

GRASPING NOTHING  
A Study of Minimal Ontologies  
and the Sense of Music

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Grasping Nothing: A Study of Minimal Ontologies and the Sense of Music

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#### ABSTRACT

If music were to have a proper sense – one in which it is truly given – one might reasonably place this in sound and aurality. I contend, however, that no such sense exists; rather, the sense of music *takes place*, and it does so *with the impossible*. To this end, this thesis – which is a work of philosophy and music – advances an ontology of the impossible (i.e., it thinks the being of what, properly speaking, can have no being) and considers its implications for music, articulating how ontological aporias – of the event, of thinking the absolute, and of sovereignty’s dismemberment – imply senses of music that are anterior to sound. John Cage’s *Silent Prayer*, a nonwork he never composed, compels a rerethinking of silence on the basis of its contradictory status of existence; Florian Hecker et al.’s *Speculative Solution* offers a basis for thinking absolute music anew to the precise extent that it is a discourse of meaninglessness; and Manfred Werder’s [year<sup>n</sup>] pieces exhibit exemplarily that music’s sense depends on the possibility of its counterfeiting. Inasmuch as these accounts produce musical senses that take the place of sound, they are also understood to be performances of these pieces. Here, then, thought is music’s organon and its instrument.

KEY FIGURES: Jacques Derrida, Georges Bataille, Alain Badiou, Quentin Meillassoux, John Cage, Florian Hecker, Robin Mackay, Elie Ayache, Manfred Werder.

KEYWORDS: ontology, contemporary rationalism, deconstruction, realism, speculative, absolute, impossible, event, divine, sovereignty, inexistence, silence, arbitrary, counterfeit, sense.

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The gigantic Satan tapped his immense belly with his fist, and there came from it a prolonged metallic jingling that ended in a vague groaning, as of many human voices. ...

And [he] said: 'I can give you the thing that will procure you everything else; that is worth everything else; that takes the place of everything else!' And he tapped his monstrous belly whose sonorous echo was a fit commentary on his vulgar offer.

(Baudelaire *Paris Spleen*)



## INTRODUCTION

# Thinking a Sense of Music

### THE QUESTION

This thesis is a work of philosophy and music: it is so alternately inasmuch as it oscillates between ontological discourse and its manifestation in music; and it is so simultaneously inasmuch as, here, philosophy is a means of both thinking and articulating music – both organon and instrument. I address two central questions:

1. Is there a significant ontology of the impossible?
2. If so, what is its bearing upon the sense of music?

The phrase ‘ontology of the impossible’ will, I imagine, make the reader’s ears prick up. By definition, the impossible has no possibility of being, hence, properly speaking, no ontological status, whatever its intrigue may otherwise be. Limits of possibility and the things that may occur across them are of central, ontological importance to two schools of recent continental philosophy, however. These are contemporary rationalism – represented here by Alain Badiou and Quentin Meillassoux – and deconstruction – represented here principally by Jacques Derrida, among various of his contemporaries and heirs (Jean-Luc Nancy, Catherine Malabou, and Martin Hägglund, for example). In a manner that has become rare, Badiou and Meillassoux can each legitimately be said to have philosophical *systems* grounded in their ontologies, systems dedicated in no small part to thinking the possibility and significance of exceptional occurrences that cannot be accounted for in the world that precedes them: radical political transformations, artistic inventions, scientific discoveries, or One becoming Two through the experience of love, for example; even, in fact, the very emergence of matter, life, or thought. These systems are dedicated, then, to thinking the *possibility of the impossible*. Badiou develops his system most significantly

across his *Being and Event* trilogy and thinks such impossible occurrences as events. Meillassoux, meanwhile, advances his ontology in *After Finitude*, the central premise of which – contingency’s absoluteness – he then derives consequences (‘figures’) from, one such being the thinkable possibility of *ex-nihilo* irruption (*surgissement*) of possibilities without precedent. Characteristically, these ontologies propose what can be minimally said of being: Badiou’s ontology applies the resources of set theory to count pure multiplicity from a ground of nothing, and Meillassoux’s ontology is empty inasmuch as it is not concerned with what *is* – Suhail Malik rightly calls it a ‘null materialism’ (248) – so much as what *could be*.

Derrida’s work – and deconstruction more broadly – is also concerned with limits of possibility and in particular with coimplied conditions of possibility and impossibility. Like Badiou, he schematises these under the name of the event. Unlike Badiou, it may be contended that Derrida does not advance any determinate ontology. Manifestly, he interrogates texts that are ontological in nature, but his work has sometimes been understood as an obscure form of textual idealism that has no place for the real. Yet, as various recent studies argue (Hägglund’s *Radical Atheism* and Michael Marder’s *The Event of the Thing* being two such), he can in fact be understood, and perhaps *should* be understood, to make realist claims – about contradictions of time in ‘*Ousia* and *Gramme*’ or the thing in *Signéponge/Signsponge*, for example – that advance a minimal trace ontology implicitly. Here, I pursue and make explicit such a claim.

These schools of thought – and, by extension from contemporary rationalism, speculative realism, to which Meillassoux’s project is central – have often remained somewhat distant from one another. The speculative turn in which contemporary rationalism has been decisive does not generally seek to continue or extend the project of deconstruction – in fact, for some, it is polemically opposed to deconstruction’s literary associations, stylings, and fetishes. Ultimately, Graham Harman – who hardly hides such frustrations with deconstruction – suggests, Derrida is ‘simply not one of the central figures with whom we [speculative realists] grasp’ (*Skirmishes* 102). It is rare, then, that deconstruction figures as a touchstone reference for contemporary rationalism or speculative realism, or vice versa. Nonetheless, deconstruction’s purview extends beyond the phenomenological, linguistic, and ethical focuses that characterised its significance in twentieth-century thought, and it engages meaningfully with speculative thought inasmuch as it can produce realist claims, to which a still-growing number of studies that engage both fields testify.<sup>1</sup> Here, then, I stage a dialogue between contemporary rationalism and deconstruction in order to think

1. See, for example, Antonio Calcagno’s *Badiou and Derrida*, Christopher Norris’s *Derrida, Badiou, and the Formal Imperative*, Paul Livingston’s *The Politics of Logic*, Peter Gratton’s *Speculative Realism*, Catherine Malabou’s *Before Tomorrow*, and Philippe Lynes’s upcoming *Dearth*.

the possibility of the impossible: its condition in the event, its implications in the most remarkable possibilities that may be thereby authorised, and its generalisation in a trace ontology through the absolute dismemberment of sovereignty.



Music, no doubt, has familiar senses: organised sound, listening, a social practice, a participatory cultural activity, or a historically specific form of auditory art that may be demarcated from oral literature or sound art, for example. Of these, listening is particularly significant inasmuch as its sense is already dual. Listening is the auditory sense through which music is given, and, at least after John Cage, what one listens to may become, or even *is*, music. In this respect, it might seem uncontentious to consider sound to be music's proper medium. Sound is the 'irreducible given of music', its 'irreducible dimension' and '*material* reality', Jean-Jacques Nattiez avers, a view Seth Kim-Cohen is content to repeat even as he advocates a 'non-cochlear' sonic art that refuses any possibility of sound 'in-itself' (67, 69; 174). Cage even polemically claims that 'nothing takes place' in music 'but sounds' ('Experimental Music' 7). These are only a few examples, of course, but they reflect a view that is equally considered and commonplace, studied and intuitive: music finds its sense in sound.

This thesis contends, however, that music has no proper sense. It argues that there are in fact senses of music that may be anterior to any sonic articulation and that the sonic may thereby be anterior to itself. This introduction does not serve as a comprehensive literature review – review of important texts is generally incorporated within the chapters to which they are significant – but I do wish to indicate here the scenes of my argument and correspondences to other work and scholarship, and Kim-Cohen's *In the Blink of an Ear* and G. Douglas Barrett's *After Sound* each offer some meaningful precedent for this argument. Kim-Cohen, I have noted, argues for a 'non-cochlear' sonic art, while Barrett argues for a critical music, each of which is irreducible to sound. For Kim-Cohen, what is in doubt is whether there is any such thing as sound-in-itself – something that does not already admit a 'vast canvas' – the visual metaphor is used here advisedly – of other forms of meaning, discourse, context, ... (260). Barrett's objects of study, meanwhile, are musical practices that are critical 'in and of' their 'own form' as music (2). He insists that they can be so only to the extent that they recognise music to be *already* linguistic, rather than simply a form of '(nonlinguistic) sound', because this is the condition for music's forms and contexts to be conceptually available for critical engagement (3). He finds this possibility to be realised exemplarily by artists who 'stage forms of participation and collectivity' by, quite literally, '*composing* radical forms of commonality' – that is, by writing interventions of thought and politics as

musical works (161). This sense of composition has clear priority over the conventional musical sense for Barrett: sound is not essential to his understanding of music as a critically engaged artistic practice. (Nor was it, he maintains, to accounts of music from Plato to the emergence of so-called absolute music [171n2].)<sup>2</sup> Even still, Barrett's focus generally leads his work towards musical practices (or parts thereof) in which '[s]ound does appear' rather than 'non-sonic' music such as visual music – which through structural analogy or derivation has a synaesthetic relation to music as it is conventionally understood – or, indeed, any other 'music without sound' (161, 8–9). In his writing on Peter Ablinger, for example, it is *A Letter From Schoenberg* – a piece in which a computer controlled player piano produces quasi-vocalisations – that is particularly significant, rather than, say, the reference pieces, which Ablinger suggests 'exist only in their title[s]', yet which one can 'execute or [visit], do or think' ('Hinweisstücke').

Various other musical works might be said to exist or be realisable only in thought inasmuch as their sounding is imaginary or psychosonic:<sup>3</sup> Amnon Wolman has written text pieces that describe sonic experiences to create them in the mind of the listener 'without any physical sensation' ('Statement' 420; see, for example, his *February 26, 2000*, which is included in James Saunders and John Lely's edited volume *Word Events*). Similarly, Matthew Herbert's book *The Music* describes an imaginary record in detail. Although every sound therein is theoretically 'possible', he thinks that '[w]hatever value it has' actually lies in the 'excessiv[e] ambitio[n]' that leads to the pragmatic 'impossibility' of any conventional sonic realisation (viii; 'Introduction'). In fact, the website Imaginary Sound Works exists to serve as a repository for user submissions of such 'unrealized sound projects'.<sup>4</sup> Yet, such works may be understood to have a certain status of existence and to be realised in a sense; clearly, though, that sense is not sound.

My own project can be demarcated from each of the aforementioned in some significant ways: in comparison to Kim-Cohen's noncochlearity, the sense of music in which I am interested is not so much irreducible to sound as anterior to, indifferent to, or substituted for sound.<sup>5</sup> Imaginary pieces can certainly be meaningfully indexed to my work, then, but the substitution of the psychosonic for the sonic is a possible *effect* of the sense of music with which I am concerned, not *the sense itself*. My understanding of what constitutes music shares more with Barrett's than Kim-Cohen's, then,

2. Similarly, David Pocknee's PhD thesis, *How to Compose a PhD thesis in Music Composition*, understands composition to be a set of techniques that typically 'involve the use of sound, but which can be applied to materials other than those which sound' (18). Given that the thesis uses such techniques, it is 'conceptualised as a composition and a work of art' (17).
3. How one might understand existence in such contexts will be approached in due course.
4. Or rather, it did: at some point around the middle of 2022, the website was taken down – it is now an unrealised but previously realised repository of unrealised sound works.
5. This is in accord with François Bonnet's *The Music to Come*, according to which music has thus far only been ritually invoked; its sense is otherwise yet to be revealed.

but my concern is less with thinking music's capacity to be critical or engage in political praxis than reading in it the expression of a sequence of philosophical problems derived from ontological impossibility.<sup>6</sup>

The musical context in which I pursue these concerns requires some clarification. The works I engage here sit within the traditions of experimental music and sound art, with Cage acting as a fork between the two.<sup>7</sup> Distinctions between these sibling disciplines are not particularly significant to me here, however, nor is general commentary on their respective histories, practices, or relations. What *is* important about these traditions is that one finds within them explicit concerns for the absoluteness of sound and exploration of what might be called music's margins (silence, for example). This informs the focuses of studies such as Kim-Cohen's and Barrett's similarly, no doubt. These fields are thematically pertinent to this study and its milieu, then, but what is more important still is that particular works thereof marginalise sound in ways that correspond to the philosophical problems with which I contend. Cage's *Silent Prayer*, a piece he never composed, is, I argue, a musical nonwork with a contradictory status of existence, on which basis it compels what, after Cage's rethinking of silence, might be called a 'rethinking' of silence. Florian Hecker et al.'s *Speculative Solution* offers a basis for thinking absolute music anew to the precise extent that it provides the discourse of its own arbitrariness – that is, to the extent that it is contradictorily meaningful and meaningless. Finally, the abyss of possible senses of Manfred Werder's [year<sup>n</sup>] pieces exhibits exemplarily that music's sense depends on its lack of absolute, secure accreditation – thus, the possibility of its counterfeiting. Let me be clear, then: this thesis engages experimental music and sound art, but these are neither its objects nor its domains of enquiry, strictly speaking. They are rather its stage. I think here the condition of possibility for the sense of music broadly conceived, but this is best made manifest by attending to the particularity of these doubly marginal musical works.

#### METHODOLOGY, STRUCTURE, AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO KNOWLEDGE

Methodologically, this thesis follows the practices of philosophy in various ways. It generally proceeds by analysing and engaging critically with linguistic texts, whether these are philosophical, musical, or musicological (or, indeed, from another discipline: literary, political, economic, ...). In fact, all of the musical works I refer to extensively are scored in text or include text as a substantial component (or, where no authoritative documents of

6. Naomi Waltham-Smith's *Shattering Biopolitics* addresses sonic political praxis more closely than I do here but is similarly concerned with the relationship of sound and a sovereignty that is 'always already in tatters', even 'shattering itself into smithereens' (50, 69).
7. In this respect, there is a certain kinship between my work and Iain Campbell's PhD thesis, *Experimental Practices of Music and Philosophy in John Cage and Gilles Deleuze*, even while we centralise different philosophical figures.

works exist, discursive ideas serve as next-best things in a similar manner).<sup>8</sup> *Speculative Solution* is the only audio recording I refer to here. I have analysed this via conventional musical means (and aided by software tools such as waveform visualisations and spectrographs), though I understand these here to be formalised and extended means of listening. I embrace diverse methodologies where my objects of study suggest them, then: musicological document study, extended listening, typographic analysis, ... . Ultimately, though, these are subordinate here to philosophy as a master discourse. In the sense that musical reading always *follows* philosophy, then, this thesis is methodologically alternately philosophical and philosophico-musicological (for want of a better term).<sup>9</sup> Yet, this thesis also gives the pieces it studies to sense by giving them sense. That is, it gives them to experience in a way that stands in for conventional forms of musical articulation.<sup>10</sup> As such, it demonstrates its argument by performing music in thought. Here, then, thought is also a methodology of research-as-practice: as I have said, it is both the organon and the instrument.

This movement from philosophy to music produces an idiosyncratic structure: my focus alternates chapter-by-chapter between strict philosophy and music. This is necessarily the case, given that philosophy dictates the terms of each musical reading. Hereafter, then, philosophy will be the concern of the first chapter of each division; music, the second. (This imitates the Cartesian meditation structure Badiou adopts in *Being and Event* (and, indeed, the elaboration of theory via aesthetic readings in *Logics of Worlds*'s scholia and *The Immanence of Truths*'s supplementary chapters.) Secondary paths through the thesis are available, then. One can read chapters one, three, and five for a strictly philosophical argument, and it is certainly possible to read chapters two, four, or six in isolation to glean their musical arguments. The sense of my argument in total, however – and, further, my project in spirit – is wedded to the alternation between philosophy and music. Each musical chapter finds its sense in the chapter that precedes it and, ultimately, in retroaction from the work as a whole.

This is in accord with what I consider to be this project's original contributions to knowledge. Of course, it contributes to scholarship on Badiou, Meillassoux, and Derrida; on Cage, Hecker, and Werder. It offers new work to the fields of contemporary rationalism, deconstruction, experimental music, and sound art. It produces consequential new accounts of particular works and practices of art in senses in which they have not previously been

8. Saunders and Lely's *Word Events* of course is the most substantial study of such textual musical practices, while Saunders's *Ashgate Research Companion to Experimental Music* is similarly authoritative for post-Cagean experimentalism more broadly.
9. Although one might describe this as a work of aesthetics (as its musical part is indeed a philosophy of art), it bypasses typical focuses of that field, such as beauty or judgement. As with Badiou's inaesthetics, 'the rules of "liking"' are not my concern (*Handbook* 5).
10. A certain correspondence with Pocknee's work is discernible here, I feel.



understood. Even still, it seems to me that this project's contributions to knowledge are most significant with its scope in view: it represents a sustained and inventive original contribution to current thought on foundational questions of ontology and art.

#### WHAT REMAINS

In what remains of this introduction, I will give a précis of the arguments that follow.

I begin in chapter one with the event. This is a central concern for both Badiou and Derrida: for Badiou, it is a point of ontological errancy that enacts a rupture in the apparent unity of what is; for Derrida, the event's condition of possibility is also the condition of its impossibility, so if it occurs, it does so against its negation or self-prohibition. Although these accounts of the event share certain commonalities – inheritances from Heidegger and characteristics of singularity and undecidability, for example – they appear to be noncomplementary if not incompatible. I argue, however, that they can be understood to be parallel formulations of the corruption of the world inasmuch as (1) each represents the impossibility of constructing the consistent totality of the possible; and (2), taken together, they represent the undecidability of the basis for this: inconsistency and incompleteness.

In chapter two, I pursue this corruption – via Nancy's deconstruction of the sense of the world – by arguing that silence is a contradictory figure of nothing. Cage's *Silent Prayer* is a silent piece he never wrote: it is little more than a footnote to 4'33", which seems to have been historically realised in its place when Cage moved from a naïve conception of silence to its radical rethinking. Yet, I argue that while *Silent Prayer* is not a work – after Heidegger, a particular domain of sense-making – it has legible effects (and thus a legible sense) that manifest parasitically in Cage's other silent pieces. These testify, then, to *Silent Prayer*'s contradictory status of existence. On this basis, against the conventional understanding of silence after Cage, silence is a figure of nothing; *Silent Prayer*, a figure of this figure.

To think the possibilities the event may authorise, I turn in chapter three to Meillassoux's speculative materialism. He argues that we know contingency to be necessary and thus beings and laws to be subject to appearance, disappearance, or metamorphosis *without cause*. He considers the most remarkable possibility that this ontology authorises to be the thesis of divine inexistence, which posits that God does not exist but His future being, while not prefigured, is nonetheless thinkably possible. On this basis, there is hope for an event of justice: the resurrection of the dead into a new World of immortal life. I argue, however, that not only is this World subject to mortality; in truth, it has already perished. 'God' becomes an arbitrary name and provides no hope for salvation.

Meillassoux provides artistic resources for thinking the arbitrary, which is the concern of chapter four: Hecker's *Speculative Solution*, a record

(or mixed media artwork) to which he, Robin Mackay, and Elie Ayache contributed, serves as an artistic prosthesis of his ontology. I offer an analogic analysis that simulates the operation of the work. This is self-negating, however: the work's ontological proposition is that it may be understood to be arbitrary to some degree or another. I join this form and analysis of the arbitrary to Meillassoux's sign devoid of meaning ('sign *dm*'), through which he hopes to ground the possibility of specific reference to the world independent of thought. I conclude that the sign *dm* cannot be consistently meaningless as he requires. On one hand, this problematises the mathematization of reality he pursues; on the other, it mandates a strong reading of arbitrariness in *Speculative Solution* through an ontology of the impossible.

Chapter five responds to the questions of justice and the absolute engaged in chapters three and four by thinking a disordered–disordering quasi-concept of sovereignty. The classical concept of sovereignty (that of Bodin, Hobbes, Rousseau, ...) concerns the quasi-divine right to decide matters of justice. The quasi-concept of sovereignty I argue for after Derrida and Georges Bataille, however, observes sovereignty always to be what it is not: above and below the human, sovereign and subject, responsible and irresponsible, meaningful and meaningless. Following Derrida's autoimmunity, then, I think a self-destructive sovereignty of sovereignty that shows justice to be necessarily corrupt and an ontology of the impossible to be thinkable on the basis of absolute dismemberment.

In chapter six, I elaborate a logic of counterfeiting as a taking place of the ontological implications of sovereignty. I first give an account of Derrida's analysis of the counterfeit in Baudelaire's 'Counterfeit Money'. Following this, I elaborate an abyss of the possible senses of a number of text works by Werder, particularly those of the [year<sup>n</sup>] series. These senses – which are graphic, linguistic, semiotic, formal, metaformal, epistemic, transcendental, appropriative, derivative, vegetal, ... – indicate the always-possible counterfeiting of sense. Perhaps most notably, *2005*<sup>1</sup> shows sound to be given without accreditation, and *2009*<sup>2</sup> shows the thing and art as a discourse of the thing to be given without accreditation. Inasmuch as one sense or one thing takes the place of another, the value of the true or proper is demonstrated to be impossible.

What I ultimately show, then, is that music is subject to a circulation and substitution of sense without consistency, propriety, or accreditation: it has no proper sense because nothing guarantees its sense in sound. This confirms the musical sense of the readings of *Silent Prayer* and *Speculative Solution*. Sound is not music's proper sense; rather, the sense of music *takes place with the impossible*.

PART ONE  
The Event



## CHAPTER ONE

# The Corruption of the Event

### THE APPROPRIATION OF THE EVENT

The event is inaugurated as a significant concern of continental philosophy by Heidegger's *Ereignis*, which is a transformation within and of what he considers to be the central question of thought: the question of Being. The event, an appropriating conjunction of the human being to Being or of the fourfold, is, on one hand, man's *originary* appropriation to *Dasein* by Being: it 'expresses the explicitly self-clearing inceptuality of the beginning' (*The Event* § 184). On the other hand, it is a rare occurrence through which 'the few ... *ask the question*', through which 'the essential sway of truth' is 'put up anew' for decision, the 'nobility of be-ing' thought, and its 'uniqueness' spoken of (*Contributions* 9). That is, events that transform thought constitute a history of Being that bears witness to such 'exceptional enownings' as the 'allotment of truth to be-ing' at the inception of the metaphysical tradition or its purported end in the 'collapse of truth' with Nietzsche (161).<sup>1</sup> The event in which 'man as Da-sein is en-owned by be-ing as enowning' is the transformative break – *by and as appropriation* – through which Being is fleetingly disclosed (180).<sup>2</sup>

1. Correspondingly, some indeterminacy prevails as to whether the event may be understood multiply – that is, between Event and events. As originary appropriation, the event appears to be indifferent to any multiple dispersal; 'instances' are effectively indiscernible from one another. Meanwhile, the events of the history of Being each raise the question of Being anew, but whether they are to be distinguished as discrete, novel injunctions remains ambiguous. Brian Smith suggests in his PhD thesis that the undecidability of the event's possible multiplicity is a vital inheritance from Heidegger for Derrida (59–65).
2. The question of the event also bridges the continental and analytic traditions, in fact. Although analytic literature is not generally concerned with the relation of the event and transformation as I am, the convergence of traditions on questions of determinability, singularity, and repeatability is manifest in, for example, the dialogue between Donald Davidson's *Essays on Actions and Events* and Willard Quine's 'Events and Reification'.

Both Derrida and Badiou think the significance of the event in Heidegger's wake as a point of radical rupture which is paramount to the possibility of invention. In Badiou's system, as with Heidegger, the event is a rupture of being that radically redefines a way of thinking: following such a point of absolute yet undecidable rupture, a 'truth' is born and maintained through the faithful actions of a subjectivised body committed to pursuing its consequences. Such truths emerge within science, art, politics, and love, the domains that harbour the four conditions of philosophy: the procedures of 'the matheme, the poem, political invention and love' (Badiou *Manifesto* 35). Philosophy's task is to think the 'compossibility' – the possible being and conjunction – of truths which emerge within these fields through these procedures. It does not itself produce or establish truth; rather, 'it sets a locus of truths' (37). Chief among such truths for Badiou, arguably, are those of Cantorian transfinite set theory, upon which his mathematical ontology is enumerated, and political egalitarianism, to which he is militantly committed.<sup>3</sup>

Derrida, meanwhile, understands the Heideggerian Event as a radical singularity that disrupts all programme, possibility, or potentiality. This structure is decisive in his writing on the gift, forgiveness, and invention, for example, each of which demands an absolute break from any economies of reciprocation, exchange, or derivation if it is to maintain its conceptual integrity. The event of giving, forgiving, or invention must be a truly novel singularity, subtracted from all iterability and economy, yet it follows from this condition that the event is not only unrecognisable or incomprehensible as such; in fact, it is not possible at all. The structure of the event relies aporetically upon those economies from which it must be disjunct. If the event is possible, then, it is possible as *the impossible* – as an impossible possibility. If one hopes for a transformative event, this prognosis seems deflationary: on what basis might the event be desirable or meaningful if it is obscured and perhaps even precluded?

In spite of their shared inheritance, then, these accounts of the event immediately appear to be incompatible. Badiou structures an ontology around the dynamism of the event while Derrida questions its very possibility. Both thinkers maintain that one decides upon the undecidable in the wake of the event, certainly, yet even here, it is as if their emphases occupy different ends of an axis: Badiou emphasises militant fidelity and commitment; Derrida, the double-bind of impossible possibility.

One need scarcely caricature these positions to register their differences, though many do. Badiou stands accused of overlooking the atrocities

3. We will return to Cantor's theorem; for now, it will suffice to register that Cantor thinks the detotalisation of the infinite, the consequence of which is the existence of an endless sequence of infinities of escalating cardinality (i.e., size). He also discovers the fundamental procedure through which sets are produced – counting as one – which is the basis of such a mathematics.

of the twentieth century in the name of universalist politics. In particular, his rejection of the word ‘Jew’ as a master-signifier of identity politics after the Holocaust has sparked outrage among those he scorns as ‘new inquisitors’ against anti-Semitism: Gérard Bensussan, for example, indicts Badiou’s *Polemics* as a measurable turning point for anti-Semitic violence, and Badiou even recalls Éric Marty saying ‘French intellectuals of your type are only the Western cover for Islamic terrorism’ (Badiou and Hazan ch. 4; Bensussan; Badiou and Hazan ch. 4). Badiou’s commitment to Maoism has been similarly provocative; it manifestly incenses Laurent Joffrin, editor of *Libération*, when he and Badiou are interviewed in conversation:

[Joffrin to Badiou:] In your book you once again defend the Chinese Cultural Revolution launched by Mao in 1966. I will tell you, I am deeply shocked by what you have to say about it. ... This was a terrible experience of terror, and you describe it as a necessary, useful episode, bringing the future closer!

Badiou does not waver, however; he accuses Joffrin of reducing the Cultural Revolution to ‘the stuff of the black legend’. Mao, he insists elsewhere, is not only one of the ‘five great Marxists’; he forms with Marx and Lenin the triple seal of the ‘doctrinal One’ of Marxist thought (*Theory* xl, 126).

Derrida, by contrast, stands charged with refusing to fully engage in politics. This lends cumulative weight to accusations of apologism for Heidegger and Paul de Man’s anti-Semitism, the ostensibly apolitical character of his early concerns with structuralism and phenomenology (though many see these as contiguous with the explicitly political work that follows), the belatedness of the so-called ethical turn,<sup>4</sup> and the religious overtones of his later work.<sup>5</sup> That various of his peers were that much more publicly politically demonstrative may also have promoted some misprision of the politics of his thought. He suggests as much in interview:

Q.: As regards the political field, you have never taken up noisy positions there; you have even practiced what you call a sort of withdrawal.

J.D.: Ah, the ‘political field’! But I could reply that I think of nothing else, however things might appear. (‘Almost Nothing’ 86)

4. Terry Eagleton, for example, suggests that while Derrida has always been a ‘man of the Left’, he arrives late to the political table with *Spectres of Marx*, having finally been seduced by Marxism’s new-found marginality. But ‘where was Jacques Derrida when we needed him, in the long dark night of Reagan-Thatcher[?]’ he asks (‘Marxism’ 83).
5. One might infer some kind of guilt by association with Levinas here, despite Derrida’s deconstruction of the absolutely Other as early as *Writing and Difference*’s ‘Violence and Metaphysics’.

While the perspective that deconstruction refuses political engagement has certainly faded, it is manifest, even still, that it does not provide – nor does it seek to provide – a programme of political action.

In this chapter, then, I consider the possibility of the event (which is to say, its conditions of possibility and what it may effect). I first address Badiou's event and the absolutely disjunctive character that emerges as a significant point of contention – an impasse, even – among his interlocutors, most prominent among which are Peter Hallward and Bruno Bosteels. I suggest, however, that this disjunction and impasse are precisely what is worth endorsing in this theory. Indeed, as we will see, it parallels Derrida's insistence on the event's impossible possibility in various respects. I then consider Häggglund's account of the contamination of event and economy and Malabou's concept of the accident, both of which advance deconstruction into explicitly realist paradigms. The question of whether these latter understand the event as the impossible looms, though. Livingston and Graham Priest provide a compelling means to understand the conjunction of realism and the impossible, however: endorsing real contradictions at and about the limits of the thought of totality permits the *real* impossible possibility of the event. I propose the formulation of the corruption of the event: the corrupt event, as a limit-contradiction, is the corruption of the world.

#### THE EDGE OF THE VOID

Let us proceed with Badiou, then. In his system, the event is technically determined precisely: it is the radical form of change characterised by a remarkable occurrence – the irruption into existence of an inexistent. I will begin with a précis of Badiou's system of onto–logy – which is to say, his accounts of being and existence (which is a logic of appearing) – in order to make the significance of this statement clear.

Badiou's gambit in *Being and Event* is to reject decisively the Parmenidean ontological unity of being: 'the one', he states, '*is not*' (1). If the one is not, the regime of presentation (that is, of being *qua* being) must be pure multiplicity, bereft of predicates other than its multiplicity. Being one, then, is only the result of an operation – counting as one – which presents multiplicity as consistent (i.e., counted) multiples. Badiou thus founds his ontology on ZFC set theory, for which there is no Whole – no One-all – because a set of all sets would be chimeric. Consistent multiples are putative rather than originary unities, then, whether they are understood as sets, situations – which, technically speaking, are consistent multiples that constitute regimes of counting but can be understood informally as contexts – or beings. (Ultimately, sets, situations, and beings are all arbitrary halting points of counting as one, so they can certainly be understood equivocally if not, strictly speaking, synonymously.) Nonetheless, counting, this minimal operation of structuration, *must* be in effect lest being be relinquished to an



originary One. Badiou emphasises that ‘there is no structure of being’ itself, only its presentative *structuration* (26). On this basis, his ontology is a discourse of the ‘presentation of presentation’ – of how presentation is itself presented (27). Presentation itself (inconsistent multiplicity, which is to say, ‘the multiple not ... in the form of the one’ – effectively, uncounted being) is only indicated retroactively as what is prior to the count-as-one through its ‘phantom remainder’ (53). This unrepresentable phantom – which Badiou calls the void (after the empty set,  $\emptyset$ ) – is the halting point of multiplicity and the source of the count as ‘nothing’. This is the necessary conceptless ground of the system if originary unity is indeed to be avoided: this ‘non-one of any count-as-one’ is therefore ultimately ‘unpresented’ in every situation as its suture to being (55).

The unique situation of ontology lacks any “‘anti-void’ functions’ or ‘special operators of the count’ through which the void might be expelled, so the void roams and the one really is not (101). In ordinary situations, however – which is to say, contexts other than strict ontology – unity prevails through the *prohibition* of the presentation of the void. As the ontological situation evidences, the count-as-one is, in itself, an insufficient operation to vouchsafe the one because the count itself always remains uncounted. Technically speaking, this means the situation-multiple is not self-belonging (i.e.,  $\alpha \notin \alpha$  –  $\alpha$  does not belong to  $\alpha$ ): it counts its elements, but not their totality as an element. This being the case, the unity of the situation is not just unsecured; it is astructured. This risks structure itself being the point where inconsistency appears and ‘the void is given’ (93). It is necessary, therefore, that the count be doubled in a re-presentative metastructure. Badiou calls this the state of the situation, thereby emphasising its parallel to the political State. (The equivalent operation and designation in the conventional terms of set theory is the powerset.) The state of the situation counts what is presented in the situation in its possible configurations as parts (also known as subsets). One such part is the totality of what is counted as one in – but not by – the situation: the total part. While  $\alpha \notin \alpha$ ,  $\alpha \in \mathcal{P}(\alpha)$  ( $\alpha$  does not belong to  $\alpha$ , but it *is* included in the powerset of  $\alpha$ ). The state thus counts the oneness of the count of the situation itself, verifying the count and including the regime itself. In so doing, consistency is affirmed through the expulsion of inconsistency. It is, Badiou writes, ‘the resource of the state alone’ that ‘permits the outright affirmation that, in situations, the one is’ (98). This doubled count gives rise to the following typology of presentative possibilities for multiples:

- **NORMAL:** presented in the situation and re-presented by the state. This is equivalent to saying that the multiple belongs to (or, is an element of) the situation *and*, as a subset or part of the situation, it is included in the state of the situation. In political terms, the bourgeoisie is such a multiple – ‘it is presented economically and socially, and re-presented by the State’ (109).

- **SINGULAR:** presented but not re-presented. Singular multiples belong to the situation, but the multiples of which they are composed do not – these elude the count. A singular multiple is therefore ‘solely presented as the multiple-that-it-is’ (175). In turn, singular multiples elude the count of the state: they are not included as they do not constitute decomposable subsets. With nothing ‘beneath’ such multiples in their composition, they are said to be on the edge of the void. In classical Marxism, for example, although the proletariat is presented in the situation as a multiple, it is not re-presented in the metastructure (i.e. the State), which counts none of the multiples of which it is composed. Perhaps a better example still is the *sans-papiers*, undocumented immigrants who are ‘without papers’ permitting residence: the State can hardly fail to recognise the existence of this group, but it does not count the individuals of which the group is composed as citizens. They appear to the state as nothing but this group-multiple, and so they remain unverified by the State/state. (We can note in passing that what Badiou calls the ‘evental site’ belongs to this category.)
- **EXCRESCENT:** not presented but re-presented. This marks the excess of the state over the situation, as the situation cannot itself be counted as one without the intervention of the state (i.e., it is a subset, not an element). Accordingly, excrescence is associated with the machination of state power, its ‘bureaucratic and military machinery’ (108).

This typology is ultimately superseded by the logic of appearing that Badiou introduces in *Logics of Worlds*. This defines existence as the ‘appearance of a multiple-being in a determinate world’ (208). The contexts previously referred to as situations are thereby conceptually developed into worlds through the addition of the world’s transcendental, which measures order relation – relative intensity of appearance. Multiples are indexed in pairs to the transcendental of the world to determine their relative identity and difference, the systematisation of which forms the phenomenon of what appears in the world. This same transcendental indexing applied to a single being measures its self-identity, which is to say, its unitary force – its appearance *as one*. The degree of existence of the being is thus formulated: this might be maximal, minimal (or inexistent), or an intermediate value. An object, a multiple as it appears localised in a world (coupling ontological support-set with transcendental indexing (hence, situated appearance)), thus appears strongly in a world in which its self-identity is affirmed, or weakly where this is not the case. While the ontological support-set remains strictly self-identical, the existence of the object may thus be understood equivocally. Ontology and existence are joined, nevertheless, by atomic pairing, through which elements that are counted as one both ontologically (i.e., they are real) and phenomenologically (i.e., their existence is maximally intense) affirm the real, material conjunction of being-multiple with being-there.

An event occurs as a rupture – an incursion of being – in the order of appearance. It is an excess of undecidable belonging to a world, which is to say, whether or not it belongs is not demonstrable according to the formal system of the world. An event is characterised by mathematical-ontological illegality: self-belonging.<sup>6</sup> The site (note that this is distinct from *Being and Event*'s aforementioned evental site) is an object that figures in its own multiple-being, which, according to the set theoretical apparatus of ontology, is 'an ontological (mathematical) impossibility' because the axiom of foundation prohibits self-belonging. The appearance of a site in which a being fleetingly and impossibly figures within its own objectivation entails, therefore, that this 'axiomatic prohibition' is suspended (391). Now, there is for any object a proper inexistent: something that is of minimal appearance but nonetheless pertinent to its phenomenon. We can refer here to a canonical example of Badiou's, the Paris Commune:

For the vast majority of people, often including the [workers] themselves, the politicized workers of Paris are incomprehensible. They are the proper inexistent of the object 'political capacity' in the uncertain world of this Spring 1871. (364)

The workers' political capacity is understood to be the inexistent element, then, and 18 March – the day the Paris Commune commences – is the site. On 18 March, 'besides everything that appears within [18 March] under the evasive transcendental of the world "Paris in Spring 1871", *it too appears*, as the fulminant and entirely unpredictable beginning of a break with the very thing that regulates its appearance' (365; emphasis added). The absolutisation of proletarian political capacity – its existential transformation from minimality to maximality – is the thoroughgoing consequence of the ontological errancy of the evanescent self-belonging of 18 March. Put otherwise, on 18 March, 18 March happened, and a certain break with the transcendental order (i.e., the indexical relations of objects) of the world began because something important was destroyed:

[T]he political subordination of the workers and the people. What was destroyed was of the order of subjective incapacity. ... Though crushed and convulsive, the absolutization of the workers' political existence – the existence of the inexistent – nonetheless destroyed an essential form of subjection, that of proletarian political possibility to bourgeois political manoeuvring. (379)

6. I focus here on the event as it is reformulated in *Logics of Worlds*. In *Being and Event*, the event is itself errantly self-belonging; it contains the elements of the event itself and of the singular evental site from which the inexistent irrupts.

The transformation of proletarian political capacity from inexistence to maximal existence, however temporary, destroys a corresponding element of the object: the absolute political subordination of the workers to the machinations of capital. This effects change in the phenomenon of the world by subtracting the destroyed term from the relations of transcendental indexing. Thus emerges a truth, a newly possible way of thinking: political capacity is not restricted to those of economic privilege. Although alien to the world, a truth is nevertheless universal and absolute upon its emergence: it can be endlessly reactivated in other worlds by other revolutionary acts.<sup>7</sup> Such a truth is borne by a subject, which is to say, a body faithful to the event. The subject – here, the political collective – is nothing other than what remains militantly committed to uncovering the possible consequences of the truth by which it is impelled. It is in this manner that the effects of events and their ensuing truth procedures are realised: the intervention of an affirmative subject can, in principle, radically reorder the world.

The term event is reserved for this exceptional form of change which bears the possibility of the most profound consequences. Lesser forms of change (in which objective phenomena cannot be so meaningfully altered) may obtain:

- **MODIFICATION** is the mere immanent becoming of a world. It requires no ontologically errant site.
- **FACT**, which requires a self-belonging site with a limited intensity of existence, affects only those beings whose existence is already strong (specifically, stronger than the site's existence). As such, here, the effects that follow from ontological errancy are limited.
- **SINGULARITY** is the form of change for which the site maximally exists. It typically occurs in a weak form in which only elements that are already maximally existent are affected, hence in which the inexistent is not absolutised. The world's logic of appearance remains thereby undisturbed.

Only the event – the strong form of singularity – amounts to real, radical change, then, 'change which imposes an effective discontinuity on the world where it takes place' (357). Where lesser forms of change resemble the mere realisation of potentiality – that is, change already mandated in principle by the 'encyclopaedia' of a situation (its immanent knowledge and possibilities) – the irruption of the inexistent to maximal existence is the maximal consequence of ontological aberrance: it testifies to the occurrence of the impossible.

7. Ultimately, in *The Immanence of Truths*, truths are absolute inasmuch as they are included in 'attributes of the absolute' (recalling Spinoza's attributes of infinite substance – of God or Nature), nonidentical inner models of the infinite class  $V$ , the metaphorical – hence, not actually a set of all sets – absolute place of the possible forms of being (25).

The radicality of this disjunction represents both the value and the risk of Badiou's project. He avers as much himself in his idiosyncratic reading of Deleuze, whom, of his contemporaries, he recognises as his most important adversary. For Badiou, Deleuze's concept of virtuality, founded as it is on his reading of Nietzsche's eternal recurrence and Bergson's unfolding continuity of duration, admits no non-One from which something might irrupt. The new is already a part of the One, so the actualisation of the so-called new is really *nothing but* the self-differentiation of the virtual:

It can be said that there is nothing new under the sun because everything that happens is only an inflection of the One, the eternal return of the Same. It can equally be said that everything is constantly new because it is only through the perpetual creation of its own folds that the One, in its absolute contingency, can indefinitely return. The two judgements are ultimately indiscernible. (*Deleuze* 96)

Hallward – an astute reader of both thinkers – suggests that the incapacity of the actual to mediate the virtual deprives Deleuze of the resources to think the consequences of novelty or change for the actual world:

[S]ince it acknowledges only a unilateral relation between virtual and actual, there is no place in Deleuze's philosophy for any notion of change, time, or history that is mediated by actuality. In the end, Deleuze offers few resources for thinking the consequences of what happens within the actually existing world as such. (*Out Of This World* 162)

Any singular event may well be a unique instance that affirms the contingency of Being, yet, in the end, this contingency is nothing but the edifice of the unfolding of univocal Being, at least in the partisan reading. The contingency of the outcome of any single event really affirms Being as the originary Event, 'a unique and tremendous event ... which is adequate to time as a whole', the virtual from which the actual proceeds without exception (Deleuze 89). For Badiou, conversely, the event's potency lies in its exceptionality:

For me, ... the absolute ontological separation of the event, the fact that it occurs *in* the situation without being in [any way] virtualizable, is the basis of the character of truths as irreducibly original, created, and fortuitous. ... For were a truth discernible by the means of these resources, then, in this situation, it would be neither a creation nor a chance. (*Deleuze* 74)

As corresponds to Badiou's system then, Deleuze – Badiou's Deleuze, at least – prohibits the possibility of real change because the virtual One admits no ontological errancy. Nor, indeed, is there any decisive means through which to intervene. Change is consigned to the mere becoming (i.e., modification) of an established world, however variable in existential intensity its phenomena might be.<sup>8</sup>

The question posed, then, Badiou maintains, is whether one can 'really think of novelty and treat it in the situation' (qtd. in Bosteels *Badiou* 307). Can one think the new? Can its context of emergence be thought? And how can it be apprehended within its context? Thus, Badiou schematises ontology as mathematical and existence as logical and strictly objective, but to produce truth, the event requires the situational treatment of the subject which intervenes to decide upon the undecidable – to wager on whether the event did indeed take place.

If this ostensibly articulates Badiou's distance from philosophies of the One-all, the absolute disjunction of the event from the world that precedes it is considered by some to prohibit its political potential in a manner akin to those philosophies. Hallward finds that Badiou, much like Deleuze, fails to think intervention effectively. While he feels that Badiou's philosophy is 'the most inventive, the most thought-provoking, of his generation', he argues nonetheless that it is limited inasmuch as it does not 'grant relation any properly constituent force' (*Badiou* 322).<sup>9</sup> Certainly, belonging – the fundamental relation of set-theory – is the sole ontological relation for Badiou. As, ontologically speaking, multiple-beings are subtracted from all other

8. Meillassoux's speculative materialism, to which we will return in part two, occupies something of a confounding intermediate position. His concept of virtuality designates the pure possibility of the irruption *ex nihilo* of any noncontradictory in-existent (i.e., anything that does not exist, rather than a proper in-existent in Badiou's sense). He follows Badiou's subscription to Cantor's theorem of the transfinite, though, to argue that it is thinkable that there is no totality (thus no One) of possibility. Whether in-existence is given a certain status of being that makes the impossible a *de facto* possibility remains obscure, however, as, therefore, does the totalisability of the possible. Meillassoux is also committed to thinking the most significant ruptures between Worlds, yet the significance thereof is not ontological as such. His ontology accords no in-existent any 'properness', so irruption could be banal as readily as remarkable (see footnote ten of chapter three for an exception which concerns the fourth World, however). Affirming the necessity of contingency is the only *generalisable* significance of the event. Hallward's criticisms of Meillassoux therefore mirror those he has of Deleuze: his 'acausal ontology' offers 'no account of an actual process of transformation or development'. It simply 'insist[s] on the bare possibility of radical change' ('Anything' 139). Irruption might be equated with modification once more, but a given irruption may be more or less consequential and so may correspond somewhat to any of Badiou's levels of change.
9. This is similarly evident where Hallward draws parallels between Badiou and Meillassoux: Meillassoux, he suggests, is deprived of 'any concretely mediated means of thinking, with and after Marx, the possible ways of changing ... situations' because, '[r]ather like his mentor Badiou', he insists on 'the absolute disjunction of an event from existing situations' ('Anything' 139).

relation to one another, the intervention of the subject in truth procedures (at least in *Being and Event*) is ultimately sovereign: they are, in a sense, a decision without reason that ‘Badiou’s axiomatic procedures cannot “explain”[,] ... [n]or do they tolerate enquiry into what enables their doing’ (321). For Hallward, conversely, ‘an individual has no being outside of its relations with other individuals’ (322). It is only such a perspective, he maintains, that can account for both the withdrawal of abstract ontology and concrete subjective intervention. He tempers such criticisms, though does not dispense with them, after the publication of *Logics of Worlds*, which introduces sequential points of binary decision (i.e., yes/no) into worlds. ‘Pre-evental’ action finally has a possible ‘role to play in the preparation of a post-evental truth’, hence a possible bearing in struggles for ‘justice or equality’ (‘Order’ 107). Even still, in focusing on the invisible (i.e., the inexistent) rather than the ‘under-seen or mis-seen’, who are ‘oppressed and exploited, rather than simply excluded’, Hallward feels that Badiou cannot account for the manner in which ‘modern forms of power do not merely exclude or prohibit but rather modulate, guide or enhance behaviour and norms conducive to the status quo’ (117–18). Further, actual, ontic beings – not pure multiples or logic-governed appearance but *real entities* – remain unaccounted for, he suggests: ontological support sets are meaningfully apprehensible only in retroaction from existence, which is itself thought ‘as a logical category’ rather than ‘as actually determinate or effective’ (119). Even then, they are an enumeration rather than what is or exists, strictly speaking. Actual beings and their relations – indeed, their motivating relations – remain obscure.

Ernesto Laclau, meanwhile, argues that Badiou fails to account for relations of equivalence which prevail in situations beyond that of strict set theory. (Although this criticism predates Badiou’s logic of appearing, its argument is hardly retrospectively circumvented.) Laclau maintains that the void is necessarily contaminated by particularity outside the world of pure ontology. He cites his own logic of the empty signifier, ‘a signifier without a signified’, under which disparate particularities that are mutually opposed to something other (e.g., capitalism, an extant state, etc.) come to be represented under a given name with which they are, however, incommensurate (‘Ethics’ 125). The consequence of such representative possibility is that the categories of countable and uncountable are ‘essentially unstable’. While this may resemble Badiou’s prescription of the undecidability of the event, for Laclau, it circumscribes any ‘locus’ or ‘site within the situation’ that may be identified with the universality of the void (126). Nothing is on the edge of the void as such because the so-called inexistent may always be represented through such signification. Laclau’s argument is consequential, but it is not fatal: Badiou’s worlds are contexts of appearance, but the minimal appearance of the inexistent does not mean that it cannot be encountered. The *sans-papiers*, for example, are certainly encounterable in a given Parisian

world; they simply have no status as citizens. The purchase of Laclau's argument, however, is that the inexistent may be represented such that it *does* have some status – the *sans-papiers* may figure within a hegemony (in the sense that he and Chantal Mouffe understand it) that grants them political capacity *without* the occurrence of an event or the intervention of a subject – in other words, through the regular becoming of the world (modification, in Badiou's terms).<sup>10</sup> Laclau, then, disputes the absolute disjunction of the event on the bases that he admits neither the true universality of a pure void nor the minimal existence of the inexistent.

Hallward and Laclau may emphasise certain aspects of the demand for disjunction too strongly, however. Bosteels, for instance, contends that Badiou's work remains dialectical – particularly so when indexed to his earlier (though latterly translated) major work *Theory of the Subject*. Against 'hackneyed objections' that Badiou is a 'dogmatist if not a downright mystic of the punctual event' which is itself 'wholly delinked ... from the existing situation', he emphasises that the event is internally split: it is not *only* delinked from the existing situation; it is *also* 'always an event *for* a specific situation, by virtue of the evental site that only a *concrete analysis of the concrete situation* can circumscribe' (Introduction to *Theory* xxiv; emphasis added). Only 'thick historical analysis' can indicate the possible locus of evental rupture; hence, the theory of the event is neither pure abstraction nor strictly miraculous (xxv). While the punctual instant of the event and its phenomenal consequences are separable 'at the level of conceptual exposition', they are so 'only' at this level (xxvi). Practically speaking, the discontinuity of rupture and the continuity of its unfolding demand to be thought together. Indeed, radical disjunction is a *retroactive production* of subjective intervention:

[A] truth not only will have created entirely new possibilities, instead of merely realizing the situation's hidden potential, but it also is responsible for the emergence of impossibility itself as the subject's very own retroactive effect. (*Badiou* 239–40)

It is intervention – which is, of course, always intervention in a concrete situation – that produces 'impossibilities that are symptomatic of this situation as a whole' (241). That is, it is only as intervention transforms the unthinkable into the possible that it makes the impossible retroactively visible as the impossible – as a particular structuring impossibility of the situation and its transformation. Without intervention, there is nothing other than 'the "normal" regime of things' (238). The impossible does not pre-exist intervention; it is produced from the realm of the absurd or the

10. Such a hegemony joins various distinct political convictions (e.g., antiracism, antinationalism, egalitarianism, etc.) under a common name that transcends its particularity to represent a universality to which it remains insufficient.



unthinkable *by* intervention. The event does indeed produce discontinuity, then, but the production of the impossible also essentially and concretely links the pre- and postevental world. Continuity and discontinuity are ineluctably interwoven.

To what extent and to what end the impossible can be entertained really are pressing questions, then. Badiou's conviction is certainly clear, and Bosteels' reading is compelling. A prescription of subjective affirmation (its maxim: 'Keep going!') may not constitute an extensive political science, but the event need not be understood as miraculous or purely disjunct (Badiou *Ethics* 67). Its strong sense does demand, though, that it be understood to be the occurrence of the impossible. As such, there is a certain kinship here with Derrida's thought of the event – to which we turn now – as an impossible possibility.

#### IMPOSSIBLE POSSIBILITY

The significance of the event to Derrida's thought could hardly be overstated. Indeed, the gift, forgiveness, invention, and decision are all bound to the structure of the event. His formulation is no less rigorously demanding than Badiou's: an event is a transformative disruption of programme that, correspondingly, cannot be prefigured; it cannot be a potentiality consistent with the possibilities of the context in question:

If I can invent what I invent, if I have the ability to invent what I invent, that means that the invention follows a potentiality, an ability that is in me, and thus it brings nothing new. It does not constitute an event. I have the ability to make this happen and consequently the event, what happens at that point, disrupts nothing; it's not an absolute surprise. (Derrida 'Certain Impossible Possibility' 450)

If the event is to be genuinely irruptive rather than the becoming of a programme or a realisation of potentiality, it must be an absolute surprise, entirely unexpected and unforeseeable – it must be *without horizon*. In this sense, it appears quasi-miraculous – it comes 'from above':

[T]he event as event, as absolute surprise, must fall on me. Why? Because if it doesn't fall on me, it means that I see it coming, that there's an horizon of expectation. Horizontally, I see it coming, I fore-see it, I fore-say it, and the event is that which can be said but never predicted. (451)

So, even if the event can be said (if it occurs ...), it cannot be foresaid (... it does so strictly without thinkable precedent). If the event is indeed possible, its possibility lies precisely in its impossibility. For an event to be an event,

the impossible must occur, but, of course, this is impossible. The event's condition of possibility is thus also its condition of impossibility. Where for Badiou the event is predicated on errancy but is nonetheless schematised (albeit as undecidable), for Derrida the event *remains* aporetic. He writes, for example, that 'the impossibility of forgiving must continue to haunt forgiveness and the impossibility of giving continue to haunt giving' (453). This has a split sense which derives from the event's relation to economy. On one hand, giving and forgiving might be impossible, which conditions every act of giving – giving is always other than it appears to be. There might be no event that is not already a circulation of economy. On the other hand, the impossibility of the event is indissoluble: it occurs as the impossible, and it remains impossible after the fact of its occurrence.

We shall consider this further, first with respect to forgiveness. Forgiveness is only at stake in transgressions that are unforgivable because if a transgression is forgivable in principle, forgiveness is presupposed – not just assumed but taken or demanded. It is even as if the real transgression or error of judgement would be to refuse to forgive the forgivable. The forgivable, then, operates in a structure of mandated limited transgression in which, properly speaking, nothing is transcended because the limit is internal to the system.<sup>11</sup> Forgiveness in the order of the forgivable is programmatically assumed and assured *before* it is given, then. This means, however, that the forgivable *requires* no forgiveness; therefore, in fact, it neither takes nor receives any. In cases of forgivable transgressions, an event of forgiveness is neither possible nor necessary, as forgiving the forgivable amounts to little more than the circulation of an economy of permissible actions. Forgiveness remains irreducible to this economy, then – it never occurs within it.<sup>12</sup>

11. Bataille poses this as the world of the profane (of productive work, regulated by taboos) and its transgression in the sacred (excess which is subject to prohibition). Transgression is typically only of a limited nature, serving to *maintain* the world of the profane: it is 'complementary to the profane world, exceeding its limits *but not destroying it*'. In other words, as a state machination, '[t]he taboo is there in order to be violated' (*Eroticism* 67, 64; emphasis added).
12. Derrida's typology of aporias is instructive here. Aporias conform to one of the following structures:
  - The impermeable aporia of a closed border.
  - The too-permeable aporia of a border that no longer separates something from its other.
  - The impossible aporia in which passage is itself constitutively unthinkable, meaning the impasse of aporia cannot be experienced:

[T]here would be an aporia because there is not even any space for an aporia determined as experience of the step or of the edge, crossing or not of some line, relation to some spatial figure of the limit. No more movement or trajectory, no more *trans-* (transport, transposition, transgression, translation, and even transcendence). (*Aporias* 21)

(footnote continues)

Only for the truly unforgivable, therefore, would forgiveness be necessary or possible. Yet, if an unforgivable transgression is mitigated to a forgivable one, forgiveness will have lapsed into that same economy in which forgiveness never occurs. There may only be an event of forgiveness to the extent that the transgression remains unforgivable. Correspondingly, forgiveness must occur against its impossibility – it must be beyond reason. This condition, however, imperils the event of forgiveness both concretely and in concept. The event must be iterable for its transformative effects to persist even minimally, yet this exposes the event to anteriority and a future that always remains to-come: the possibility that forgiveness might be drawn back into economy cannot then be disqualified. Forgiveness might always be revised, misplaced, misunderstood, misgiven, incomplete, or unknowingly given. The implication is not only that the event might be retroactively annulled; the event projects its retroactive annulment as a possibility to which it should be absolutely foreign. The conditions of possibility for the event are *both* singularity (its lack of horizon and its irreducibility) *and* iterability (its efficacy is contingent upon its temporal persistence and apprehensibility), yet, by the same token, these are also its conditions of impossibility. The event of forgiveness is, therefore, the impossible of an economy of transgression: the event cannot be adequately accounted for *within* this system, yet it remains meaningfully bound to it.

The gift is a similarly paradoxical figure of economy. For a gift to be a gift rather than an economic exchange, it must be given without implying or provoking reciprocity. It must not ‘circulate’, ‘be exchanged’, or be ‘exhausted’ by circulation ‘in the form of return to the point of departure’:

If the figure of the circle is essential to economics, the gift must remain *aneconomic*. Not that it remains foreign to the circle, but it must *keep* a relation of foreignness to the circle, a relation without relation of familiar foreignness. It is perhaps in this sense that the gift is the impossible.

Not impossible but *the* impossible. (*Given Time* 7)

The problem presented is not only of economic reciprocity but of the conceptual exchange of the terms giving and taking: an act of giving takes its return *as credit* in its very occurrence. Conversely, the condition of the pure gift would be that it remains foreign to such an economic exchange. It cannot *take*: it can neither provoke nor demand any reciprocal counter-gift, nor can it return to the giver the satisfaction of giving (whether by consideration

These aporias haunt one another: the genuinely unforgivable is constitutively barred from and to forgiveness (first aporia) as the border of the forgivable is displaced to that between the outright permissible and the forgivable, which, in a sense, is no border at all (second aporia). There is then no thinkable border of the forgivable and the unforgivable, no passage for forgiveness, ‘a lack of the topological condition itself’ (third aporia [21]).

of their own virtue or through the gratitude of the receiver). Nor can it be *calculated*: it cannot dispose of unneeded excess – of waste – which, in a sense, costs nothing to the giver. It cannot pay off a debt, whether this is value outstanding or a *de facto* debt incurred through the social structure of giving – these are calculated fulfilments of economic obligations. It cannot *risk* equitable return; it must, in fact, be irrationally generous, given beyond reason. The absence of calculation is also perilous, however, as there should be no possibility, even in principle, of the gift being or becoming burdensome or poisonous.<sup>13</sup> A gift that brings misfortune to the receiver is no gift at all. The gift, then, should bear neither the possibility of economic return nor of its corruption, but the gift ‘gives, demands, and takes time’: it implicates its future-anterior possibilities of return and nullification into the act of giving (41). The gift must be foreign to the circulation of economy and immune to corruption, then – again, a condition of absolute singularity – yet the *value* of the gift is essentially economic; it obtains only on the condition that it can take time and, therefore, is effaceable. The gift, the event of giving, is the impossible of economy; it is obscure to (and in excess of) the system of economy, but it nonetheless holds a relation of familiar foreignness to it.

Derrida suggests, then, that the event must be genuinely unique: as an irruption beyond programme, it is not prefigurable, and if it is to remain foreign to any corrupting economy, its iteration is barred. Hence, it is strictly singular. Yet, it must *also* be iterable. If the event is to be apprehended or responded to, if it is possible to recognise or uphold the rupture that it instantiates, the event must be subject to division and self-alterity. The conceptual condition of the event is the impossible: it is a sovereign singularity free of relation, but it is also necessarily iterable and thus essentially repeatable with a self-othering relation. It is ‘repeatable in its very uniqueness’ through a ‘substitution’ that ‘replaces the irreplaceable’ (Derrida ‘Certain Impossible Possibility’ 452). The event, then, if it does indeed occur, is thrown into undecidability, corruption, and destruction.

#### THE EVENT AFTER DERRIDA

In recent years, materialism has, for many, superseded language as the paradigmatic orientation of contemporary thought (a shift in which Badiou’s work has been decisive). Articulating materialist possibilities of or after deconstruction has become imperative for some who work in its legacy, at least if new thought is to be pursued and engaged. Hägglund and Malabou are prominent among this number. Hägglund’s *Radical Atheism* attributes a material status to Derrida’s trace structure, while Malabou pursues a distinctly original philosophy of morphology under the concept of plasticity,

13. Gift has precisely such a double reference, though: in German, *das Gift* is (a dose of) poison (from the Greek δόσις). Derrida, citing Mauss’s *The Gift*, notes this conjunction in ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’, for which he credits himself in *Given Time* (132n56; 36).

which is both neuroscientific and Hegelian. Her concern is not a trace that appears in disappearance but *form*. What, then, of the event in Derrida's wake? Is an insistence on the impossible consonant with the materialist paradigm? It seems increasingly incompatible, at least, that, in some readings, the event resembles the religious miracle. Hägglund clearly sees this in John Caputo's perspective, against which he argues that the (arguably) ultimate religious event – an afterlife that joins life with immortality – is equivalent to annihilation:

According to Caputo, we 'dream' of the impossible becoming possible in the kingdom of God. ... [He] thinks we desire that the impossible will become possible, while Derrida argues that we dread that the impossible will become possible. (*Radical Atheism* 140–1)

Hägglund insists that 'if the impossible were to become possible', if immortality could be lived, 'everything would be erased' (141). Inasmuch as immortality is opposed to the essentially destructive temporality that is a condition of possibility for life, it *is* annihilation. Caputo ripostes that Hägglund misrepresents his position so egregiously that, in fact, he *endorses* his argument: 'Far from refuting me, he owes me a footnote' (37). God, Caputo insists, is the name of the event as the conjunction of the possible and the impossible at their limit:

God is not an unlimited being but a name uttered in *limit situations*. ... God is not a pure act but a pure interruption, not pure perfection but pure provocation, not a being but an event ... (39; emphasis added)

Malabou similarly observes the conjunction of Derrida's event with God. The event and God alike 'would forever remain irreducible to form' and therefore material presence. Formlessness makes each inapprehensible as such, she argues, '[u]nrecognizable ... , as if in disguise or even *nonexisting*' (*Plasticity* 75; emphasis added). It is against precisely this impossibility, we will see, that she distinguishes her own concept of the accident.

It is clear that the relation of the impossible to the possible is at stake in these arguments, and the event may not emerge unscathed. Let us consider, then, how Hägglund and Malabou understand the event.

#### THE EVENT AFTER DERRIDA: SUPERSEDED IN ITS EVENT

Hägglund proposes that, in Derrida's oeuvre, the structure of the event is characterised by a pervasive 'il-logical' logic of autoimmune identity. The trace structure is a 'metatheoretical' structure that is 'expressive of *any* notion of succession – whether ontological, phenomenological, or scientific'

(Hägglund interviewed in King 62). It is proper to neither phenomenology nor language; these are accorded no intellectual priority on the basis of being the fields in which Derrida first intervened. Succession is both essentially temporal and essentially destructive; what persists in time does so only as the surviving trace of something destroyed in its very event: time is this negating process; the trace, the form of survival. Hägglund's argument follows Derrida's '*Ousia and Gramme*', an essay concerned with the aporia of time constituted according to the presence of the now, which Aristotle writes of in *Physics*. Derrida writes:

If time ... appears not to take part in pure *ousia* as such, it is that it that it is made of nows (time's parts), and that several nows cannot: (1) either follow each other by immediately destroying one another, for in this case there would be no time; (2) or follow each other by destroying each other in a not immediately consecutive way, for in this case the intervallic nows would be simultaneous, and again there would be no time; (3) or remain (in) the same now, for in this case things that occur at intervals of ten thousand years would be *together, at the same time*, which is absurd. (56)

Both the persistence and the immediate destruction of the now seem incoherent for such a concept of time: the former annihilates the interval of time because it permits the concurrence of multiple nows, while the latter permits no present moment (i.e., it never is now because now has already been destroyed and superseded). It is on the latter basis that the deconstructive logic of the trace can be understood to operate, however. There is no now that is not destroyed and so encountered only as trace. This trace is 'itself' never present as a now: in fact, '[t]here is no trace *itself*, no *proper* trace', only its tracing. Presence is only ever indicated in its absence, as 'the trace of the trace, the trace of the erasure of the trace' (66).<sup>14</sup> As Hägglund then argues, any identity that persists, however minimally, is infinitely divided by this destructive succession. This opposes classical formulations of identity, as the condition of temporality forecloses any possibility of positive presence that is not immediately lost in its very event: 'Every event is both superseded (*no longer*) and to come (*not yet*) in its very event. Whatever happens is therefore transgressed by the future and becomes past' (*Radical Atheism* 29).<sup>15</sup> That something survives radically destructive temporal succession is thus a condition for anything whatsoever to occur, but by consequence, nothing is sovereign *qua* self-identical; identity is in a self-othering relation, or it is equivalent to nothing. The event *cannot* be an absolute singularity, then, or

14. Hägglund emphasises that this logic of time pervades Derrida's writing, perhaps even to the extent that time is not just an organising scheme but a master signifier.

15. Specifically, this contradicts self-identity ( $\alpha = \alpha$ ), noncontradictory opposition ( $\alpha \neq \beta$ ), and the law of the excluded middle ( $\neg\neg\alpha = \alpha$ ).

even the trace of a singularity annihilated in its very event. It *must* be divided in its very instance, and reiteration is the condition of its persistence not in positive presence but as the tracing of a destroyed past. The contamination of event by economy – of singularity by iterability – is the originary possibility for anything to occur: there may only be an event to the extent that it is not a pure event. In Hägglund's account, this, for Derrida, is the significance of the event, and it has been badly misunderstood:

The standard misreading of [Derrida's] argument is to understand ... impossibility as a negative limitation that prevents us from having access to the pure gift. ... [In fact, c]ontamination is not a privation or a lack of purity – it is the originary possibility for anything to be. Thus, a pure gift is not impossible because it is contaminated by our selfish intentions or by the constraints of economic exchange; it is impossible because a gift must be contaminated in order to be a gift. If the gift were not contaminated, it could neither be given nor received. (37)

For any giving to occur, then, the gift must be contaminated, and it is so inasmuch as it is subject to future-anteriority – to what remains to-come. The unconditionality of temporality divides the gift from itself and thus from any present and true value, exposing it to conditional calculation and the irreducible possibilities of economic return and turning poisonous. Gift and economy are not debased by this mutual contamination, however; they are made possible by it. In short, one may only give because one never knows exactly what is given. Time, then, is a real, ultratranscendental condition of possibility *and* contamination for what would otherwise be impossible.<sup>16</sup>

Hägglund's deconstruction of the gift/economy dyad is persuasive, as is his insistence on the temporal contamination of the event. Even still, the schema of survival does not in itself account for anything like a rupture within or from a given order. In fact, if what exists does so only as the material trace of its own destruction, this makes prefiguration necessary, which precludes any genuinely irruptive event. While Hägglund asserts that the event is impossible as a self-identical moment, the resultant synthesis of event and economy does not account for impossible possibility as a *real possibility* that is obscure to economy. Put simply, the event has something

16. Hägglund opts to use the term ultratranscendental rather than the more common quasi-transcendental (coined by Rodolphe Gasché). Derrida uses both, and their sense is very much similar (they 'can be used interchangeably', Hägglund suggests), though one might understand the former as absolute and the latter as equivocal (*Radical Atheism* 211n8). Where the transcendental is otherwise understood as the condition of possibility for the empirical, the logic of the ultratranscendental inverts this. Empirical occurrence (i.e., succession and survival) conditions the transcendental space of possibility. It logically precedes and exceeds (hence ultra-) the transcendental, therefore, as – or as if it were (hence quasi-) – its condition of possibility.

of a commonplace sense for Hägglund: he considers the condition of the event to be a ‘radically descriptive’ condition for ‘anything to happen and for everything that happens’ (184). This is not to say that he writes against the possibility of profound change or the unexpected, of course, but if it is the case that there are exceptional events, this has nothing to do with the condition of impossible possibility. Events (in this more quotidian sense) may be phenomenally exceptional, but they are not ontologically remarkable. Impossible possibility is nothing other than the contaminating condition for everything that happens.

Given Hägglund’s singular emphasis on the primacy of time and the corresponding schema of survival, he has ample resource to think the conditions of possibility for events to occur. Such events are certainly self-othered inasmuch as they are drawn into the economy of survival, and what happens is indeed conditioned by the impossibility of the singular event, but it is nonetheless of the order of the possible. For Derrida, conversely, the event is not impossible; it is *the* impossible. That is, it crosses a limit of possibility. Hägglund’s impossible, however, would never be anything but the sovereign *qua* indivisible. The event as a real occurrence of the impossible remains obscure to Hägglund’s reading.

#### THE EVENT AFTER DERRIDA: THE EVENT OF THE EVENT

Malabou writes of the event under the aegis of her concept of the accident. She characterises the psychological break – into before and after – of brain trauma as legible either in continuity or as an evental accident. The latter may be most intuitable in cases of acute injury or debilitating illness, but the domain of this schema is not so restricted: even ‘the most peaceful ageing’ may be understood to require an ‘accidental, catastrophic dimension’:

Something else is needed, namely, the event of ageing. Sudden, unpredictable, upsetting everything all at once. This concept of ageing can no longer be termed becoming-old, but rather ‘the instantaneity of ageing’, if we are willing to understand this as an unexpected, sudden metamorphosis ... . (*Ontology* 41)

In the strictly evental schema, ageing is nothing but the accident. The accident strikes absolute discontinuity upon the subject, severing their psychological link to the past and rendering them radically other than they were. It conforms to plastic *explosiveness*, not plastic malleability: it is ‘a pure rupture’ and ‘an existential break – not a continuity’ (42). Ultimately, however, Malabou endorses a conjunction of continuity and discontinuity – their ‘intertwin[ing] and implicat[ion] in one another’ (50). In this sense, the accident supplements becoming as an unmeasurable or indeterminate excess. Indeed, ‘instantaneity’ – the appearance of change in the instant – ‘renders the limit between the natural and the accidental undecidable’ (42).



As such, the accident does not just incur upon life; rather, life does not proceed without possible accident. Death is the ultimate such event of discontinuity, which the accident may reproduce as an *event of the event*:

[T]he transformation of the event of illness into a deadly event requires an event of the event. Again, this event of the event is the form of death, this apparition that depends on nothing, that is suspended in time and whose dynamic is one of pure acceleration. ... Often, this rush, in the figure, contour, shape adopted by the person about to die, is too fleeting to be noticed. Yet, among those who appear to us as living dead, those whose subjectivity left before time and who take on the new form of their end, ... the form of death is visible, it has time, it leaps out at you. This form can be seen in emergency shelters, old people's homes, hospices for the elderly, and neurodegenerative disease treatment centers. The form of death can be defined as a sudden accommodation of the worst. (69)

The event of the event, then, is the *giving-form of and to death*, the division of the sovereign event of death and its rupture into life. In this sense, the accident is a real discontinuity of the subject: to be born anew, the subject really dies, yet – in the worst cases, at least – they continue to live as a semblance of death, death given time and form. Death haunts the subject before and after their plural deaths: the neurobiological-psychological death that the subject has undergone and the projection of biological-existential death that remains to come.

It is worth dwelling further upon the event of the event because it invokes questions beyond a straightforward reproduction or simulacrum of death. The event of the event seems in fact to reciprocally produce a certain possibility of an event of death. It is Heidegger's being-towards-death that I have in mind here. 'Dying is not an event', he claims, 'but a phenomenon to be understood existentially' (*Being* 223). Dying is not 'being-at-an-end' but '*being toward the end*'; it is *Dasein*'s mode of anticipation of, or projection towards, death as an always-imminent possibility (228). As such, he insists that death, which is *Dasein*'s 'ownmost nonrelational possibility', is '*not to be bypassed*' as either an essential possibility or an aporetic limit (243). *Dasein*'s comportment is towards a death of which it cannot, as *Dasein*, take the step. That is, *Dasein* – constitutively, being-there – cannot pass the threshold of not-being-there. *Dasein* may end when it ceases to be in the world, certainly, but this avers nothing as to what occurs to *Dasein* "after death" – whether it "lives on" or even, "outliving itself", is "immortal" – because such questions exceed the purview of the "this-worldly" analysis of *Dasein* (230). As such, *Dasein* does not perish in the manner of ontic death. Heidegger suggests instead that *Dasein* 'can only *demise* as long as

it dies' (229; emphasis added). He accounts for demise as an intermediate phenomenon between dying and perishing. It connotes a departure or passage from life (*ableben*) with a medico-legal sense: *Dasein* can be observed and pronounced to no longer be. Crucially, though, *it does not perish*.<sup>17</sup> As such, with Heidegger, there is no event of death posterior to originary *Ereignis* and the givenness of dying – no rupture, the effects of which might transform being-there.

The event of the event produces death *within* the life of the subject rather than as a posterior limit, then, and it produces the concomitant possibility of an event of death. Death, which as the 'ownmost non-relational possibility' is strictly singular, becomes a divisible, displaceable, traversable limit. (Once again, the possibility of the event lies in the impossibility of its singularity.) In this sense, the event of the event corrupts being-there: Malabou thinks that 'contrary to what Heidegger claims, the history of being itself consists perhaps of nothing but a series of accidents which ... dangerously disfigure the meaning of essence' (*Ontology* 91). This history is not just one of revelations of Being, then, but also one of the plasticity of being-there and the metamorphic death-event of *Ereignis* itself.

At this point, Malabou's orientation must also be distinguished from Derrida's. Where Malabou emphasises that the accident may or may not be understood as an event of discontinuity, such discontinuity nevertheless belongs immanently to the formal possibilities of plastic-being. Indeed, Malabou disavows all possibility of transcendence:

Why ... do I constantly affirm the impossibility of any transcendence, of any 'disappearance in appearance', of any messianicity? Why do I state that plasticity survives or transgresses its own deconstruction? ...

To state that nothing is unconvertible amounts to claiming the philosophical necessity of the thought of a new materialism, which does not believe in the 'formless' and implies the vision of a malleable real that challenges the conception of time as a purely messianic process. It means that we can sometimes decide about the future ... , which means that there is actually something to do with it, in the sense in which Marx says that men make their own history. (*Plasticity* 76–7)

To Malabou's mind, Derrida has a 'philosophical resistance to plasticity' because form, in the language of metaphysics, is sutured to presence to the

17. This typology of death consigns nonhuman life to mere perishing, but it also denies death to man as *Dasein*. Derrida writes that '[e]ven if [*Dasein*] dies (*stirbt*) and even if it ends (*endet*), it never "kicks the bucket" (*verendet nie*). *Dasein*, *Dasein* as such, does not know any end in the sense of *verenden*' (*Aporias* 40). The question 'what follows death?' is not just bracketed; *Dasein* is ultimately denied its essential possibility and rendered immortal.

extent that they form a metonymy, one that also includes meaning, identity, value, ... (74). An outright rejection of form comes at the cost of the absolute indeterminacy of the future, however – the pure messianicity of the unexpected and unexpected. Where for Derrida the event ‘cannot take any form, cannot appear as the result of a metamorphosis’, Malabou insists upon thinking a relation of time, materiality, and event ‘within which nothing escapes transformation or the operation of exchange’ (76, 77). The urgency to do so is equally political and philosophical, she feels; it responds to both contemporary capitalism’s totalising impulse and the waning force of linguistic deconstruction. Plasticity is the emerging motif of both ‘post-metaphysical’ and scientific thought and is thus to supplant the Derridean ‘motor scheme’ of writing as ‘the systemic law of the deconstructed real’ (57).<sup>18</sup> For Malabou, trace and form must be thought in correspondence: tracing becomes taking form. The event is not of the order of impossible irruption, then; it is a material possibility of plastic being. Consequently, the task of thinking the event is not thinking impossible possibility as a condition of emergence but negotiating the transformation of the possible.

Malabou seems to me to address the event’s profound, rupturous effects more significantly than Hägglund does. She reminds the reader that she does not ‘seek to ward over a thought of the pure event or an idolatry of surprise’, but she nonetheless thinks the possibility of ‘emerge[nce] from unthinkable nothingness, th[e] enigma of a second birth that is not rebirth’ on the basis of the accident (*Ontology* 90). Even still, particular consequences of affirming plasticity’s metamorphic capacity over and above any transcendence must be recognised. As Gratton notes, it is certainly ‘immanentist change’ for which Malabou accounts, whether ‘ontological, biological, or political structures’ are in question (*Speculative Realism* 185).<sup>19</sup>

18. Malabou suggests, in fact, that plasticity is both the metamorphosis of and the condition for Derrida’s ‘enlargement’ of the concept of writing:

Wasn’t it the particular aptitude of this concept for *deformation* and *reformation*, as well as for the *explosion* of its meaning or original *form*? Shouldn’t we assume that the origin of the plasticity of meaning is itself the relation of the ‘enlarged’ meaning to the ‘derived’, ‘vulgar’, or ‘common’ meaning of any concept or word? On this basis, writing would have to be plastic to open onto its ‘wider’ meaning, to reveal the *other* writing, masked by its ‘derived’ or ‘common’ meaning. (*Plasticity* 12)

She may be correct that plasticity has superseded writing’s significance for contemporary thought, but the enlargement of writing can be understood equally on the basis of the writing of writing – that is, on the basis of real contradiction. We will return to this shortly; for now, it is sufficient to register that such a commitment to form is not inevitably demanded.

19. This should be distinguished from Badiou’s insistence on thinking change within the situation, however; as Ray Brassier suggests, Badiou can be described as an ‘advocate of radical transcendence’ in the particular sense that subjective intervention transcends ‘the immanent objective parameters of ontological discourse’ (250n15).

While the accident is in some sense undecidable because the border between the natural and the accidental – or, the continuous and the discontinuous – is indeterminate, the accident-event appears nevertheless to be a necessary supplement for life. If one maintains that events of ageing or death, for example, are *necessary*, not only does the event take form; it becomes programmatic – indeed, it becomes *phenoptotic*. However obscure or unpredictable the moment, nature, and effects of the accident-event might be, the event that must come becomes a programmatic break in programme or a determinate rupture of indeterminacy. This is not to say that there is a programme of plasticity as such; Malabou is clear that ‘plasticity forms where DNA no longer writes’ (*Plasticity* 60). Nor, indeed, can one meaningfully think the conjunction of thought, life, and brain (both matter and psyche) as Malabou does without thinking a certain programme of human finitude. It is not clear, though, that this programme is generalisable such that it imposes itself as the preferable scheme of thought in other domains. If one subscribes to Badiou’s analysis of the state of the communist hypothesis, for example, any unbinding from extant class-labour relations demands novel experimental political praxis because any teleology of the event is strictly untenable.

With Malabou, then, the accident-event may have remarkable effects, but it is not errant as such. The event always has a horizon. It is in principle a possibility of plastic-being, not an impossibility.

#### CONTRADICTION OF THE REAL

To my mind, Hägglund and Malabou both provide insightful accounts of the deconstructed real. Whether on the basis of temporality or plasticity, the event occurs, and it does so on the condition that it is impure. For Hägglund, the contamination of event and economy is the condition for anything to occur; for Malabou, the accident is a possibility of plasticity that enjoins one to think discontinuity as a possibility of continuity. On one hand, these characterisations of the event authorise a certain negotiation of the future, as Malabou suggests. Hägglund, too, insists that it is for these ‘structural reasons’ that ‘there is nothing but negotiation’ (*Radical Atheism* 202). On the other hand, however, with Hägglund and Malabou alike, the deconstructed event is a possibility immanent to the deconstructed real. The event that occurs is *not* the impossible. Contradiction has, in a sense, given way to the consistency of *what happens*. This, at least, has been relinquished from Derrida’s condition of impossible possibility: Must this be the case, however?

As the Heideggerian emphasis on finitude has given way to thought of the infinite – more specifically, the post-Cantorian infinite – a decisive question has emerged: can the totality of the possible be thought? Badiou thinks not, recall: there is no set of all sets; the One is not. The being of the set of all sets would entail the being of the Russell set, the set of all nonreflexive

sets (i.e., sets that do not belong to themselves). If this set is nonreflexive, then it must belong to itself (i.e., be reflexive), but this entails that it does not belong to the set, making it nonreflexive, and so on. In other words, the set is inconsistent. As the logic of Badiou's ontology is classical, it requires that we conclude that this 'Chimera is not'. Given that the being of at least one set is thus proscribed, the consequence must be that 'the Whole has no being', making totality constitutively incomplete (*Logics* 110). Correspondingly, Badiou's project is opposed equally to ontotheology, in which the completeness and consistency of being are affirmed by God's transcendence of the thinkable, and to constructivist thought, which 'subsumes the relation to being *within the dimension of knowledge*' (*Being* 293). Constructivism affirms totality and prohibits errancy by regulating existence absolutely in accordance with the Statist vision of the situation (i.e., that of the existence of the One). '[W]ithin the constructivist vision of being', Badiou insists, '*there is no place for an event to take place*' (289).

Livingston insists, however, that Badiou's is not the only legitimately post-Cantorian orientation of thought. There are in fact two possibilities presented by Gödel's incompleteness theorems, which specify that for any formal system capable of formulating arithmetical truths:

1. *There exist true statements that are unprovable within the system.* Such statements – Gödel sentences – testify to both the incompleteness of the system and thought's capacity to think truths that exceed said system.
2. *Such a system cannot consistently demonstrate its own consistency.* As such, it is *also* possible that there are *inconsistent* limits or impasses of thought.

Either the system is incomplete, then, *or* it may be inconsistent. (These two possibilities correspond to the possibilities enumerated above regarding the existence or nonexistence of the Russell set, of course.) The implications of these theorems bear not only upon "mathematical reality" narrowly conceived, Livingston argues, but more generally on the very "relationship" between thought and being' ('Realism' 1).<sup>20</sup> What Cantor's event demands of thought in its wake is that completeness and consistency become disjunct. We have seen, for example, that Badiou maintains incompleteness and that ontological consistency is its necessary vouchsafe. Derrida can be understood, conversely, as a 'paradoxico-critical' thinker: he maintains that the existence of totality is thinkable but that the existence of this thought within the totality it addresses inevitably produces significant logical consequences:

[C]omprehending the totality of a structure from a position caught within that very structure involves thought in a specific

20. A shorter version of 'Realism and the Infinite' is published in *Speculations* IV. I refer here to this unpublished extended version, though, because it contains material significant to chapter four.

kind of relationship to totality as such, which can itself be formally modelled. ... [S]uch a thought, and its formal representation, necessarily involves the development of formal *paradoxes* or antinomies of thought and its limits. ... In particular, Priest suggests, thought about the totality of the thinkable (or language about the totality of the sayable) is inherently involved in such contradictions whenever it is possible to generate, within such a totality, a thinkable element which reflects or is about the whole, but is nevertheless still located within it. ('Formalism' 10)

Priest outlines this structure – inclosure – in *Beyond the Limits of Thought*. It entails the formulation of a totality that is in principle unsurpassable ('Closure') and the generation of an object that refers to this totality and that nonetheless surpasses its limit ('Transcendence'). Such an object will be understood to both belong to *and* exceed the totality to which it refers, which reveals the limit it crosses as a *dialetheia* – a locus of a true contradiction. As I have implied above, Derrida's discourse on writing can be understood to be one such theory insofar as it is subject to its own effects. Iterability, for example, is a quasi-concept that concerns the possibility of signification; hence, it applies to anything that is expressible, *including* iterability and statements concerning it. If iterability is understood to be true – if it is indeed the case that all meaning is contingent upon the radical contingency of meaning – statements concerning iterability are deprived of any present meaning *by* iterability. They are, as such, foreign to any absolute truth value. If they are so, however, it is *because they are true*. In other words, if iterability is true, the truth of iterability is not *consistently* expressible. As Priest writes, Derrida 'is expressing something (Closure) that, if he is right, cannot be expressed (Transcendence)' (*Beyond* 240).

Livingston suggests that thought of totality and limits is subjected by such logical paradoxes to an 'inherent dilemma ... *between* consistent incompleteness (the generic orientation [i.e., Badiou's]) and inconsistent completeness (the paradoxico-critical one)' ('Formalism' 11). This metalogical dilemma obtains precisely because, as we have seen, the existence of totality is *undecidable*. While consistency may be assumed, it is '*essentially* unsecurable' (Livingston 'Realism' 5). Meanwhile, limit contradictions are not invalidated by consistent logical systems, but this does not prove that the real world is complete and inconsistent. One may decide for either inconsistent completeness or consistent incompleteness, then (a decision that Livingston notes is to some degree forced but which is also 'possibly non-exclusive'), but one must recognise that thought at such a limit is submitted to a dilemma that cannot be immanently resolved as such (4).

The impossible possibility Derrida attributes to the event may be more significant than a contaminating condition, then: it may in fact be understood to identify the event as the possible occurrence of a real contradiction.

Indeed, the event can be thought according to the structure of inclosure: the totality of the possible comprises what can occur (this is assumed to be consistent); thus, we have Closure. The event, which is the point of Transcendence, will be both within and without this totality, then. If consistency were assured, the event would simply be impossible: it could not and would not ever happen. Though its impossibility might still be a legitimate concern of thought, it would be unremarkable otherwise – certainly, it would not be a concern of ontology. If the impossibility of the event were only apparent, meanwhile – if, however obscure or previously unthought, it *were* consistently possible – it would belong to the totality of the possible straightforwardly. Consistency would be unchallenged once more. The event, then, if it happens, must be the impossible that occurs *against its impossibility*. The impossible happens, and it happens to happening – to possibility. If the event is to happen, it must be possible, but if it were possible, it would not happen as an event – the event would be impossible. The event, if it happens, happens only to the extent that it cannot happen. As such, it is both impossible and possible, within and without the totality of the possible. As Derrida insists, it is not just impossible; it is *the impossible*, the figure of familiar foreignness to possibility.



In certain respects, while Badiou's and Derrida's orientations remain meaningfully disjunct, correspondences between their accounts of the event seem to me to support the disjunctive character of Badiou's and a realist sense of Derrida's. More significantly, though, their accounts exhibit a rapport inasmuch as the event represents a dilemma both within and *between* these positions. Not only is the event undecidable for both Badiou and Derrida, it is the locus of the undecidability between the world's incompleteness and inconsistency. As such, the event is a *corruption of the world* that makes legible the illegibility of this challenge to post-Cantorian thought. (I take this corruption to be reciprocal: if the event is indeed to be decided upon – if it is indeed to be apprehended, responded to meaningfully, and its consequences pursued – the basis for this is that the event is itself corrupt: its illegibility is legible.) To think the possibility of the impossible occurrence is to think that the constitution of the possible is in one way or another irreducibly insufficient; in which way, however – incompleteness or inconsistency – is *really* undecidable, *really* illegible.





## CHAPTER TWO

### Lecture on Nothing (No. 2)

#### A FIGURE OF NOTHING

In this chapter, I will demonstrate what I have characterised as the corruption of the world within – in fact, as – music. I will elaborate the thesis that silence is a figure of nothing. I refer to silence as a *figure* of nothing because, for all that silence is the absent member of the dyad of sound and silence, what is in question is the possibility of nothing taking form. Cage’s concept of silence, which displaces the limit between sound and silence to the presence or absence of intentionality, might, *prima facie*, be said to observe precisely this. For Cage, silence has a proper medium of appearance; it has a *sense*. What the orthodox reading of Cage therefore denies, however, is that silence is a figure of *nothing*. In displacing silence’s horizon to the domain of intentionality, Cage identifies silence with sound such that sound becomes a universally produced and, in principle, fully experienceable face of being. Inasmuch as this seems to me to be a musical analogue to constructivist thought (assuming experience constitutes a form of knowledge), I will suggest that it *relinquishes nothing*.

In ‘What is Metaphysics?’ Heidegger reflects upon the difficulties one faces in any interrogation – even any index – of nothing:

In our asking we posit the nothing in advance ... as a being. Interrogating the nothing ... turns what is interrogated into its opposite. The question deprives itself of its own object.

Accordingly, every answer to this question is also impossible from the start. ... With regard to the nothing, question and answer alike are inherently absurd. (96–7)

He suggests that postulating anything of nothing – even making it the object of a question – makes nothing precisely what it is not. Nothing,

properly speaking, should remain foreign to the copula – to existence and identification. Some find Heidegger’s contortions incoherent: Carnap, for example, argues that Heidegger formulates a sequence of logically flawed ‘pseudo-statements’ by using nothing as a noun phrase and a verb rather than a null quantifier. He finds these statements ‘absurd, even if [they] were not already meaningless’ (71). Priest, however, recognises them to be symptomatic of Heidegger contending with real contradictions. Nothing, he writes, is ‘a most strange, contradictory thing’. He endorses noneism, which is to say, he allows for objects to be nonexistent. This entails that they can be targeted by thought but cannot enter causal relations with other objects. An adequately characterised object corresponds to its characterisation in at least one world or another – that is, at least one of the many modal logical worlds, possible or impossible – but whether it *exists* depends on whether one of those worlds is the actual world. Nonexistent objects correspond to the values with which they are characterised in worlds other than the actual, then. This avoids succumbing to the possible falsity that follows from the characterisation principle – objects are not simply willed into existence in the manner of the ontological argument for the existence of God. Nonexistent objects include fictional characters, for example; they can certainly be thought, but, Priest maintains, they engage in no real interactions with the world. Nothing, too, can be experienced in thought, but, ‘presumably’, it cannot be interacted with otherwise, so it is a nonexistent object. It is something of a special case, though, as its objectivity is contradictory: ‘Since it is an object, it is something. But it is the *absence* of all things too; so **nothing**’ – styled in boldface to denote the object rather than the quantifier – ‘is nothing. It is no thing, no object’. Indeed, for Priest, herein lies an answer to the question of why there is something rather than nothing: if nothing existed, **nothing** would exist as the absence of all things – as nothing (‘Much Ado’ 151).<sup>1</sup>

If silence is to be understood as a figure of nothing in a strong sense, this will entail thinking its contradictions, then. On one hand, silence will be understood to be a possible limit contradiction of sense – to be both within and without presentation. On the other hand, silence may be understood to be a significant lacuna which testifies to presentational incompleteness – to being which is unpresentable to knowledge and experience. It may, then, be understood to be indicatively coextensive with the void in Badiou’s philosophy. Given these possibilities which reflect the undecidability of totality, silence is a figure of nothing inasmuch as it sutures presentation to the unrepresented. It is, as we will see following Nancy’s deconstruction of world and sense, a point of in-significance, a point where *sense* touches *non-sense*.

1. **Nothing** can be formalised as the fusion of the members of the empty set, which is a subset of every other set: ‘it is the absence of everything’, hence ‘it is nothing too’ (154).

In *The Sense of the World*, Nancy declares that '[t]here is no longer any world' nor 'any sense of the world'. There is no longer any possibility of a grounding relationship for the world, no possibility of any 'composed or complete order' or any 'beyond or other' that might give the world sense or meaning (4). He refers, then, to the disruption of the world's grounding and vouchsafing of sensical-being. This disruption is radical – beyond crisis, in fact – as the sense of the end is not available to thought. An end thought as an apocalypse is determined within those systems of sense and signification that are no longer secure, but renouncing the signifier 'end' or 'apocalypse' is no more sufficient; if one thinks that *what* is ending can be conceptualised, the world as a regime of signification remains an assumed ground. Nancy suggests, therefore, that

this cannot mean that we are confronted merely with the end of a certain 'conception' of the world ... . It means, rather that there is no longer any assignable signification of 'world', or that the 'world' is subtracting itself, bit by bit, from the entire regime of signification available to us ... . (5)

That is, as every conceptualisation of the world's end finds its sense *in* the world, to say that the world has ended can only mean that this regime of sense is no longer capable of functioning. Appeals to transcendence to provide or restore sense understand world as 'that which precisely lacks all sense or has its sense beyond itself' and so are structurally ontotheological (Christian, Nancy insists). If, however, as Heidegger suggests, and following a lineage back to the equivalence of Spinoza's God with Nature, world is a 'totality of signifyingness or significance', then no philosophy has thought a beyond of the world, because it '*has its outside on the inside*' (54). Hope for any proper reconciliation of world and sense thereby abates.<sup>2</sup>

2. While world, for Heidegger, variously connotes the conceptual history of world (as *kosmos*, *mundus*, etc.), beings and humanity's relation to them, and the world as mundane environment, it is his understanding of world as a regime of sense-making that is most pertinent here. Heidegger is far more allusive than Nancy's concise account suggests:

On the path we must here follow, the nature of world can only be indicated. Even this indication is confined to warding off that which might initially distort our view into the essence of things.

World is not a mere collection of the things – countable and uncountable, known and unknown – that are present at hand. Neither is world a merely imaginary framework added by our representation to the sum of things that are present. ('Origin' 22–3)

World is not an encyclopaedia of existent beings or things, then; Heidegger is careful to distinguish his from the 'so-called *natural concept of world*' that posits the collection of  
(footnote continues)

There is only the world, then, except that there is no longer the world – there is only the fact of its withdrawal. The absence of ‘a proper and present signified, the signifier of the proper and present as such’, precludes the coconstitution of a consistent world and legitimate sense (3). As such, the consequence of the world’s subtraction is that sense must be abandoned. Yet, there is indeed something given – *es gibt Sein* – so Nancy recognises that there must be *some* sense of and in the world. Following the abandonment of sense, then, another sense of the world must obtain. Denied of any absolute grounding of sense, ‘the world *no longer has* a sense’, he writes: ‘it *is* sense’ (8). In fact, sense itself lacks any proper ground: it has ‘no unity of sense, no original matrix of sense, not even a univocal etymological derivation’ (76). Sense variously refers to meaning, approximation, coherence, sensuous experience, givenness, instinct, bodily sense, ... . There are, indeed, bodies of sense, animate and inanimate, that form the body of sense:

[A]ll bodies, each outside the others, make up the inorganic body of sense. The stone does not ‘have’ any sense. But sense touches the stone: it even collides with it, and this is what we are doing here.

In a sense – but what sense – sense is touching. The being-here, side by side, of all these beings-there (beings-thrown, beings-sent, beings-abandoned to the there). (63)

beings in this manner (*Fundamental Concepts* 279). Nor does world supplement objects as a structure of representation. Rather, humanity’s participatory forming of world produces, structures, and derives significance. Heidegger calls this the worlding of a world. World is not a determinate object that may be encountered, therefore; it is that ‘always-nonobjectual to which we are subject’ (‘Origin’ 23). Accordingly, while world can be indicated, it cannot be fully conceptually grasped because any such conceptualisation is caught within the ‘prevailing of world’ – its givenness and its worlding (*Fundamental Concepts* 351). World, then, is a prevailing domain of significance into which we find ourselves thrown, in which we project and make sense, and in which we participate to produce civilisation. As a condition for understanding, this domain is total. In the existential analysis of world, no sense of existence is external or transcendent:

By the opening of a world, all things gain their lingering and hastening, their distance and proximity, their breadth and their limits. In worlding there gathers that spaciousness from out of which the protective grace of the gods is gifted or is refused. Even the doom of the absence of the god is a way in which world worlds. (‘Origin’ 23)

Gods too, then, whether they exist or not, are to be understood for their sense *within* worlds, not as transcendent creators or necessary beings. Whether via the whims of the gods of antiquity, the love of the Abrahamic God, or the historic effects of His demise, the theological structuration of human civilisation is but another way in which humanity makes sense. World ‘does not in any way imply earthly as opposed to heavenly being’, Heidegger insists; a transcendent God cannot be opposed to world, for the sense of every signification and significance is *immanent* to the world. As such, ‘[t]hought in terms of ek-sistence’, world is “‘the beyond’ within existence and for it’ (‘Letter’ 252).

For Heidegger, inanimate matter – exemplified by the stone – is ‘worldless’, unlike world-forming man or the encircled animal (*Fundamental Concepts* 184). Nancy retorts that sense touches the stone. This is not to say that he endorses an extended vitalism. Sense touches the stone because the stone is abandoned to an existence in which it *touches*, no less than the human does. Sense is found and made in being-in-relation in a world that no longer is and so which is devoid of sense. After the dissolution of the sense of the world, this sense of the world remains. As such, there is no decision to be made between the absolute sense of a mythical *logos* and absolute non-sense.<sup>3</sup> Sense participates in each: it must participate in non-sense to avoid renewing myth by conferring on sense ‘a unity that would not be simply numerical’, a unity *without relation* for which touching would no longer be possible; yet, it must participate in sense to avoid lapsing into that ‘all-too-tempting game’ of the endless circulation of a sense without sense that amounts to an ‘interminable autophagy of discourse’ (162–3).

The sense of the world must participate in a certain senselessness, then. ‘The in-significant’, Nancy writes, ‘is not that which is mean, without importance’ but the locus at which sense ‘detaches itself, disconnects itself from any signification’, at which sense is ‘out of its senses’, even ‘close to madness’ (166). There is, indeed, ‘a madness of sense, before all reason and without which no reason would be possible’ and which will have ‘marked truth itself’ (49, 166).<sup>4</sup> (This brings to mind something Derrida writes of Bataille’s sovereignty, to which we will return in chapter five: the difference between Hegel’s lordship and Bataille’s sovereignty is the very ‘difference of sense’, according to which meaning may only observe the effects of ‘a *certain* non-meaning’ [‘Economy’ 321; emphasis added]). The madness of sense – senselessness, or non-sense, we can say – is the conditioning excess of sense; it is both within and without sense (which evokes Priest’s inclosure, of course). Sense escapes *from* and *into* itself; it has its outside on the inside.

#### MUSIC’S IN-SIGNIFICANCE

In *Listening*, Nancy articulates the pre-eminent quality of music’s body of sense. As and for sense, music must resound: it acts upon the listener’s body, of course, but, more significantly, it also acts upon its own body by *listening to itself* – in combination, in trace-retention, and in anticipation. This anticipation is the ineffaceable quality of music, which ‘never stops exposing the present to the imminence of a deferred presence, one that is more “to come” [*à venir*] than any “future” [*avenir*]’ (*Listening* 66). Music is constitutively open to the future anteriority of alterity; it depends upon a touching that is foreign to the interiorisation of self-presence. It makes sense, therefore, only to the extent that it surrenders any possibility of a sense that

3. Jeffrey Librett emphasises that the latter is equivalent to nihilistic relativism (xii).

4. Nancy finds this to be the significance of psychoanalysis, even while its therapeutic interventions lapse into a desire for absolute sense when they diagnose sickness.

is sovereign or finally given. This is music's distinguishing temporal structure for Nancy – one he enjoins philosophy to imitate, in fact. If music is always constituted and motivated by a certain non-sense, then silence – the expectant caesura – might be thought as music's figure of non-sense *par excellence*. Properly speaking, silence should act upon no body; it should resound with, retain, and protain nothing; it should elude touching. Silence should be truly in-significant.

#### SILENCE GIVEN TO SENSE

Silence, however, has been sensorily rich since Cage's preoccupation therewith. Famously, his understanding of silence was transformed upon hearing otherwise-inaudible biological processes occurring in his own body in an anechoic chamber at Harvard:

[I] heard two sounds, one high and one low. When I described them to the engineer in charge, he informed me that the high one was my nervous system in operation, the low one my blood in circulation. Until I die there will be sounds. And they will continue following my death. ('Experimental Music' 8)

For all that Cage's account is thought to be apocryphal in part, an *encounter* with silence persuades him that '[t]here is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time' (8).<sup>5</sup> The impossibility of true silence would, of course, go on to be presented in the 'silent' piece *4'33"*, which is sufficiently widely known – if often vaguely so – that it resembles a pop culture reference: Warhol's soup cans, Beethoven's Fifth, Cage's silent piece, ...<sup>6</sup> In fact, *4'33"* belongs to a *set* of silent pieces whose membership is both often overlooked and meaningfully indeterminate, a situation no doubt exacerbated by Cage's elusive references to his silent piece (i.e., in the singular). James Pritchett outlines four principal candidates for membership in 'John Cage's Silent Piece(s)':

- *Silent Prayer* (unrealised, but discussed in 1948)
- *4'33"* (1952; revised 1953–86)
- *0'00"* (1962)
- *One<sup>3</sup> = 4'33" (0'00") + ♯* (1989)

5. Scepticism is widely registered about the origin of the sounds. Kyle Gann credits Peter Gena's account as an authoritative (and medically supported) refutation. More likely, this suggests, a condition such as tinnitus was misidentified (Gann 164). Pauline Oliveros attributes the sounds to an undiagnosed medical condition that would ultimately lead to Cage's fatal stroke, but given the decades between the events, this is a marginal viewpoint (qtd. in De Re 77). The precise origin of the sounds (and the biological expertise of the engineer) seems fairly inconsequential, though its mythologisation is evocative here.
6. As if to prove my point, in an early draft, I inadvertently referred to Warhol's beans...

Of these, 4'33" and 0'00" have been widely studied, while *One*<sup>3</sup> = 4'33" (0'00") + ♪ is little-known and has not motivated a great deal of scholarship. *Silent Prayer* is the black sheep of the flock: while it is often afforded passing mention in discussions of 4'33", it is not actually a musical work – Cage 'did not create' it, Pritchett notes ('Silent Piece(s)'). It is generally understood, at least, that it does not exist: William Fetterman's *John Cage's Theatre Pieces* contains what is probably the authoritative account of Cage's silent pieces, and it does not treat it as a work. Yet, what I propose here is a quasi-hyperstitional reading of this piece that is not a piece.<sup>7</sup> I will first construct a family history of Cage's silent pieces. This will show that in the orthodox perspective of Cagean silence, these pieces identify silence with sound, much as one expects. More consequentially, though, it shows that they do so *progressively*. At their culmination, in *One*<sup>3</sup> = 4'33" (0'00") + ♪, Cage risks the absolute interiorisation of silence-as-sound. This, I suggest, is analogous to the mythical return to *logos* of which Nancy writes: sense sensing itself sensing, an 'invasive inherence' and a 'leech' of 'the self' (*Sense* 162). 4'33", therefore, could be said to inaugurate silence's disaster. It is possible to read Cage against this, however, if one entertains that *Silent Prayer* insinuates inconsistency and the escape of sense into his sequence of silent works from the outset. Heidegger writes that the work of art 'opens up a world and keeps it abidingly in force' by 'allow[ing] a space for that spaciousness' of a world to take place ('Origin' 22–3). *Silent Prayer*, which is not a composed work, should not give rise to any world and so should make and allow for no sense – we will see, indeed, that it flirts with absurdity. Nonetheless, it may be *significant* in Cage's composed silent pieces. Its status of existence as a musical (non)work would thereby be obscure to the world or – more compellingly still – contradictory. It is certainly murkier than the nonexistence Priest attributes to fictional characters.<sup>8</sup> Such contradictions are inevitable, I think, if silence is thought as a figure of nothing; *Silent Prayer*, a figure of silence – hence, a figure of a figure of nothing. In this perspective, there is an other possibility of silence that demands to be thought with and after Cage: not sound bereft of intention but the in-significant, where sense is outside itself.

7. A hyperstition – a term coined at the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit – is a fiction that makes itself real. Eldritch Priest – no relation to Graham – writes of Jennifer Walshe's fictitious artistic network, Grúpat, as one such example. Walshe's ruse is up – the network has been revealed to be fictive – yet this has not negated its hyperstitional effects. That *there is* discourse about Grúpat testifies to its self-founding existence. '[T]here is no meaningful difference or delay between the fictional and the real', Priest suggests. In the order of the hyperreal, 'it matters only that words and ideas about art are exchanged' (209, 210). What I mean by *quasi-hyperstitional* will become clear shortly.
8. This account is quasi-hyperstitional, then, inasmuch as it suggests that while Cage never wrote the piece, *Silent Prayer* has possibly-real effects that are contingent upon its *contradictory* status of existence and nonexistence rather than a self-founded status of existence strictly speaking.

Cage refers to his plan for *Silent Prayer* in a talk given at Vassar College in 1948. Although reports suggest that he was reluctant for the text to be published, it was eventually disseminated in 1991 as 'A Composer's Confessions'. He writes therein of an ambition to

compose a piece of uninterrupted silence and sell it to Muzak Co. It will be 3 or [4½] minutes long – those being the standard lengths of 'canned' music – and its title will be Silent Prayer. It will open with a single idea which I will attempt to make as seductive as the color and shape and fragrance of a flower. The ending will approach imperceptibility. (40)

As this formulation predates the events and developments that were decisive in what we know as Cage's understanding of silence – the anechoic chamber, chance, indeterminacy, his study of Zen Buddhism, and Robert Rauschenberg's 'blank' *White Painting* series – the silence Cage has in mind here is the *absence* of sound.<sup>9</sup> Pritchett confirms that at this stage Cage had 'no interest in paying attention to ambient noise, much less considering it to be music' ('Silent Piece(s)'). Douglas Kahn agrees: if anything were to be not-presented in *Silent Prayer*, it would have been 'conventional silence' (182). Given Cage's later commitments, many view *Silent Prayer*'s proposition of a true sensory absence as naïve and consider it to be little more than the preliminary idea – at best, an experiment – for 4'33". William Brooks, for instance, argues as much:

*Silent Prayer* contains a framed silence, an expressive silence. Knowing what I do about Cage's thought in 1948, I understand that I am to *not-attend* to sounds that may occur. I am, in fact, to attempt to continue to disregard them, to stipulate [absolute] *silence*, as before. And if I cannot disregard them – which, I suggest, is what Cage discovered in his initial experiments with that piece – then *Silent Prayer* is a failure ... . (124)

What the mature 4'33" successfully presents – the impossibility of silence as an absence of sense – consigns *Silent Prayer* to failure in its naïve conception. Gann and Pritchett consider the piece to be a failure too, and they are emphatic as to what this implies: the description of an uninterrupted silence that is nonetheless punctuated by a seductive idea and a near-imperceptible end is contradictory, hence *Silent Prayer* 'does not exist'; Cage 'did not create it' (Gann 127; Pritchett 'Silent Piece(s)'). These views represent the

9. A study of Zen may well be an interesting complement to my argument, but it lies outside the scope of this thesis.



orthodox understanding: scholars widely consider the work to be jettisoned or think it to be a conceptual sketch for *4'33"*. In fact, Cage even endorses the latter perspective in an interview with William Duckworth. He suggests that he had spoken of the possibility of *4'33"* four years prior to its composition (i.e., in 1948), but he had been reticent to make the piece as he felt it would be 'taken as a joke' (21). As such, *Silent Prayer* is consigned to a footnote in the history of *4'33"*. Indeed, it is only mentioned in passing in various significant studies for which *4'33"* is a central concern; among them, Craig Dworkin's *No Medium*, Barrett's *After Sound* and Juliana Hodkinson's PhD dissertation, *Presenting Absence*. Its entry in Paul van Emmerik's formidable catalogue of Cage's works just says '[s]ee *4'33"*'. The passage from *Silent Prayer* to *4'33"*, then, Gann suggests – the passage from an impossible piece to a possible piece and from non-existence to existence – entails Cage no longer 'attempting to listen to *nothing*' but 'redefining silence as being ... *something*' (127).

#### *4'33"*

This something is exposed in *4'33"*, which decouples musical content from both its determinacy – its conformity to a prescribed and structured set of materials – and its intentionality – its production by the actions of a thinking performer. While the performer is instructed to produce no intentional sound, Cage understands that there will always be sounds, 'those intended and those others (so-called silence) not intended' ('Doctrine' 14). Faced with the performer's inactivity, Cage expects the listener to become attentive to the nonintentional sound he now calls silence. Silence is no longer sound's absence or opposite; in fact, it could be said that it is nothing other than its *primal form*.

If the general sense of *4'33"* is well-known, its form and construction are less so. It is surprisingly storied for a work of such apparent simplicity. The first form of the score – or, at least, what is generally understood to be its first form – is notated on empty staves (either single or great staff – David Tudor's various reproductions of the lost manuscript disagree), in three movements (mirroring the structure of the sonata, it is often said – etymologically, sonata is derived from the Italian *suonare* ('to sound')), with a metronome mark of 60 BPM, and with a key that indicates the spatio-temporal relationship of the staves. Cage reports to Fetterman that he followed an aleatory procedure 'just like' the gamut technique he used to compose *Music of Changes* in 1951, though applied only to duration, given that other musical parameters were superfluous (72).<sup>10</sup> That is, he obtained short component durations of silence in consultation with the divinatory text *I Ching* and determined their arrangement via tarot cards. Whether by choice or by

10. Cage prefigures this idiosyncratic procedure in 'Defense of Satie', in which he writes that sound is characterised by pitch, volume, timbre, and duration but silence is 'heard in terms of time length' alone (81).

good fortune, the combination of the durations he obtained approximated the 4½ minutes he had proposed for *Silent Prayer* four years earlier.

Several revised and alternatively notated scores have since been produced. In 1953, Cage made a score for Irwin Kremen in proportional (i.e., space–time) notation which is largely blank: its only markings are a dedication, spatio-temporal key, metronome mark ('60'), movement durations, and lines that denote the graphic extension of movements (the last of which is dated and located). This minimally marked score graphically evokes Rauschenberg's *White Painting* (the triptych variant in particular). In certain respects, it preserves a space-equals-time relationship present in the first score, but the correspondence of 'empty' time and space does not require a linear, left-to-right, top-to-bottom reading procedure. Such a procedure remains largely functional, but it is not clearly implied by the text: while the metronome mark and spatio-temporal key are written horizontally, the durations, date and location are written vertically. In this sense, time and graphic space are corepresentative in a manner that is generally indifferent to conventions of notation and reading.

Two text score editions – the so-called tacet editions – followed in 1960 and 1986. These mark each movement as tacet, and durations are no longer stipulated; the performance notes state that the piece may 'last any length of time' (4'33" *Centennial Edition* 2, 20). The durations used in the first performance are noted in each, and, in fact, the 1986 edition makes durational discrepancies between the earlier scores explicit. Cage suggests that the durations used in the first performance were 33" + 2' 40" + 1' 20"; this is indicated in both text editions and is consistent with Tudor's 1989 reproduction. It is not consistent with the programme for the first performance, however, which provides a set of durations that agree with those of the Irwin Kremen proportional notation score: 30" + 2' 23" + 1' 40" (qtd. in Fetterman 74). It is possible, of course, that Cage recomposed the piece according to the same procedure and obtained slightly different durations, though when he may have done so and which edition actually came first are matters of obscurity and dispute (see, for example, Hodkinson 53–4). The 1986 score at least explicitly recognises both permutations. The performance notes of the text editions further specify that the piece should be titled according to its duration. For performances of any other duration to be referred to as 4'33" is either pragmatic or deferential to performance tradition – it is 'a commitment more to Tudor's first performance than to what is written in the score' (Hodkinson 53). The score has even been published without a title – that is, not as an untitled piece but as a piece with a title that remains to be determined (as reproduced in Hodkinson 52). One possible sense of why Cage often refers to his silent piece rather than using the name 4'33" is no doubt apparent: the latter may be a useful shorthand, but – according to this titling stipulation – it is not *necessarily* the name of the piece to which he intends to refer.

*0'00"*

For all that Cage recognises *4'33"* as his most significant piece, Pritchett suggests that there are various indications he was dissatisfied with it: it is unusual that he significantly revised the score; particularly so, that he did so numerous times. He was also reluctant to perform the piece publicly and somewhat disinterested in its programming. In correspondence with Cage, Helen Wolff registers disapproval at the piece's inclusion in a concert to be given by Tudor, and Cage is reticent to be inculpated. He writes that '[t]he piece exists in the repertoire and he [i.e., Tudor] chose to program it at the present time. I myself am detached'. He claims, in fact, to be 'busy with other things', including new work, but also 'this letter, and this springtime' ('To Helen Wolff'). The lines between enigmatic asceticism, haughty disinterest, and transparent defensiveness seem vanishingly thin here. Pritchett feels that Cage sought to correct certain failings with *0'00"*, the score of which identifies itself as *4'33"*'s successor – '*4'33" (No. 2)*'.

In *0'00"*, the performer resumes the role of producing sounds and does so without any durational fixity – the titular reference is to Christian Wolff's unmeasured 'zero time'. The original form of the score offers only a brief text instruction: 'In a situation provided with maximum amplification (no feedback), perform a disciplined action'. Cage gave the first performance, fulfilling said instruction by writing said score, which thereafter was supplemented by a set of restrictions:

With any interruptions.

Fulfilling in whole or part an obligation to others.

No two performances to be of the same action, nor may that action be the performance of a 'musical' composition.

No attention to be given the situation (electronic, musical, theatrical).

Where *4'33"* evacuates an extant musical structure, leaving a measured duration populated by sound produced mostly by things other than the performer, *0'00"* almost does the opposite: it produces a situation in which the performer's action populates an unmeasured duration with sound. The maximal amplification of the incidental sound produced by the performer's fulfilling action centralises the performer's action again – *0'00"* makes the resonance of the performer's action heard. There is a certain elegance to it doing so without recourse to a representative absence that will be shown to be nonvoid. It eschews procedures and notations that structure and evoke a silence unpopulated by sound in favour of a fairly rudimentary procedure that makes the subsensible manifest and the incidental significant. Pritchett and Kahn alike therefore suggest that it is *0'00"* rather than *4'33"* that constitutes the revelation of Cage's music. Despite the 'apparent radical provocations' of *4'33"*, it is 'just another musical score', whereas *0'00"* is

‘nothing but a turning towards the universe of unintended sounds that shadows our every action’ (Pritchett ‘Silent Piece(s)'). In turning towards this universe, Cage extends musicality to ‘increasingly smaller sounds’ and ultimately ‘to all sounds all the time’, into ‘everyday life and all fields of action’, ‘absolutely everywhere’ (Kahn 194–5). In a sense, we have an inversion of the experience of the anechoic chamber: given the technological means, any activity can be heard. Much as 4'33" is said to testify to the failure of *Silent Prayer*, if *o'oo"* transforms the border of art and life, 4'33" will have failed to do so and remains essentially a musical work for the concert hall. It is only with *o'oo"* that ‘it has been made apparent that everything is musical’, Cage suggests (qtd. in Kahn 194).<sup>11</sup>

*ONE*<sup>3</sup> = 4'33" (*o'oo"*) +  $\text{♩}$

Nearly thirty years later, in 1989, Cage was asked to perform 4'33" but was unwilling. ‘I said, I don’t want to do the silent piece’, he recalls, ‘because I thought that silence had changed from what it was, and I wanted to indicate that’ (qtd. in Fetterman 95). To take its place in the programme, he wrote *One*<sup>3</sup> = 4'33" (*o'oo"*) +  $\text{♩}$ , a work that remains little-known and unpublished (there being no score as such). A fax from Cage’s agent, Mimi Johnson, to the concert promoter indicates the title of the work, the programme note that should accompany it, and Cage’s technical requirements.<sup>12</sup> It directs that the sound system should be arranged ‘so that the whole hall is just on the edge of feedback...not actually feeding back, but feeling like it might’. To realise the piece, Cage went on stage, and the levels on the sound system were raised to meet this threshold. He then sat among the audience, measuring time via what he calls his inner clock. When he wished to conclude the piece, he returned to the stage and the amplification was lowered.

As Cage explains the title, 4'33" indicates the passage of time; *o'oo"*, an obligation to other people; and the treble clef is a G (clef) for Sofia

II. *o'oo"* (NO. 2): OR, 4'33" (NO. 2)(NO. 2)

There are then several variations upon *o'oo"*, of which Fetterman again offers the most substantial account. Solo 8 of *Song Books* reproduces the text of *o'oo"* less the proscription of repeated actions and musical compositions. It includes the inscription – whether it can be called a title or subtitle is not clear – ‘(o'o')’. The missing numeral here appears to be anomalous (though, we can note here, I will return to its significance in due course). Solos 24, 28, 62, and 63 then refer back to Solo 8, but prescribe that one should not repeat actions that were used in prior pieces in the sequence. Solos 23 and 26, which are subtitled ‘*o'oo"* No. 2’ and ‘*o'oo"* No. 2B’, prescribe a similar amplified situation, but they are realised by playing games. *o'oo"* No. 2 may itself be dated to 1968, when it was realised as *Reunion*, a performance in which Cage played chess with Marcel Duchamp. Surprisingly, despite the evidence to the contrary (i.e., its inclusion in *Song Books*), the Cage Trust’s works list suggests that although Cage intended to compose *o'oo"* No. 2, he ‘never did’. Fetterman also presents the score and film *WGBH-TV* as a variation on *o'oo"*, as it fulfils an obligation (a request for a donation to a charity auction) and records Cage performing a disciplined action (composing).

12. The fax is reproduced in Pritchett’s ‘John Cage’s Silent Piece(s)’.

Gubaidulina, who had told Cage that although she liked his music, ‘she didn’t like the watches’ he used to measure time (Cage qtd. in Fetterman 94). This gives the formula  $One^3 = \text{time (obligation)} + \text{an inner clock}$ . That time passes measured by an inner clock is self-evident from Cage’s account, but the obligation fulfilled is more enigmatic. With *o’oo’’*, Cage had sought to fulfil the obligation for a new piece, but that does not seem to be the gesture he has in mind here. Rather, he wishes to warn his audience that ‘the world is in a bad situation, and largely through the way we misuse technology’ (Cage qtd. 95). Pritchett speculates that Cage may well have had nuclear proliferation in mind (‘Silent Piece(s)’). Connotations of instrumental rationality and humanity’s self-domination are certainly palpable, and the piece can be understood on this basis, rather than as the ‘more liminal’, ‘even more subtle example o[f] nonintention’ Fetterman considers it to be (95). Cage creates a situation in which silence not only comes to be heard; it threatens to do so again and again (i.e., as feedback) as the microphone listens to itself listening. Cage risks ‘silence’ overwhelmingly saturating the sonic field, yet where sound totalises, there is no space for silence. The possibility of silence is annihilated by the overwhelming saturation of sound. To the degree that silence and sound are equivocated, silence dominates itself. It becomes sound in a process of pure interiorisation through which it is given absolutely to sense. To hear the amplified room is to bear witness to silence annihilating its own possibility of being as sense senses itself sensing. In a sense, Cage is right: ‘We can no longer be certain that there will be any silence. We are no longer certain that there will be a world’ (qtd. in Fetterman 95). Silence is lost and sound no longer touches.

#### SENSE GIVEN TO SILENCE

To my mind, what  $One^3 = 4'33''(o'oo'') + \text{♩}$  presents is the conclusion – or, at least, it risks the conclusion – of the absolute recuperation of silence to sense. The trajectory of this concept is progressively identifiable across Cage’s silent pieces. *4'33''* exposes its performances to nonintentional sound, but this sound may still be understood as extrinsic to the work, which, therefore, can still be identified with the empty structure of which it is composed. This is not what Cage aspires to, of course, but I do think that one can understand *4'33''* as an empty work. *o'oo''* responds by *centralising* incidental sound. As amplification transforms the threshold of sensibility, incidental sound leaves the margins to become the unequivocal material of the piece. By opening the world of life with and for the work, *o'oo''* ensures that no matter what happens, the work will have happened: ‘in any way, by anyone’, and ‘[w]ith any interruptions’, silence will have sounded. With  $One^3 = 4'33''(o'oo'') + \text{♩}$ , Cage stands over the precipice of silence, risking what he fears has come to pass: the end of silence as the end of the world. He threatens the domination of silence by and as sound.  $One^3 = 4'33''(o'oo'') + \text{♩}$ , in this respect, is a totalising counterpart to *4'33''*. The performer resumes the tacet

role of 4'33" (even as another audience member), but they also *dictate* the situation; they *wield* silence's identity with sound; audience and silence alike are at the mercy of their inner clock. In other words, it is the performer who *makes heard* that silence is not empty. Each step in this trajectory, then, is a more emphatic affirmation that silence has been recovered to sound. For all that a signifier of absence or non-sense has been appropriated, the identification of silence with nonintentional sound places it squarely within what exists. As, recall, 'everything is musical', being is identified with producing sounds which are assumed to be consistently experienceable, thus knowable. For all that this totality is to be investigated by humans of finite experience, the formal possibility of excess is disavowed, and silence is swallowed by sound through the erasure of their thinkable difference. This is the musical analogue to constructivist thought, then, as it posits sound as a consistent totality *beyond which there is nothing*. 4'33" can be said to inaugurate silence's disaster, therefore, because with *One*<sup>3</sup> = 4'33" (o'oo") + ♪, silence is lost.

#### RETHINKING SILENT PRAYER

Although it is rarely framed in such terms, this seems to me to be the conclusion that follows from the orthodox understanding of Cage. Bonnet also questions whether we should not 'go all the way and posit *the identity* of silence and noise' if silence is 'always already sound' (*Order* 54). Subjective silence (which is connotatively sufficient rather than absolute), noise, and sound are sufficiently equivocal, if distinct in significance, that a certain such identification is possible. Nevertheless, Bonnet maintains that absolute silence 'precisely does *exist*, standing outside of our field of experience'. Cage actually reveals that no one can 'have an *experience* of the absence of sound. Silence exists, but not for anyone' (53; emphasis amended). While silence cannot be experienced in sound as the absence of sound, it can nevertheless be thought, which for Bonnet testifies to its existence. In certain respects, his formulation is the inverse of what Priest writes of nothing (it is possible to think nothing, and this thought is an experience of nothing, even while nothing is nonexistent). I think the thoroughgoing implication of either side of the coin is that the orthodox understanding of Cage thinks silence insufficiently or in the wrong sense.

Consequently, it does not ring true that *Silent Prayer* is naïve. In fact, it is the locus of resistance to the recuperation of non-sense to sense. I have noted that it is widely understood to be contradictory; therefore, to be unrealised; and, ultimately, not to exist as a work. In this perspective, it resembles a postulated object that proves to be fictitious, thus nonexistent. No doubt, it never silenced the Muzakal airwaves, and Cage certainly realised another piece that appears to take its place – historically so, in fact. These facts are not decisive in the possible significance of *Silent Prayer*, however. We should consider its description again: although it will be a piece of

uninterrupted silence, it will begin with a seductive idea and its end will approach imperceptibility. In a sonic register, these characteristics are absurd. Even still, to what Cage might refer seems quite ambiguous. It may be, as many infer, that he intends these ideas to be sounding musical motifs, but there are other possibilities. Brooks speculates that the ideas might themselves be silent. This certainly corresponds to the gamut technique used to construct 4'33", which supports claims that Cage's plan for *Silent Prayer* is a draft of the realised work. Brooks and Pritchett also each suggest that Cage may have sought to invert the placement of work and the precedent and antecedent silences that frame it in performance, an idea to which I will return shortly. First, though, I want to elaborate a conceptual register in which *Silent Prayer* may be understood. Kim-Cohen writes – and I agree – that it has ‘an undeniable conceptual content’, no less than 4'33" does (113). He finds it vexing, nevertheless, as he feels that it is ‘difficult to square’ Cage’s abandonment of the piece with his interests in indeterminacy and Satie’s *musique d’ameublement* (furniture music), which would have ‘found ready application and realization in *Silent Prayer*'. He speculates that Cage may have discerned that, given its idiosyncratic medium of dissemination, it was likely to have ‘little effect on “classical music”’ (19–20). The inheritance from Satie’s background music is well-founded, certainly, though Pritchett suggests that Cage’s interest in indeterminacy flourished some years after *Silent Prayer*: it was only after 1957, in fact (and following Morton Feldman, Christian Wolff, and Earle Brown), that it was ‘fully explored’ in his work (*The Music* 109). Indeed, 1958 could rightly be thought of as Cage’s year of indeterminacy: that year, the concept lent its name to a record, a set of minute-long stories (which appear on said record), and a Darmstadt lecture.<sup>13</sup> Yet, given that Cage understands indeterminacy to refer to the openness or variability of musical parameters for performance and *Silent Prayer*'s performance is impossible on multiple counts, any such conjunction is by definition not only unfulfilled but, properly speaking, unfulfillable. *Silent Prayer* is indeterminate, however, in the sense that it is open to the *performance of its writing*, as I am undertaking here.<sup>14</sup> I suggest, then, that silence is the seductive *idea*, the uninterrupted duration, and the ending that nears imperceptibility. It compels Cage’s preoccupation; as an object of thought, it is immune to sonic interruption inasmuch as it is indifferent to it; and, as a figure of nothing, it is near a limit of sense (thus, perception and experience), *around* the limit, both within and without it. Silence is thinkable, but

13. These written texts are collected in *Silence* under the same name.

14. *Silent Prayer* also evokes the ontological register of indeterminacy Karen Barad reads in nothingness. The emergence of virtual particles from the void – from nothing – testifies to the ‘indeterminacy of being/nonbeing’ at the level of matter itself, they write (12). Indeed, this is a border effect of the infinite upon the total, of ‘af/finity’ – i.e., ‘related to or bordering on’ (16). In other words, the existential status of nothingness is a *real* problem of the limit which is expressed through indeterminacy.

it is thinkable as the empty presentation of nothing. For silence to submit to sense, it must be presented, yet it must be presented as void. Hence, it is presented as not presented. It is a sensical thought of anteriority to sense, rather than ‘just’ an absurd thought of the sensical. In this perspective, silence sutures the unpresented to presentation, and *Silent Prayer* is the art of this thought. This is no doubt an idiosyncratic reading, and it does not verify the existence of *Silent Prayer*, which still has not been scored, signed, or sold to Muzak. I do not want to verify its existence, however. I want to think its particular obscure status of existence – neither strict nonexistence, undiscovered work, nor hyperstition as such – because, as I will elaborate more extensively in chapter six, there are real effects of what is possibly fiction. *Silent Prayer* is dismissed as a nonwork because it is contradictory, thus impossible, thus unrealised. Yet, these characteristics can also be attributed to the works that follow it. In fact, not only can they be read therein – they are, perhaps, *Silent Prayer*’s encoded effects.

#### MARGINALIA

Let us return first to Brooks’s and Pritchett’s suggestions that *Silent Prayer* inverts the conventional framing of the musical work. The procedure of framing the musical work with silence has been indexed to Derrida’s writing on the *parergon*, the supplement through which the work (the *ergon*) appears. Richard Littlefield, for example, presents a typology of silences as the ‘crucial structural determinants’ of musical works on this basis (§ 4.1). Silences may be *horizontal* moments, such as those that precede and follow the work; *vertical* limits of registral extremity and frequency limits of human hearing; or silences of *depth*, in which sufficient spatial distance from a sound source makes its imperceptible. 4’33” specifically has been indexed to *parergonality* quite extensively. Kim-Cohen suggests that 4’33” depends upon ‘certain framing devices’ – the score, the concert hall, performance conventions, the context – without which ‘the work leaks out indiscernibly into the world’ (243). Indeed, the noncochlearity he proposes of sonic art – its irreducibility to sound-in-itself – is derived from *parergonality* in that it ‘constructs itself’ from the ‘*parergonal* material’ of discursive significance (229). Barrett, meanwhile, finds that 4’33” may be considered ‘the anti-autonomous artwork par excellence’ as it disrupts its own framing by producing a singularly permeable border (50). Michael Pisaro even goes so far as to aver that Derrida’s discussion of the *passe-partout* – the mount, the spacing frame within a frame – is ‘(without knowing it) perhaps the deepest discussion of the implications of 4’33”’ (‘Writing, Music’ 42n15). Yet, the *passe-partout* is not a frame as such; it remains in need of a *parergon* – it is a frame in need of a frame. Derrida suggests that the *passe-partout* (which also has the meaning of master key) makes the frame *work* – it makes it possible, makes it functional, and sets it to work. In this way, the *passe-partout* gives the possibility of the work’s appearing through its framing. ‘What appears’,



he writes, ‘only appears to do without the passe-partout on which it banks’ (*The Truth* 12). As such, the passe-partout is the border through which inside and out are demarcated. Its bordering topography is abyssal, however: it is placed within the frame, but it is supplementary to the artwork, so it neither ‘stand[s] outside the frame’ nor ‘let[s] itself be framed’ (11–12). As such, it is both within and without frame *and* work. Indeed, where Derrida writes that the passe-partout ‘works the frame’ and ‘makes it work’, he means both makes it function as a frame and makes it *ergon* (12). That is, the frame is also neither strictly intrinsic nor extrinsic to the work. While it appears that the *parergon* ornaments the work, it is in fact what the *ergon* structurally lacks – it is a secondary object that is ‘constitutive of the very unity of the *ergon*’ (59).<sup>15</sup> The *parergon* is thus neither strictly outside nor in, but ‘stands out against two grounds’, work and context, and from each perspective merges into the other: for the work, the *parergon* merges into the outside (the wall, the room, the context); for the outside, it merges into the work. In separating outside from in, the *parergon* ‘disappears, buries itself, effaces itself’ (61). It appears both as the work and outside the work, within and without.

This much may seem resonant with the inversion of sonic framing that Brooks and Pritchett suggest, but the question that follows is whether the border itself can be so simply inverted. This would assume some symmetry or free substitutability of *ergon* and *parergon*. Works can certainly be reframed, and frames can take new works. A work put to work as a frame, however, lacks the *parergon* that is its condition for appearing as a work. Recalling Derrida’s typology of aporias, therefore, might not such a substitution annihilate the topographical condition of the border and thus the particular world of the artwork? The prevailing of world in the milieu does not constitutively depend upon the differentiation of the work of art, but the world of the work does. What would be in question, then, would be an art without work, without a sense or world proper to it. This is precisely what Kim-Cohen follows Jean-François Lyotard in acknowledging: the radical reading of Cage is that there is ‘no work anymore, no *ergon*’ (259). In fact, Cage suggests exactly this of 4’33’’: it is an ‘art without work’ that ‘leads out of the world of art into the whole of life’ (qtd. in Duckworth 21–2).

#### THE IMPROPER NAME

This is very much counter to the perspective in which 4’33’’ remains a concert work. Yet, is there any fixed work – however minimally fixed – to which

15. Derrida reads this of the *parergon* in Kant. We can follow his example in referring to faith: faith is ‘*exterior* to the proper field’ – pure reason – that would ground religion *for* reason. Reason, however, recognises its own constitutive lack, which faith supplements by ‘press[ing] against the limit itself and interven[ing] in the inside’ (56). To ground religion, then, reason requires a *parergon* of faith that, in constituting its unity, is neither strictly immanent nor exterior to it.

this name refers? The proliferation of editions already raises this question. Dworkin, for example, feels that 4'33" should be disambiguated from the 'watered-down' text score, *Tacet*, though this is not necessarily pejorative (145): as Gann notes, 4'33"'s duration 'owes something' to the twelve-inch 78 RPM records from which Muzak broadcasted, as these held around four minutes and thirty seconds of music (128). Introducing variable duration with the *tacet* editions distances 4'33" from both the compositional techniques deployed to produce the earlier versions and *Silent Prayer*'s parodic appropriation of Muzak.<sup>16</sup> Its setting in text also relinquishes the visual reference to *White Painting*, though this is most prominent in a score that might similarly be characterised as watered down. The identity – or the lack thereof – of the two *tacet* editions is no less in question. Between the exchange of typeface for calligraphy and the amendment of the performance notes, Dworkin finds the scores to be 'slightly but significantly different'. This may be predicated in part by a misreading. Where he draws attention to the durational discrepancies these recognise of the earlier editions, he suggests that each edition of *Tacet* attributes a different set of durations to the first performance. This is not consistent with the editions to which I have referred – rather, different durations are attributed to different versions. Nevertheless, he feels that such discrepancies might indicate 'two distinct compositions', each of which, we can infer, iterates upon possibly distinct compositions which share the name 4'33" (206n9). While it is unconventional that Dworkin *names* the *tacet* editions *Tacet*, it is hardly inexplicable, given that these editions make the title variable. Gann also feels that the piece 'is no longer 4'33"': 'each performance', in fact, 'is a new piece' (183–5).

Even while variant durations could in principle produce an infinite set of works, the question I pose is not so much the possible plurality of works as whether there is any unity of elements that constitute the piece(s). It is not clear that articulation by a *tacet* performer is necessary, for example; nor is the three-movement structure evidently so. Rather than articulating the piece, Cage suggests, 'I turn my attention toward it' (qtd. in Duckworth 22). He writes of such an experience in 'Music Lovers' Field Companion': while identifying a mushroom in the woods, he is interrupted by an encounter with a pair of deer; when they leave, he resumes his study of the mushroom. 'The third movement was a return to the theme of the first', he writes, 'but with all those profound, so-well-known alterations of world feeling associated by German tradition with the A-B-A' (276). For all that he refers to the three-movement structure common to the published editions, the happening of the world to which one might attend does not conform to this – it is 'going on continuously' (Cage qtd. in Duckworth 22). Faced with the possibility of simply turning one's attention to the sound of the world,

16. Whether derestricting duration updates the piece for the hold and background music of the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, I leave to the reader's speculation.

Gann concludes that 4'33" "has expanded into an infinite river of a piece' which someone can frame, yet, 'for those who have an affinity for Cage's appreciation for the physicality of sound, even that is no longer necessary' (187). What is significant, it seems to me, is only that *there is structure*. Cage insists upon this repeatedly: he writes, for example, that, to be 'distinguishable from nonbeing', music 'must have a structure' and that 'life expresses itself within and through structure' ('Defense' 78–9; *Lecture on Nothing* 113; musical structure removed). This structure is not identifiable with any particular musical structure; rather, it suggests a minimal condition for sense, which is to say, the structure of *givenness itself*. There is givenness of and as structure. This is the necessary condition of 4'33" as Cage seems latterly to understand it.

Meanwhile, where the piece *is* performed, the sense of the instruction 'tacet' is more obscure than it appears; it has at least two dissimilar senses. Hodkinson notes the distinction between tacet – 'the silence of one voice within a continuing polyphonic sound' – and the *finis punctorum* – 'total silence from all performers' (49). On one hand, tacet instructs the performer who exists within a polyphony composed of both intentional and nonintentional sound to be silent. On the other hand, it indicates the *prevailing* of silence. The piece produces a clearing for nonintentional sound to be heard, so a tacet voice resounds. These two senses of tacet may be complementary, but they are not coconstitutive or symmetrical. While the former strategically draws attention to the latter, the latter is really indifferent to whether intentional sounds are produced or prohibited. Once more, the only necessary element here is givenness.

4'33" lacks any conceptual unity of elements – duration, form, action, score, or instruction. As such, '4'33"' is incommensurate with any object it names. In fact, if the work has no unifying elements besides givenness as such – the givenness of the nonobjectual world – 4'33" resists coherent objectification. It is not clear, then, that it *can* bear a proper name. Indeed, it does not. Across Cage's oeuvre, across scholarship, across popular writing – essentially, wherever the name appears – it is presented as both 4'33" and 4'33", with and without a central space, a central *void character*.<sup>17</sup> Like the silence it purports to present, the proper name is given inconsistently according to the being or nonbeing of an empty character – a figure of nothing. '4'33"', therefore, is an improper name for an 'infinite river' that might, as art without work, refuse the border of inside and out.

The proper name and identity of *o'oo"* are also shrouded in ambiguity. In Cage's hand, the score identifies the title of the piece without mention of 4'33". Cage only indicates that '[t]his is 4'33" (No. 2) and also pt. 3 of a work

17. I have sought to preserve the empty characters of 4'33" and *o'oo"* in my own prose while *One<sup>3</sup> = 4'33" (o'oo") + ♯* is consistently presented without spaces. Quotations preserve their authors' stylings. As far as I can tell, this preference is consistent with Cage's first uses of each title, but it also encodes here the progressive relinquishment of nothing.

of which Atlas Eclipticalis is pt. 1' in a note at the bottom of the page. If it is understood that underlining indicates work titles, '4' 33" (No. 2)' could be an alternative title or a title that pertains exclusively to the metawork, but it may just be a description, for which the underlining connotes emphasis. Where the title figures elsewhere – where the piece features in *Song Books* or as a title component in *One's = 4' 33" (o'oo") + ♪*, for example – no such reference is preserved. Pritchett notes, however, that the current Peters edition is published with its title and subtitle reversed (i.e., as 4' 33" (No.2) (o'oo")). He attributes this to savvy marketing, but variance is pervasive: the Cage Trust gives the title as 'o'oo" (4' 33" No. 2)' – note the spacing – while listing the alternative titles '4' 33" No. 2, Zero Minutes Zero Seconds, o:00', and 'o'oo"'; Stephen Davies suggests exchangeable titles, using the contracted form 'o'o"(1962), which also was called 4' 33" No. 2' (461); while Barrett places this plurality within a single title where he refers to 'o'oo" or 4' 33" No.2' (33); Dworkin's encyclopaedia of silent pieces assimilates o'oo" into the entry on 4' 33", though distinguishes therein between 'the classic', 'Tacet', and o'oo" (145); Hodkinson refers to the piece as a 'new version' of 4' 33" (53); as does Pritchett ('Five Statements'); Fetterman refers to it as a 'variation' (84); ...<sup>18</sup>

It is not clear, then, how we are to interpret the idea that o'oo" is '4' 33" (No. 2)'. Whether it is a new version, a variation, or an independent work is further confounded if 4' 33" is not a coherent object: if o'oo" is derivative, from what precisely is it derived?

#### NO PERFORMANCE OF A 'MUSICAL' COMPOSITION

In fact, both 4' 33" and o'oo" have a clear derivation from *Silent Prayer*: they can both be understood to be impossible. The case for 4' 33" appears a little weaker, as there is a degree of strategic misdirection on Cage's part. We understand that his notations of emptiness are not strictly in earnest because he is *demonstrating* the impossibility of experiencing absence. It is generally understood, then, that these notations are impossible in a certain sense. The piece is *also* impossible, however, inasmuch as it corrupts silence with intention. It *instrumentalises* nonintentional sound – and thus lends it a certain intention – by subordinating it to the project of making silence heard. As such, there can be no tacet – no silence – not just in the absolute sense but also in Cage's. What 4' 33" makes heard cannot be silence as Cage understands it. The work is inexpressible, then. 4' 33" can be understood to be an impossible work at both an explicit and a subtextual level.

18. As I have noted, o'o", the contracted form that Davies adopts, is used in *Song Books* to identify or title Solo 8. The set of restrictions that Solo 8 provides is slightly different to those given in the score for o'oo", however, as it does not proscribe the performance of repeated actions or musical compositions. As such, o'o" and o'oo" may appropriately be understood to be different pieces with different titles, a difference marked by void characters – a space and a zero. These differences are not trivial: as we will see shortly, they are the difference between a possible piece and an impossible piece. Yet, each passes as if it were the other.

The case for *o'oo''* is particularly compelling, however, as it implies that the work might be a locus of real contradictions. Recall that the score was produced in its first performance, and it was supplemented thereafter by restrictions: the performance should fulfil an obligation; it should be unique; it should not be the performance of a musical (“musical”) work; nor should it be attended to as if it were. In the first performance, in which he produced the score, Cage sought to fulfil the obligation to donate a new piece. This resembles the structure of performative utterances – the piece appears to come into being through being articulated. But, if Cage were bound by the restrictions in the first performance, no such performative donation would be possible. Whether Cage performed a ‘musical’ composition is arguable – much depends how much stock one sets in his scare quotes – but because the performed donation of a musical work gives attention to a musical situation, this is not a circumventable problem. If Cage were not to perform a ‘musical’ work or attend to a musical situation, no musical work would be performed or donated, thus he would have fulfilled neither the obligation he had in mind nor the instructions of the piece. If he were performing a ‘musical’ work, he would violate the instructions of the piece he purports to perform. Either way, the work never happens. It may be contended that as the restrictions supplemented the primary text after the fact, in effect, Cage was not yet bound by them, but what this concedes immediately is that what he donated *is not the work*. It is not the whole work, it is not the same as the work, and it may never have been so. The stronger reading that this situation therefore demands is that the possibility of the work would lie in *the event*. Indeed, it evokes both the gift and foundational acts of sovereignty: the work calls for a donation – its own donation – without precedent. The musical work could not pre-exist its performance, but upon being performed, it appears as if it had existed. Thus, its impossibility is produced retroactively. The implications of this impossibility are contradictory: *o'oo''* is a musical work in which the performance of a musical work is proscribed. Its musical realisation is impossible, therefore. If, by consequence, it is not a musical work, then it can be performed. But then it is a musical work, so its performance is not its performance, ... . In this sense, it too is without work: it lacks a consistent condition of appearance because the condition of possibility for its appearance is also the condition of its impossibility. Thus, *o'oo''* is an impossible piece, and if Cage did give its first (and only) performance, he also did not.

*SILENT PRAYER: FIGURE OF A FIGURE*

As I say, then, *Silent Prayer* cannot be dismissed because it is not a work, impossible, or contradictory; *4'33''* and *o'oo''* share these characteristics, and inasmuch as they do so, they indicate *Silent Prayer's* insinuation of silence as a figure of nothing, rather than as something, into Cage's oeuvre. *Silent Prayer* does not give rise to a world because, as art without work, it lacks a

condition of appearance, but it does have a quasi-*parergonal* relationship with Cage's silent works inasmuch as it unrepresents itself within and without their borders.

Cage says that 4'33" appears to be 'a piece of music like any other piece of music' but '[i]t's not'. It '*becomes* sounds' (qtd. in Duckworth 31; emphasis added). If it only *becomes* sounds, the implication is that there is another form of tacet, a nonsounding form of silence *prior* to silence-as-sound, which the piece also indicates. Cage recognises, then, that silence has a possibility other than being sound. Otherwise, 4'33" would be a work like any other. In fact, he recognises that 4'33" is only art without work if it is grounded upon *nothing* – only if 'nothing is taken as its basis' (22). It is necessary, therefore, to revert the transition that sees Cage go from listening to nothing to listening to *something* to rediscover a silence that is (or is equivalent to) nothing. This silence refuses presentation as sound, but it is nonetheless a thinkable basis – therefore, it is a figure of nothing. 4'33" is only art without work, then, if *Silent Prayer* appears in nonappearance as its condition of possibility.

0'00" appears to produce a condition whereby everything becomes musical, but it concurrently prescribes its own impossibility. The piece can be thought as the impossibility or contradiction of its own taking place. What obtains in 0'00" is not the sounding of silence, but nothing. Nothing takes place because the work lacks the possibility of working. In this sense, the title does not indicate unmeasured time so much as the null duration of nothing happening. If anything can be thought to appear, it is not silence-as-sound; it is silence as a figure of nothing. If 0'00" never happens, *Silent Prayer* takes place – and takes 0'00"'s place – in not taking place. The result of the impossibility of the work is that what is realised is an index of the thought of nothing.

And if, with  $One^3 = 4'33" (0'00") + \frac{1}{2}$ , Cage is 'no longer certain that there will be a world' after its self-subtracting interiorisation, what escapes is the in-significance of silence, its prevailing sense in and as non-sense (qtd. in Fetterman 95). Cagean silence, which in its apothecotic form is an absolute sense of sound, is thus persistently shadowed by *Silent Prayer* which denies it the outright sense in which it would culminate.

*Silent Prayer* seems both to exist and not to exist as the figure of a figure of nothing. It was never written, but it has, perhaps, taken place. It lacks a condition of appearance, but it can be observed. It lacks sense, but it indicates where sense detaches from itself.



Silence conceived in this way sutures presentation to the unrepresented. It is somewhat analogous to the phantomic void that sutures every count to being in Badiou's philosophy, though whether this correspondence is

merely indicative or if it has an ontological sense is debatable. Christian Gelder considers a similar conjunction of nothingness, the void, and the meaningless word ‘ptyx’ in Mallarmé’s *Sonnet en -x*. He feels that Mallarmé has in mind a nothing that ‘mark[s] the point of unrepresentation’ – *rien* – rather than the existential nothing that Sartre reads in the poem – *néant* (162). Badiou compels Gelder to find Mallarmé’s desire to be impossible, however. In ‘Mark and Lack’, Badiou writes that however much literary writing may aspire to present the ‘scriptural Outside’ – that is, the absolute – it remains ‘freighted with the marks of everything it denies’. Try as it might, it cannot vanquish the vestiges of subject and language. Hence, literary writing ‘merely sports the ideology of difference, rather than exhibiting its real process’, which remains the preserve of mathematical-scientific writing (1124). Mallarmé’s nothing, then, must inevitably be a presentation of more than nothing: the meaningless word ‘ptyx’ sounds in the musicality of poetry, so it still speaks in the symbolic order. On one hand, then, perhaps this concept of silence is a metaphysics of the void that exhibits the marks of what it would deny. On the other hand, if we take seriously that ptyx and silence alike are immanent marks of anteriority that observe a limit contradiction of sense, silence participates in sense to indicate non-sense. (In fact, this is not unlike *The Immanence of Truths*’s index of the absolute place, the residue of the infinite in finite works that overcomes finitude’s ‘covering-over’ of the infinite (in particular, see section II and ch. 23).) It presents an unrepresentable nothing to thought by exposing the real limits and process of the detachment of sense from itself: it is a tracing of real in-significance.





PART TWO  
Remarkable Possibilities



CHAPTER THREE  
The Endurance of the Aporia of Suffering

THE MOST REMARKABLE POSSIBILITY

Meillassoux proposes that the event makes thinkable a novelty as profound as the emergence of life from matter or of thought from life.<sup>1</sup> The most remarkable possibility that this authorises – the possibility he considers worthy of the appellation of the ‘fourth World’ (matter, life, thought, ... ) – is a World of *justice* which realises the Marxian promise of ‘universal equality’.<sup>2</sup> This event would transform the thinking being into the ‘ultimate being’ – that is, it would deify the human – by granting an existence ‘worthy of its condition’: immortality. (‘Immanence’ 462). The possibility of this World is consistent with the speculative ontology and ensuing divinity (‘divine inexistence’) for which Meillassoux argues. By consequence, however, it is also without cause or teleological necessity. The fourth World may never arrive, then, and it certainly cannot be induced. Its significance may nonetheless be retroacted into the present World, he maintains, thereby transforming ‘those who take seriously such a hypothesis’ into *metaxu*, intermediaries between the World of thought and the projected possibility of the World of justice. Indeed, thinking such possibilities – ‘*not being, but may-being*’ – is philosophy’s most important task. This may-being in particular has the remarkable quality of uniting ‘the true heart of every ontology ... and the deepest aspirations of ethics’ in the absolutely novel occurrence of universal justice (463).

1. Meillassoux refers to advent rather than event, but the two are equivalent. It is worth indexing here, even if it puts the cart before the horse, that whether he understands matter itself to be emergent is, as Harman puts it, ‘murky’ (*Skirmishes* 113). I will elaborate upon this further in footnote nine of this chapter.
2. ‘World’ is not consistently capitalised in this way across Meillassoux’s texts (in translation, at least) but it does ultimately assume a particular technical significance, so I will maintain capitalisation here.

In this chapter, then, I consider what can be hoped for from the event, which is to say, the possible limits of what exceeds the limits; Meillassoux's proposal seems particularly provocative on this basis, so it is his work I will follow here. I will first account for the ontology he presents in *After Finitude* before returning to the event of justice via the aporia he calls the spectral dilemma. What will then remain will be to consider whether an event of justice may be thought as consistent if it is conditioned by a quasi-messianic nihilism of unbound ontological possibility.

#### THE ARCHE-FOSSIL AND FACTICITY

Meillassoux suggests that philosophy has been trapped in what he calls the correlational circle since Kant separated givenness from the absolute – what is for-us from what is in-itself. Being can only be thought on the basis of its givenness to a thinking subject, never independently of the subject-object relation. Correlationism produces a problem, however, when its adherents are faced with 'arche-fossils'. Arche-fossils evidence phenomena that are not just ancient; they are *ancestral*. Ancestral events (such as the beginning of the universe, the formation of the earth, or the emergence of life) predate the emergence of thought; hence, their occurrence precedes any possibility of correlation. The correlationist philosopher cannot strictly admit the reality of a time that is independent of a thinking subject, though. For Kant, of course, space and time are *a priori* intuitions of the transcendental subject – they do not inhere in the absolute. Yet, '*what is it that happened 4.56 billion years ago?*' Meillassoux asks. 'Did the accretion of the earth happen, *yes or no?*' If the correlationist *is* to affirm the truth of this scientific fact, it must be heavily caveated: while the statement may be recognised to be both evidenced and 'objective' or 'inter-subjectively verifiable' – thus, *yes* – they will insist that the event to which the statement refers cannot have occurred as it is described, 'as non-correlated with a consciousness' – thus, *no*. Effectively, the human mind must be retrojected into an event with which it cannot have coexisted, or the sense of the fact must be refused as incoherent. The result, Meillassoux suggests, is a 'rather extraordinary claim':

[T]he *ancestral statement is a true statement*, in that it is objective, but *one whose referent cannot possibly have existed in the way this truth describes it*. It is a true statement, but what it describes as real is an impossible event; it is an 'objective' statement, but it has no conceivable object. Or to put it more simply: *it is a nonsense*. (*After Finitude* 16–17)

One thus encounters an impasse between the correlation and the arche-fossil. Either the correlationist claim is so strong that it can *a priori* refute a naïve claim of science, or the arche-fossil has a real sense through which being may be thought in its *anteriority* to thought. Meillassoux certainly

recognises the claims of correlationism to be remarkably strong, a position which Harman repeatedly suggests Meillassoux's critics overlook: it *should* be insisted that attempts to refer to an outside of thought lapse back into correlation insomuch as they are thought. Yet, he proposes that thought of the absolute must be recuperated from a dubious fate to which it has been abandoned by critical philosophy, so this impasse is one that must be overcome.

The implications of Kant's project are very much in question, but his own position is only weakly correlationist. He does posit the existence of a noumenal world anterior to the correlation, though we have scant access to it: he avers that it 'is non-contradictory and that it actually exists', but it need not correspond to representation (35). Nor is the correlation necessary; rather, it is *factual*. The correspondence of the objective world to the human mind may be described, and it appears to be an invariant structure, but no sufficient reason can be given for its being our extant reality. The *a priori* intuitions and categories are given, the transcendental structuration of the world is given, but they are not deducibly necessary.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it is the absence of any such metaphysical necessity that *authorises* the division of what is for-us from what is in-itself.

With the twentieth-century refusal of metaphysical absolutes, however, strong forms of correlationism develop. Heidegger and Wittgenstein (hence, both continental and analytic philosophy) extend facticity to the givenness of the world – that *there is* a world given is without knowable reason. Any necessity for the world to correspond to givenness is not groundable, therefore. *Pace* Kant, it is entirely possible that the in-itself 'differs *fundamentally* from what is given to us' (39; emphasis added). As such, neither the possibility of a contradictory reality nor that of a nonexistent reality can be disqualified, however absurd these might be, and even the minimal correspondence to thought that could be proposed of the absolute is relinquished to the unthinkable. The correlation is thereby absolutised – the thinkable is *essentially* correlational – and thought of the absolute is surrendered to the realm of blind faith, religious thought of the absolute Other which is tantamount to affirmative mysticism. Meillassoux argues, then, that critical philosophy ultimately concedes the absolute to fanaticism, the 'reasoned violence' and 'pretensions' of which must be guarded against no less than the dogmatic metaphysics critical philosophy seeks to overcome (49).

3. Malabou, for example, argues that the categories (and, indeed, the transcendental in general) are subject to epigenetic development. She writes that while 'reason necessarily pre-exists the elements that it orders' – i.e., experience – 'this systematic program also assumes the malleability ... of the structure, which is ensured by the *growth of new parts*' (*Before Tomorrow* 182, 183; emphasis added). That is, the transcendental is continually reformed at the juncture of the *a priori* and experience; the efficacy of the categories actually lies in their contingency.

Thereby doubly animated, Meillassoux suggests that philosophy must rediscover ‘a modicum of absoluteness’ without, however, succumbing to metaphysical absolutes (49). He proposes that such an absolute lies latent within the correlationist argument; in fact, the force of the correlationist argument is derived from precisely this absolute. To counter the claims of subjective idealism (i.e., that the world is the necessary correlate of the human mind, as in Berkeley’s immaterialism), correlationist thought insists upon the facticity of the correlation: it is possible that the world could be, or could have been, other than it is given to us, hence the division of the given (for-us) from the absolute (in-itself). The thoroughgoing implication of this is that the facticity of the correlation is not merely an epistemological index of the limits of the knowable; it is an absolute condition coextensive with the real absence of necessity – in other words, with absolute contingency. The correlationist argument proceeds according to the presupposition that the in-itself is indifferent to the existence of a correlated human mind. If contingency were only something given, if it did not inhere in the absolute, the correlation would itself be necessary, and correlationism would simply recapitulate the subjective idealist position. Contingency *must* have an absolute sense, then, not a correlational one. Meillassoux suggests that this absolute sense is thought paradigmatically in mortality, which entails thought thinking its own possibility of noncorrelation. I can only think myself as mortal ‘if I think that my death has no need of my thought of death in order to be actual’, he writes. If the correlation were necessary and contingency were merely for-us, death would depend upon its correlation to thought and one would be forced in death to ‘agonize indefinitely, without ever actually passing away’. Effectively, the correlationist (who thinks the correlation is factual rather than necessary) already tacitly acknowledges that contingency is thinkably absolute. Only an *absolute* indifference to thought ‘confers upon’ contingency ‘the power to destroy’ thought itself (57).

From this absolutisation of contingency, Meillassoux derives a principle of unreason, which is effectively a negative index of the principle of sufficient reason. Where the latter proposes that an adequate cause exists for any effect, the principle of unreason retorts that the implication of the absoluteness of facticity is that there is *no* attributable sufficient reason that things must be as they are rather than otherwise. The impossibility of associating a necessary cause to a structurally invariant fact is not just a limit of human knowledge; according to this principle, the absence of a *necessary* cause is a real, knowable lack. Thus, the consequence of the absoluteness of facticity can be aphoristically summarised: ‘contingency *alone* is necessary’ (80). Recall that Meillassoux wishes to deduce this necessity without grounding it in a necessary entity (which, in his terms, is the defining characteristic of metaphysical speculation). To say that contingency alone is

necessary, then, is to say that it is determinate knowledge of the absolute that there is no basis for attributing necessity to any being; everything must be contingent, therefore; *except*, the contingency of everything must be necessary. The principle of unreason is thereby positively reformulated as the principle of factuality: only facticity itself may not be thought as factual.<sup>4</sup>

Meillassoux then seeks to deduce ‘figures’ of factuality, which is to say, conditions that follow from absolute contingency. The first of these affirms the law of noncontradiction: a contradictory entity (i.e., one that contains the opposite of all of its properties) would be immutable because it would already contain its own other. Unable to change or pass out of being, it would be necessary, hence incompatible with the principle. The second figure asserts that not only must what is be contingent but there must be contingent things – something rather than nothing – as contingency is unthinkable unless existence and nonexistence are ‘imperishable poles’ that persist in reality. Contingency is only thought as absolute if one thinks the real ‘perishability of everything’ (76). Meillassoux thereby claims to deduce what Kant only assumes and strong correlationism relinquishes: there is an existent, noncontradictory world to which thought of the absolute may coherently refer.<sup>5</sup>

4. Meillassoux suggests that this is the only coherent possibility as it avoids an infinite regress of ‘orders’ of facticity. Priest suggests, however, that the intuition to which arguments against infinite regress appeal is both ‘question-begging’ and ‘unsound’ (*One* 183). An infinite order of facticities is conceivable as a benign regress (i.e., one with explanatory power) if each order of facticity is understood as a distinct fact. Such a logical model permits that facticity might be either factual (if the regress is indeed infinite) or necessary (if an order of necessity serves as an ultimate ground) without legislating over which is true; such a truth may or may not be accessible elsewhere, but it may well be undecidable within the factual world. It is certainly possible, then, to both think facticity as factual and to think its ontological consequences without recourse to an inviolable principle.
5. These arguments could be said to be circular in that they are both derivations from and conditions for the necessity of contingency, so their truth is immanently unverifiable. At this stage in his argument, however, Meillassoux intends them to be deductions from the principle rather than proofs thereof. Even still, he concedes that his summary of the inviolability of noncontradiction is cursory. In particular, he does not refute the possibility that there are real contradictions that are not explosive (hence, which do not testify to the existence of a necessary being). He does project the reconfiguration of his thesis to account adequately for both inconsistent systems (in which all contradictions are true) and contradictory systems (in which only some contradictions are true): dialectics and paraconsistent logics would be shown to deal only with contradictory ‘statements about the world’ rather than with ‘real contradictions’, which ‘violate the conditions for the conceivability of contingency’ (79). This project is as-yet incomplete, and statements of this figure in his more recent work seem more restricted in their purview (i.e., they prohibit a necessary being more guardedly). The figural affirmation of noncontradiction remains insufficiently substantiated, then, not least as logical inconsistency is not a sufficient ground to dismiss inconsistency if inconsistency is real. Further, though, the figure itself is actually inconsistent; Ray Brassier points out that factuality engenders a paradox of self-reference in which the truth of any thought of the principle is contradictory: if the principle is true, the truth of  
(footnote continues)

The implications of the principle of factiality are radical: it indicates the irremediable contingency of those supposed invariants that one may have assumed are inviolable laws. Put otherwise, it prescribes the contingency of *law itself*. This proposition is illuminated by Meillassoux's speculative solution to Hume's problem, which concerns causality and induction:

1. Will the same causes always produce the same effects (whether deterministically or otherwise – e.g., probabilistically)?
2. What is the ground for any conclusion thereof?

Hume suggests that it is evident that the conjunction of cause and effect is derived from experience rather than reason; we need only recall discovering causal relationships that have been 'altogether unknown to us' to confirm this. He questions, however, by what resource one might predict the future consistency of cause-effect relationships that are familiar and invariant since 'our first appearance in the world' (20–1). In other words, does our consistent experience indicate the real invariance of such events? Meillassoux notes that there have been three primary responses to Hume's problem – the metaphysical, the sceptical, and the transcendental:

- THE METAPHYSICAL RESPONSE posits a supreme principle through which God and reason reciprocally vouchsafe one another. Leibniz, for example, proposes that the principle of sufficient reason follows from the principle of the best which follows from the ontological argument for the existence of God: every effect has a sufficient cause, however complex, because divine power bestows upon God the responsibility that the world must be the best possible one because existence is a perfection and God a perfect being, who must therefore exist. Whether the specific cause-effect relationship has been observed or not, in this view, causality is necessarily secure.
- THE SCEPTICAL RESPONSE, Hume's own, maintains that patterns of sense experience inform a *belief* that the same effects will follow from the same

the thought of the principle is subject to the principle; hence this truth must be contingent, which means that its negation could be true – i.e., the principle could be false. In order to refute this negation, one must affirm the thought's necessary truth, which means, however, that something other than the principle – the truth of thought of the principle – is not factual. The principle therefore either 'necessitates the existence of its own negation', or the truth of thought thereof is necessarily anterior to reality – either through exemption or noncorrespondence – in which case we remain trapped in the correlational circle (90). Meillassoux feels that this problem is surmounted by restricting the domain of the principle to 'entities in their being', in which case the principle and thought thereof are contingent facts because they have no need to exist, but they nonetheless correspond to an ontological referent – facticity itself – that is necessarily true yet also self-exempt (Meillassoux qtd. 92). As Brassier concludes, this demarcation of thought from reality incurs the 'price of an absolutization of conceptual sense' without which the contingency of everything would be strictly unintelligible, thus subordinating being to thought once more (93).



causes but that any necessary conjunction of cause and effect is accessible to neither reason nor experience. ‘When I see, for instance, a Billiard-ball moving in a straight line towards another’, he writes, ‘may I not conceive, that a hundred different events might as well follow from that cause?’ While one probably expects the first ball to strike the second and cause it to move, it is both ‘consistent and conceivable’ that any number of effects may follow (21). There is no foundation in *a priori* reason to give preference to one over another. As such, sense experience has epistemological priority over reason, but it can only ground belief, not inviolable principle. No principle of reason dictates that real phenomena will continue to correspond to any such belief. While Hume does not seriously doubt that physical laws will remain stable, he finds their mutability conceivable.

- THE TRANSCENDENTAL RESPONSE – Kant’s transcendental deduction – is a proof by absurdity. He infers that if the order of causes and effects (what one might call the laws of nature) were not consistent and stable, the sensory world would be so chaotic as to render representation unthinkable. The brute fact of our consciousness and the appearance of a constant world – in other words, the fact of the correlation – affirms the consistency of the causal relation, albeit not its necessity.

Meillassoux thinks there is a radical implication of the sceptical response from which Hume turns away and to which Kant responds insufficiently, however, which is that there is *no* reason that given causes must produce the same effects. Hume recognises that reason is incapable of grounding the stability of causality, but he nonetheless continues to assume a necessary, stable order that the principle of sufficient reason has ‘*injected* into the world’ (*After Finitude* 91). While it is consistent with his position that invariants may change, this would occur through some higher law to which reason has no access. For Hume, then, the problem remains essentially epistemological. For Meillassoux, conversely, reason’s incapacity to ground the necessity of law has an ontological significance. The limits of sense experience and reason do not just preclude a determinate affirmation of causality; they indicate the primacy of unreason over reason – that there is *no* necessary causal conjunction. If contingency alone is necessary, nothing precludes change – however radical – occurring on a spontaneous or random basis. Not only might there be some change in extant physical laws such that different effects could follow from the same causes, but this could happen at any time and for no reason whatsoever.

#### UNTOTALISABILITY AND THE FREQUENTIALIST PROBLEM

The frequentalist argument that Kant makes must still be rebutted, however. If invariants of experience can change spontaneously, why does this not happen so frequently as to render experience chaotic and thought impossible? A sceptical interlocutor may challenge the likelihood of this situation.

Despite the overwhelming number of possibilities in which *ex-nihilo* irruption might have thinkably occurred, the world seems to be uninterrupted by such changes, the odds of which are so vanishingly small that experience seems to contraindicate the claim that contingency is necessary. Meillassoux compares such reasoning to an extreme form of the inference that a die must be weighted if it produces identical results across many throws. This view identifies the problem as one of *chance*: the actual universe is conceived as ‘one among an immense number’ of possible universes, each of which may operate according to different physical laws. Billiard balls may produce any possible effect in different universes, but in this one, they produce predictable motion in one another. This immense number of universes is identified with the totality of the possible – the ‘*Universe of universes*’ – and can be mapped metaphorically onto a die. While the throw of this die could produce any result from this set of universes, it appears to always land ‘with the face representing “my” universe up’, and the continuity of the world we experience is unaffected (97). That these results repeat and continuity endures, not just across our own experience but seemingly across human history, may provoke the belief in some necessary cause (in this analogy, a weighted die). Yet, this belief is ‘*extra-logical* as well as *extra-mathematical*’ (98). It illegitimately infers a necessary cause from a sequence of results that may well appear absurd but is not *impossible as such*. It does so, Meillassoux suggests, because the frequentalist argument does not extricate contingency from chance, a ‘fundamental ontological presupposition’ that holds only in the case that ‘the being of the possible and the being of the Whole’ are actually coextensive (101). In other words, the argument assumes that there exists a totality of ‘non-contradictory conceivable possibilities’ and stipulates that this totality is ‘immensely larger than the set of physically possible events’ in our extant universe. This sceptical interlocutor assumes, then, that there is a countable totality of possibilities against which probability can be thought, if not calculated as such. That there really *is* such a totality of possibilities is an ‘uncircumventable condition that must be satisfied’ for the frequentalist argument to have any bearing, however; if no such totality exists, ‘aleatory reasoning becomes meaningless’ (102).

Here, Meillassoux follows Badiou in appealing to Cantor’s theorem and set theory. The axiom of the powerset is particularly important, as this stipulates that the cardinality of any set is exceeded by that of its powerset, the set that counts its subsets. As the powerset can then be submitted to the same procedure, every set is superable by its powerset; hence, there is an infinite sequence of infinities of increasing cardinality. The consistent implication is that no set of all sets exists (this would be succeeded by a powerset that would and would not belong to the set). On this basis, it can be maintained that ‘*the (quantifiable) totality of the thinkable is unthinkable*’ (104). Given that this argument appeals to an axiomatic system, it does not refute the frequentalist argument outright, but it does undermine its

ground: the being of the totality of possibilities cannot be assumed *a priori*, at least, as it is thinkable that probabilistic reasoning is inapplicable. There may simply be no throw of the die. Kant's transcendental deduction and the frequentalist argument are thus defanged, albeit not refuted, as it is demonstrably conceivable that the contingency of everything is not fundamentally incompatible with the stability of experience. Everything is contingent – so could have been and still could be otherwise than it is – but this does not necessitate chaotic becoming. The world can rather be said to be hyperchaotic. This does not connote an intensification of chaos; it is the condition for either order *or* chaos to be produced without cause. Beings and the laws that govern their existence *can* change radically and spontaneously, but this does not dictate that they *will* or *must*. Meillassoux does not 'expect' them to change at any particular frequency (84).<sup>6</sup>

As this argument proceeds by exposing a lacuna of Kant's transcendental deduction, Meillassoux credits it as a merely hypothetical solution. The speculative solution he desires would demand an absolutisation of the transfinite that would couple it comprehensively with factual ontology such that it would be deducible that the laws of nature really do 'derive their factual stability from a property of temporality that is itself absolute': 'the non-totalizability of its possibilities' (127). The fruition of this development remains, for now, to-come.<sup>7</sup>

6. Some critics suggest that this argument shifts from pure to applied mathematics without legitimating its bearing upon reality (see, for example, Hallward 'Anything' 140; Johnston 104). Further, Johnston feels that Meillassoux overstates the consequences of the detotalisation of infinity – that even if Cantor's theorem *is* applicable, the problem of frequentialism remains intractable:

If contingency involves an incalculably and immeasurably vaster number of infinite possibilities than chance, ... it seems more reasonable to wager that it would be even chancier (as a chanciness beyond chance [*hasard*] in Meillassoux's sense), thus further inflating the entire problem of frequentialism facing speculative materialist hyper-Chaos. (105)

This is certainly a wager, as it is only the *possible* inapplicability of chance to possibility on which Meillassoux's argument rests – nothing is actually refuted here, then. Although Ayache is a more sympathetic reader, he still goes so far as to 'bet' that the laws of nature will not change. For him, even the derivation of future possibility remains bound to probabilistic reasoning. 'Meillassoux's speculation', he feels, is not 'designed for the future'; its significance is to assert the absence of any reason for the world to exist as it does (*The Blank Swan* 148, 149).

7. If the frequentalist implication is to be thereby speculatively refuted, this will further require an account of the real disjunction of contingency and chance (rather than their nonidentity and their incommensurability) such that the impossibility of calculation against untotalsability mandates the direct intuition of real ontological consequences limited only by the inherence of noncontradiction in being. Ayache also recognises that this is not forthcoming in *After Finitude*: it 'remains only a hint in [Meillassoux's] reasoning' (*The Blank Swan* 158).

We are now in a position to return to the event of justice. This idea has preoccupied Meillassoux's work from his own PhD thesis to its definitive elaboration in his as-yet incompletely published major work, *L'Inexistence Divine*.<sup>8</sup> While factial ontology affords an event of justice no ontological privilege or preference, Meillassoux considers it to be the most remarkable possibility thereof because it makes thinkable a transformation of justice from an aspiration or ideal to a determinate situation in reality. Such an event inherits a divine character from ontotheology, albeit one of which the sense is radically transformed. As such, the *possibility* of universal justice is a divinological figure of factial ontology, to which it provides an ethico-political orientation. Meillassoux believes that this figure alone permits passage through an aporia of justice he calls the spectral dilemma. We shall consider this, then.

Meillassoux identifies spectres as those dead with whom the living share a 'morbid' relationship (whether turbulent or melancholic) rather than a 'tranquil' one; in this account, the dead haunt the living inasmuch as they are *not yet* mourned. *Essential* spectres are those whose deaths are so unjust that such a relationship is engendered not only with 'their nearest and dearest' but with 'all those who cross the path of their history' ('Spectral Dilemma' 262). Humanity has no means of providing these dead with something other than the terrible deaths they endured – thus no means of enacting justice – and these spectres are unbound from the phenomenological and mortal finitude of any particular bereaved subject. They endure in the lives of those by whom they are encountered, lives therefore pervaded by grief. So, the aporia is formulated: essential spectres demand justice but humanity is powerless to provide it. In fact, any justice for which one might hope for the dead has been (thus far) characterisable as ontotheological, Meillassoux suggests: it is, in one form or another, an afterlife. Yet, religion, understood as any 'thesis of a life beyond the grave' for which the basis is 'the existence of a personal God', offers no more hope for mourning essential spectres than the atheism that 'recuses both of these theses' (265–6). That the existence or nonexistence of God equally preclude the possibility of essential mourning confirms the aporia. A thesis of divine power may allow for something other for the dead, but if God does exist, He has permitted terrible deaths perversely despite His power to do otherwise. In fact, He compels love while – even *for* – doing so. No, if God exists, one cannot hope for justice from Him. If, on the other hand, terrible deaths testify that God does not exist, there is simply nothing for which one can hope for the

8. A translated excerpt from the former has been published in *Parrhesia*. Nathan Brown, its translator, suggests that it already offers a 'coherent and rigorously argued philosophical system' (Translator's Introduction to 'From "*L'Inexistence Divine*"' 20). Translated excerpts from the working draft of the latter are published in Harman's *Quentin Meillassoux* (they are referred to in the present text under the title 'Excerpts').

dead. Each position, religious or atheist, culminates in insoluble despair, providing no serious possibility that we might ‘live with essential spectres’ rather than ‘die with them’ (262). Essential spectres remain irreducibly unmournable; their unjust deaths, without redemption.

Meillassoux contends that this aporia can be surpassed, however, as factual ontology provides a possibility through which these theses can effectively be sublated. Meillassoux advances the thesis of *divine inexistence*: God does not exist, but His future emergence is a possibility consistent with hyperchaos. On one hand, the fact of injustice – which is to say, the existence of essential spectres – testifies to the nonexistence of a just God. On the other, a possible emergence that exceeds the potential capability of humanity is the condition for hope for something other than death for the dead; whatever this emergence may be, it is appropriately characterised as divine. Such an emergent God is neither a first cause nor a necessary being, however. Indeed, it is on the basis that God is uncoupled from His metaphysical necessity that a just God becomes thinkable. The necessity of God would, for Meillassoux, entail His perversity (i.e., if this God existed, we would *know* Him to be guilty of the worst), but a contingent God-to-come can be innocent of what predates its being yet have the power to ameliorate it. Divine inexistence is therefore doubly connotative:

- God is inexistent (i.e., has no actual existence).
- Hyperchaos harbours in inexistence the divine and its possible effects.

The aporia can be overcome, then, because the justice of resurrection and an order of unceasing life are possible – virtually possible rather than materially prefigured, but nonetheless possible – effects of the divine.

#### THE FOURTH WORLD

In ‘Spectral Dilemma’, the story ends here, but Meillassoux picks up its thread again in ‘The Immanence of the World Beyond’. There, he proposes that the emergence of God would revolutionise the order of life because mortality would no longer be its essential possibility. There would be a fourth World, one that follows the Worlds of matter, life, and thought.<sup>9</sup>

9. As I noted at the beginning of the chapter, whether Meillassoux understands matter to emerge eventually is obscure. As we have seen, he argues that there must be something rather than nothing and endorses the law of noncontradiction, so this something cannot be **nothing**. Given that his is a materialist ontology, one could reasonably infer that this means that there must be matter. Harman feels, though, that this is opposed to ‘the sense one gets’ from *L’Inexistence Divine (Skirmishes 113)*. Meillassoux does indeed at one point therein refer to matter as a ‘World’, which he defines as an order that ‘arise[s] suddenly’ from the world of nontotalisable possibility (‘Excerpts’ 238). Otherwise, however, he refers specifically to the *ex-nihilo* emergence of the Worlds of life from matter, thought from life, and justice from thought. There are three possibilities that I can see:

(footnote continues)

This is not to say that death becomes impossible or that humans become necessary; rather, death is reduced from an inevitability to a formal possibility. By consequence, finitude is no longer the essential condition of the human subject. This renews the dilemma, however: the annulment of dying (with Heidegger's sense in mind) quells the concern for justice, which Meillassoux recognises to be motivated by finitude – it is a struggle of and for mortal beings. If the event '*accomplish[es]*' justice, the '*struggle and the vectorization towards such a justice*' will cease (472). The subject of the fourth World must reckon with the nihilism of a World in which such motivations have been dissolved:

[W]hat would a world (the fourth world) be like that was stripped of the escha(t)ological vector, if not a world of egotism and disengagement in which life would no longer find the meaning of its existence in the generous gift of itself in political or individual engagement in favour of emancipation? (472)

This portends a soporific world stripped bare of motivating concerns that only those content with the most banal existence would see fit to inhabit. It is unfit for the return of spectres, therefore, to whom it offers nothing 'new or good'. Meillassoux sees only one way through the new dilemma of nihilism. The fourth World must inaugurate '*a communist life, that is to say, life finally without politics*'. This life cannot be one of peace or happiness as such; it must be one of '*universal disquiet*'. Misery and suffering (respectively, base animal pain and the humiliation of inequality) must be overcome if politics is to cease. Disquiet, however, is the pain of the free – the negative condition proper to the fourth World according to which an emancipated life 'dedicated to love, friendship and thought' is threatened by the possibilities of 'betrayal', 'poor and sordid' relationships, and 'inventive sterility'. This invigorates a life that, inasmuch as it is no longer towards death, 'has become undefined': it can now be 'dedicated to the risks of extreme disquiet' (474–5). This presents the subject of the fourth World

- The implication of an event of matter is not intended; the World of matter is originary and what exists is necessarily material.
- Matter is emergent, so something pre-exists matter (a surprising position for speculative materialism). Either this something is excluded from the material domain, or matter and material are distinct, and the emergence of matter has a restricted sense. It is not clear in what sense factuality would inhere in whatever this something would be – thus, whether contingency is strictly *necessary* – its domain having been defined as entities in their being.
- Matter emerges from nothing, and the figural assertion that there must be something rather than nothing (and, conceivably, the prohibition of contradiction) must be false.

Gratton understands Meillassoux to 'clear[ly]' advocate the second of these options in its first form: matter is 'second to a non-material ... Time before time of this materiality' (*Speculative Realism* 67). I agree with Harman, though – it seems murkier than this.

with the ontological reality of Nietzschean eternal recurrence: ‘everything returns eternally to the same, yourself included’ (466). One must experiment with the possibilities of living an affirmative, inventive life in the face of nihilism lest one lapse into interminable disengagement or commit ‘lucid’ suicide to relinquish unbearable disquiet.

Although the fourth World is a projected possibility without *telos* or even ontological preference, Meillassoux suggests that its possibility produces effects in our own world. Not only can one ‘have at present this experience of life’ by living *towards* the fourth World – living an inventive life committed to shaping a world worthy of the return of spectres – but to live in this manner is the mode of ‘awaiting’ upon which the fourth World is conditional (475; ‘Excerpts’ 264). That is, an event of justice only constitutes a fourth World, rather than an improved third, if it fulfils the remarkable may-being and possibility of thought for which humanity has hoped and concretely striven. It can only commence as a ‘*recommencement*’ of the vector towards justice (264).<sup>10</sup> The ethico-political practice that prepares for the fourth World is essentially committed to its own annulment through the event, then. Two archetypal impetuses of political militancy must therefore be distinguished. On one hand, there are those for whom politics is an end in itself – who practise politics because they ‘love struggle’ and so for whom the lust for politics would not abate. On the other hand, there are those who ‘do not love’ politics but for whom it is the practice compelled by their ‘love for justice’. Only the latter can commit to an emancipatory politics of which the goal is ‘its own proper abolition’ (‘Immanence’ 476). While this politics is a condition for the event of the fourth World (though not strictly speaking for those of resurrection or immortality), it remains insufficient to effecting any such justice or end of politics. Indeed, Meillassoux is emphatic that any politics that pronounces an end of politics should be derided as totalitarian. Justice *requires* an eventual supplement which is irruptive, apolitical, and quasi-miraculous, yet the fourth World is immanent to the third in the precise sense that it joins the may-be of an inexistent possibility with what may be done now.

#### THE ARBITRARY NAME

For Meillassoux, then, the event alone is adequate to universal justice, even while its most significant sense for thought depends upon a world shaped by factual thought. I do not see the fourth World as the ultimate world he feels it to be, however. Various questions present themselves: first, we shall consider what the consequences of the contingency of divinity are. What is Meillassoux’s God? Meillassoux certainly recognises that the question poses itself: what, he asks, does ‘the signifier “God” really mean’ if God is thought

10. This may be the exception to the point I made in chapter one regarding the absence of proper inexistents for Meillassoux. It does not structure the possibility of rupture as such, however – rather, it concerns how the fourth World is thought.

as inexistent yet possible rather than ‘actual and necessary’ (‘Spectral Dilemma’ 269)? Various critics note the similarities between the Gods of ontotheology and speculative materialism. Among the most trenchant is Johnston, for whom this represents a peculiar lack of imagination: he finds that when faced with the unbound possibilities of the infinite, Meillassoux simply reinscribes the God of metaphysics within his system by dividing His attributes (His ‘bundle of features’) between a God-to-come and hyperchaos itself. Hyperchaos becomes ‘disturbingly similar’, he feels, to the God of ‘non/not-yet-philosophers’ in the sense that it is omnipotent and free in the quotidian sense – that is, free to act capriciously (109). Johnston ultimately sees this as a conservative recovery of God which, as a ‘rigorously consequent’ possibility thereof, bears ‘damning witness’ to Meillassoux’s project (113). Such views echo elsewhere: Livingston writes that hyperchaos and the absolutisation of the principle of factuality ‘fall back into the essentially pre-Cantorian position of onto-theology’, and Gratton remarks that Meillassoux’s work is ultimately wedded to ‘a religious conception that repeats trope by trope a tradition he believes he suspends’ (‘Realism’ 24n49; ‘Post-Deconstructive Realism’ 88n21).

The God to which Meillassoux refers is indeed often indexed to that of the dogmatic mould: both the spectral dilemma and its resolution endorse characteristics of ontotheological God, and, in fact, Meillassoux contends that it is a ‘catastrophic’ illusion that ‘*one can do without Him*’ (‘Excerpts’ 286). The contingency of God preserves the possibility of His ethical character by circumventing any contraindications thereof (i.e., the fact of injustice), yet this is only necessary because Meillassoux’s formulation of the aporia tacitly endorses the principle of the best. Indeed, it is the thinkable possibility of the occurrence of the best that constitutes the ethical and political component of his thought, and he proceeds according to a contingent analogue to this principle – his interest is ‘the most singular possible divinity, the most interesting, the most “noble”’ (‘Spectral Dilemma’ 275). *L’Inexistence Divine* is unlikely to seduce those for whom this orientation is unconvincing, given that it is in its published excerpts that this divinology is presented with its greatest rhetorical intensity: therein, he writes that this God is ‘Christlike’, a ‘child’ or ‘*infans*’ as-yet unborn but who will possess ‘goodness’, ‘omniscience’, ‘omnipotence’, and the power and will to abolish His own power so that He may live among immortal humans as their equal (‘Excerpts’ 273–4).<sup>11</sup>

There is a sense in which criticisms on this basis are overzealous, even still, as Meillassoux’s argument is distinct from an ontotheology or a

11. I take it, however, that what Meillassoux calls omnipotence does not extend to the power to produce necessity, whether His own, that of the fourth World, or, retrospectively, that of the world that precedes Him. If it does, contingency will be shown to be contingent, and Meillassoux’s ontology will be demonstrated to be inconsistent inasmuch as the truth of the principle of factuality will have produced its own falsity.



religious belief, if not quite antithetical to them: ‘has anyone ever seen a believer deny the existence of God?’ he asks (282).<sup>12</sup> The God of divine inexistence is neither a transcendent cause nor a supreme entity in which one *believes* but rather, if Meillassoux is correct, a God that one deduces to be virtually possible. In the event that the fourth World does occur, God will also have pre-existed His emergence in some form as the *metaxu* that bridge the third and fourth Worlds:

To be deified is to turn oneself into a demon: a *metaxu*, an intermediary, a living passage between the thinking of this world and the justice of the ultimate world. To turn oneself into a human being who is neither only ‘here’ (world 3) nor already ‘there’ (world 4) but who is *already between here and there* – this in-between for which the English language has a beautiful [word]: yonder. (‘Immanence’ 478)<sup>13</sup>

God already has a multiple sense, then. Given Meillassoux’s ambition to recuperate the absolute from religious mysticism, and, therefore, the possibilities immanent to being from transcendence, one could understand that he appropriates familiar rhetoric of ontotheology – even ‘trope by trope’ – in order to liberate the possibility of God *from* ontotheology and religion.<sup>14</sup> In this case, the question of precisely what ‘God’ means remains suspended; the fetal *infans*, undeveloped. In a precise sense, ‘God’ is only determined to be a contingent ‘*effect* of a Chaos unsubordinated to any law’ – an effect, not a being-in-waiting (‘Spectral Dilemma’ 274; emphasis amended). Although God is thought in this context as the most remarkable possibility of the factual, His irruptive possibility is strictly indifferent to the thought of any aporia or particular concept of God. While Meillassoux distinguishes between the fourth World and immortality within the third on the basis of

12. Actually, yes, they have: Eagleton, responding to Richard Dawkins’s *The God Delusion*, writes that God is neither ‘a person, ... a principle, an entity, [n]or “existent”’: in one sense of that word it would be perfectly coherent for religious types to claim that God does not in fact exist’ (‘Lunging’).

13. A certain set of propositions is obscure, however:

- Politics cannot bring about the end of politics.
- Shaping the world for the fourth is deifying.
- The intervention of God can end politics.

Here, shaping the world is surely both a political practice (so it *cannot* end politics) and divine (so it *can* end politics). Perhaps there are two different senses of deity here, the stronger of which (the emergence) may *retroactively* deify the weaker (the *metaxu*), but it seems contradictory, even still.

14. Indeed, to Badiou’s mind, Meillassoux is the ‘only major philosopher today attempting in absolutely new ways’ to ‘*rescue* transcendence’ from its ‘old onto-theological form’ (*Immanence* 20; emphasis added).

their difference in thought, then, this difference and the thought that constitutes it are themselves contingent and generated by contingent beings. In fact, it is puzzling that Meillassoux does not acknowledge (explicitly, at least) that a divine power and the world ‘worthy’ of its condition could coirrupt; it is certainly consistent with facial ontology that his divinology can be decoupled thus from its preparatory condition of a deifying ethics. It seems to me, then, that despite its quasi-ontotheological rhetoric, this divinology provides no necessary concept of God; here, God has no necessary attributes other than its contingency. The identity of God is indeterminate in a two-fold sense, then:

1. It remains to-come (i.e., it lacks any testamentary existence).
2. It has no necessary essence or even characteristics (i.e., if this God were viewed as a nonexistent object, it would still be scarcely characterised).

The particular figuration of God that Meillassoux uses is coextensive with an ethical commitment, but this does not legislate over the condition of divinity; it is necessarily putative and ontologically arbitrary. The emergence of an entity that one may (or, indeed, may not) deem worthy of the name God is a generic possibility of hyperchaos, whatever that entity might be. In the reciprocal sense of divine inexistence, the divinity of contingency is clearly the prior condition for any contingent divine entity that emerges. In other words, a revelation of ‘God’ testifies principally to ‘*the divine character of inexistence*’ – that the effects of the divine belong to the possibilities of contingent being (268). If it were maintained that God is both a contingent being and a necessary principle, however, this would metaphysically absolutise Him once more, so Meillassoux must disjoin the two. Explicitly, he maintains the divinity of the inexistent entity; thus, God is neither necessary nor existent. Even still, the effects of the divine are possibilities of contingent being, not any particular emergent being. The *infans* is not destined for any particular form or even for form as such. In a sense, Johnston is absolutely right; the attributes of ontotheological God are divided between in-existent God and hyperchaos, but the effects of the contingent divine are thinkable on the basis of the frivolity of the latter alone. It does not follow, then, that so-called divine effects are possible only on the basis of a perfect being, and ontological possibility is indifferent to anyone’s hope for such a God.

The signifier ‘God’ can be understood multiply, therefore:

- ‘God’ signifies a determinate emergent being or situation that corresponds to the particular possibility of the fourth World. It is the proper name of the most remarkable possibility of being, an event of justice through which, for Meillassoux, there is finally something for which one can hope.
- ‘God’ signifies the power of thought to shape a world in which the fourth World can irrupt.

- ‘God’ signifies irruptive possibility without reason. God is not a being but the condition of contingent-being. In this sense, ‘God’ *names* factuality despite remaining subject to it.
- ‘God’ and God are contingent, so any identity thereof is subject to change or annulment. As such, ‘God’ is an *arbitrary* name – in a sense, it corresponds to Meillassoux’s sign devoid of meaning (to which we will turn in the next chapter), which represents nothing but contingency.

If contingency is not equivalent to God as such, it is nonetheless the divine condition and vouchsafe for any irruptive possibility that anyone might deem worthy – whatever that might mean – of being so named.

#### THE MAY-BEING OF THE FOURTH WORLD

What are the consequences of the contingency of God for the fourth World, then? As we saw in chapter one, Hägglund argues that conceptions of an immortal afterlife appeal to a positive presence impervious to the ravages of time that is equivalent, ultimately, to annihilation: whatever immutable substance existed would be indistinct from the void – from nothing. Such an appeal is barred to Meillassoux in any case because if everything is contingent – destructible and mutable – this ‘hinges on the destructive passage’ of succession: ‘there is only ever contingency at the price of destruction’ (‘Radical Atheist Materialism’ 126). Hägglund understands immortality to be neither possible nor desirable, therefore; he argues that we care about *mortal* survival, whether affirmatively or negatively. There is, however, a symmetry between the care for survival and the disquiet of the fourth World, despite their divergent conditions, that Hägglund does not explicitly recognise. They are not reducible to one another, but they are not opposed as Hägglund thinks. Although Meillassoux poses the fourth world as an ultimate world of immortality, it remains a *lived* immortality in which death and loss remain possible. As such, it is a mortality that may be without end rather than immortality in the strong sense. This is no less true of the fourth World itself, in fact. It seems somewhat misleading to call it an ‘ultimate’ world, as it too is subject to the possibilities of irruption, change, and destruction. Meillassoux does not explicitly think this sense of the fourth World’s may-being and so curiously leaves its retrojection into the third and fourth Worlds unaccounted for. Yet, the positive may-being of the fourth World cannot proscribe its corrupting, annihilating may-being. *This* may-being is the insoluble threat that the fourth World might perish at any moment, whether through the end of immortality, a rupture in the becalmed community, a corruption of justice, the becoming-unliveable of the world, or an event of injustice. Unlike Meillassoux, I think that this contingent immortal life remains conditioned by the essential possibility of mortality and that the World of justice is corrupted by its own may-being to the point that it is barred in advance.

We have encountered the question of whether one must fear the may-being of the world with the frequentalist argument, of course. The assumption of this argument, which Meillassoux seeks to discredit, is that if ontological possibility is actually without a grounding necessary law, this should ‘incite us to fear at every moment the random behaviour of reality’ (*After Finitude* 100). His counterargument shows that the contingency of causality is at least thinkable on a basis that is incompatible with neither conscious experience – as we will see exemplified in the next chapter with ‘extro-scientific’ worlds – nor the stability of the laws of nature. He concludes, then, that we need not fear the caprices of hyperchaos. I do not believe that this follows for his divinology, however.

The disjunction of contingency from chance remains a contentious point within Meillassoux’s argument. While the intuition of the frequentalist argument may indeed equate contingency and chance incorrectly, this does not mean that contingency and chance are strictly incompatible. I have already noted that Johnston avers that the unlimitation of possibility might as readily intensify the frequentalist problem as resolve it – the problem of stability might well become ‘even chancier’ (105). Hallward, meanwhile, suggests that Cantor’s theorem, from which Meillassoux derives the untotalisability of possibility, of course, ‘concerns the domain of pure number alone’. It is not clear that its implications apply to the ‘actually existing universe’, as Meillassoux does not demonstrate that this is itself infinite rather than immensely large (‘Anything’ 139). If the material universe is indeed finite, Meillassoux’s inference would simply be invalid. On the other hand, if the universe’s potential to be other is limited only by the figures of non-contradiction and existence, it is thinkable that this *capacity* is indexable to the infinite. It is an idiosyncrasy of Meillassoux’s ontology that it ‘never speaks about what is but only about what can be’, so Hallward’s point may itself not be pertinent (Meillassoux in Brassier et al. 393). Even if this is the case, though, this contention would not in itself be sufficient to settle the problem of frequentalism; Livingston argues that there is no ‘evident direct’ implication of Cantor’s theorem for ‘any kind of reasoning about probabilities and necessity’. Even if the theorem is taken to indicate ‘infinitely or even uncountably many “possible worlds”’, this does not indicate that measures of probability across their totality are ‘not well-defined’. He insists, in fact that untotalisability offers no alternative to totalisable possibility ‘unless we know how to identify the space of possibilities with *all* of Cantor’s hierarchy’, which is of course precisely what the subscription to untotalisability proscribes (‘Realism’ 23). There is a sense, perhaps, in which Livingston repeats Meillassoux’s argument back to him here. They agree, in fact, that untotalisability *does not* offer an alternative to chance, but the consequences they derive from this diverge. For Meillassoux, the excess of untotalisability over any constituted totality means that the possibilities of being are simply inaccessible to aleatory reasoning. Contingency does not

offer an alternative to chance as such; it prevails in a domain in which chance has no purview.<sup>15</sup> Livingston, meanwhile, suggests that the absence of a thinkable alternative to chance means that the question of frequentism is really just left unanswered on the basis of the tautological impossibility of calculating chance against a totality whose existence is refused. Yet, Ayache suggests that Meillassoux ‘only’ mounts an argument of frequency against the frequentist – in other words, he only asks why the frequentist cannot conceive that events could happen ‘rarely’ rather than at an ‘*extraordinarily high*’ frequency (*The Blank Swan* 158). For Ayache, conversely, the stronger argument is one of *gravity*. ‘[T]he objection of stability of the laws’, he writes, ‘is not serious ... in front of their contingency’. What is serious about the event is not its frequency; it is its remarkable quality of impossibility. In the frequentist’s discourse – which, in his reading, is constructivist – ‘they don’t happen’ and ‘they don’t exist’, so they cannot be accounted for (159). The frequentist question, he feels, can be ignored safely because it lacks gravity.

Ayache’s argument is interesting. To my mind, Meillassoux articulates the noncorrespondence between contingency and chance without accounting for their correspondence – in other words, he brackets frequency rather than simply arguing another form of it, and he does so too quickly. While chance may be given as a true mathematical calculation – one that remains entirely consistent within that formal system – that system of thought is itself contingent. Mathematical thought is ideal inasmuch as it concerns pure objects of thought, but as a historically emergent discourse with codified laws, it is nonetheless an existent object. As we will see, Meillassoux hopes to ground the possibility of the absolutisation of mathematical reference, so mathematics does have a particular significance for factual ontology, but this is not to say that any mathematical discourse is *necessary* as such, even if a mathematical procedure (i.e., counting as one) may be thought in certain respects as absolute. Mathematics remains a discourse conducted in a world in which nothing evades contingency.<sup>16</sup> If one calculates the probability of a throw of a die to land on any given face at one in six, this brackets the possibilities that while it rolls it sprouts extra sides *or* that mathematics might be spontaneously revolutionised or disfigured such that this calculation – or, indeed, probability in general – is altered or nullified. In this sense, one *always* calculates chance against contingency, which is to say, against the possibility that a formal system and its attendant laws are suspended or transformed. Given, then, that Meillassoux recognises that calculations of probabilities involving the infinite are feasible, the absolute does not seem

15. There is a meaningful distinction to make here between Badiou and Meillassoux, though: untotalisability is an axiomatic decision for Badiou, whereas for Meillassoux, subscription to the law of noncontradiction makes it the necessary post-Cantorian configuration of the thought of totality.

16. I will return to this question in chapter four with the sign devoid of meaning.

to be ‘exempt’ from chance so much as contingency is the possibility of chance’s corruption. Chance is haunted by the possibility of the event: there is always the chance that chance must account for both chance and the contingency of chance. This is indexable to the distinction Meillassoux draws between potentiality and virtuality:

I accord to time the capacity to bring forth situations *which were not at all contained in precedent situations*: of creating new cases, rather than merely actualising potentialities that eternally pre-exist their fulguration. If we maintain that becoming is not only capable of bringing forth cases on the basis of a pre-given universe of cases, we must then understand that it follows that such cases irrupt, properly speaking, *from nothing*, since no structure contains them as eternal potentialities before their emergence ... .  
(‘Potentiality’ 72)

It seems to me, though, that for Meillassoux potentiality is a weak concept and that the virtual leaks into the actual world. Potentiality accounts for possibilities immanent to a situation ‘under the condition of a given law’, while virtuality accounts for the emergence of possibilities that are not pre-figured – they are ‘*not at all contained in precedent situations*’ and they do not ‘pre-exist their fulguration’ (72). As Meillassoux’s account lacks any ‘principle of preference’ for one world or another, however, one may as consistently describe virtual possibilities as *actually* possible, which is also to say, as part of the situation (*After Finitude* 100). One need not, as he implies, construct a universe of possibilities to think this; it is sufficient to register that the extension of possibility beyond what the contingent laws of the situation prescribe is an actual possibility of the situation. For factual ontology, then, potentiality catalogues a situation’s material possibilities insufficiently. It may well have been pragmatically accurate thus far, but it is an inadequate encyclopaedia of possibility. Virtuality can be understood as a radicalisation of potentiality, meanwhile: although virtual inexistents do not exist as such, they do seem to have *some* status in actuality: they are not ‘pure emergences, which before being are nothing’, because they are *thinkable* possibilities, hence why the possibility of the fourth World can be *retrojected* into the third.<sup>17</sup> I do not think the problem of frequentalism allows any decision between chance and contingency, then. Meillassoux is quite right that acausal change is thinkable without ontological caprice annihilating consciousness, but this does not in itself refute the incredulity of the frequentalist’s question. That the actual world is as it is rather than

17. Slavoj Žižek also feels that Meillassoux gives “immaterial” phenomena a specific *positive*’ status of ‘non-being’ (Žižek 215; emphasis added). He calls for a limiting supplement to factuality – ‘the incompleteness of reality’ – to avert thought from what he regards as hyperchaos’s more fantastical possibilities (Žižek and Woodward 409).

otherwise is simultaneously incredible and utterly banal *because* it is without reason. In other words, the question of frequentialism lingers unanswered, but its argument is weak.<sup>18</sup>

Nonetheless, there *is* something to fear from the imminence of irruption; it is just not on the basis of frequency. Rather, following Ayache, it is because of gravity: there is something to fear because the may-being of the fourth World is conditioned by the threat of may-being, which, as a *threat*, is imminent irrespective of its occurrence. By consequence, the fourth World is imperilled before, in, and after its event:

- As Meillassoux's account prescribes the condition for the fourth World, a resurrectionary event might be unjust if adequate becoming towards it is precluded – by the cessation of life, thought, or action, say, or by the untimely arrival of the event. Spectres might thus return to a world of enduring nihilism or torment. In one sense, this is less an imperilment than a *simulacrum* of the fourth World (in a sense close to Badiou's – a 'false' event that he considers a form of evil). Yet, it is possible that such a world *circumscribes* the fourth World if it is a world in which there are no longer spectres: there is no one to be resurrected, for the dead are once more living, albeit poorly. The impossibility of a condition for the explicit account of the fourth World is at least thinkable.
- The fourth World could be corrupted into its own simulacrum. As the fourth World is contingent, it is possible that an event might make it inhospitable or uninhabitable, thus denying its inhabitants the life of disquiet Meillassoux equates with justice. On one hand, then, the may-being of the fourth World is its essential possibility of corruption.
- On the other, this may-being signifies the essential possibility of death, the apotheotic form of which is the radical destruction of the world such that any sense of the fourth World being an ultimate world can only be that it may be the *final* World before the end; a World after such a death-event is no world at all. The possibility of an event of death means that immortal life remains *essentially* mortal. Meillassoux understands that the possibly infinite deferral of death suspends being-towards-death, but while death remains an essential possibility of temporal being, there is always a horizon of possibility of death. Even as the fourth World retroacts into the third as a profound possibility, it is *already negated* by this may-being that is indifferent to probability or frequency but is of the utmost gravity.

18. Other rejoinders to the frequentialist question have been proposed: Norris posits that Meillassoux might have appealed to "evidence" such as the many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics alongside 'modal-logical considerations having to do with the supposedly "real" existence of possible though non-actual worlds' (43). A certain analogy is apparent, though such an account seems to assume a universe of sets (i.e., of possible worlds) which, in Meillassoux's account, is unthinkable, so they are not ultimately compatible.

This projection of death is not only phenomenological in the mode of dying *à la* Heidegger; it has an absolute sense – that which Meillassoux wishes to ground for scientific hypotheses (i.e., their anteriority to thought). Brassier contends that the extinction of thought and space-time must each ‘be grasped as something that *has already happened*’ (223). It is not just that extinction ‘*will terminate*’, but that it ‘*has already retroactively terminated*’: *everything has already died* (223, 230). Indeed, that thought can think its own future extinction is both aporetic and constitutive of its being. Extinction inscribes a death that life and thought cannot evade, for which no “afterwards” can be thought – by definition, it has no condition of phenomenal manifestation – but which, Brassier contends, is not a possibility towards which one can be orientated because it ‘disables projection’ – extinction ‘unfolds’ in ‘anterior posteriority’ rather than in futurity (230). Yet, the threat of catastrophe seems to me to be a projection of this nonprojectability – one cannot think its ‘after’, but as a subtraction from projectability, it promises that life is not impervious to death. Thus, in recognising this limit – not one’s own death but absolute extinction – thought participates in an absolute dying inasmuch as the projected impossibility of projection confirms the mortality of the world. This may-being – that in which the actuality of extinction is realised – is tangibly evidenced as possible by the very event of the World that it would destroy: that the World can irrupt for no reason testifies that it can disappear for none too. The fourth World has therefore already been destroyed in its event – it arrives stillborn. In this sense, an event of immortality or universal justice is even self-annihilating – after Derrida, it is *autoimmune*.

Meillassoux thinks the World of justice as a profound possibility, but I think may-being debases this hope. Hope for the fourth World might be an essentially militant commitment to a regulative idea in the third – it is only on this basis that one might prepare for this world rather than any, every, or no other – but this still resembles zealotry inasmuch as the fourth World is annulled in advance by the threat of may-being. Advocacy for the fourth World seems to entail the return of the enigma of faith, therefore. Contingency is not a being, so it is not evil in the manner Meillassoux insists an extant God would be, but it is both indifferent to our existence and capable of the worst. This is a new impasse for the spectral dilemma: God inexists, is indifferent to our desire, and is capable of corrupting any event or World of justice. The contingent divine does not offer hope so much as make hope a trivial category of thought. The divinological position repeats the original problem of the religious position, then: one can hope for no ultimate justice from God. Even if atheism is, in a sense, incompatible with this implication of factuality, one might as well hope impotently for nothing from God – that is, hope that the worst irruptions do not come to pass and engender spectres of their own. This is a fear proper to the fourth World.



If this event of justice is in a particular (negative) sense impossible, are we therefore bound to a world of injustice and a melancholy life haunted by spectres? In a sense, yes, yet the spectral dilemma may be formulated so that a thesis of indifference to divinity does not provoke insoluble despair. This consists in joining the *experience* of the aporias of mourning and justice – not their resolutions – with the ineluctable condition of mortality.

From the outset, mourning is an aporia of self and other. For Derrida, in mourning we face '[t]wo infidelities, an impossible choice' between betrayals: on one hand, to be entirely faithful to the dead would be to refuse to live without them – to demand to live or die together. Denying their death, one might always move in 'counterpoint' with them, but to sustain their spectres in this way addresses nothing to the dead as such. Rather, it *consumes* them for and into oneself by denying their otherness and their mortality. If one chooses death, though, one chooses this for oneself and spectres alike; there is nothing for spectres but death. If, on the other hand, one tries to live on in solitude, avoiding 'all quotation, all identification, all rapprochement even', this too risks their disappearance, as if 'one could add more death to death' in an 'indecent pluraliz[ation]' (*Work* 45). This is a double bind inasmuch as the correction for each infidelity risks the other: one always risks consuming spectres, whether through interiorisation or immolation. The challenge, Derrida feels, is to keep spectres alive 'within oneself' even while recognising that they are 'now inaccessible to th[e] appellation[s]' of their names (36, 46). When one addresses a spectre, their name can no longer become a 'vocation, address, or apostrophe' – it is rather '*him in me* that I name' (46; emphasis added). Yet, if someone's name can be 'no longer' theirs, 'simply' and 'uniquely', this is because the interiorisation of the other is at work long before death becomes actual (45). To live in a community of mortals is to be structurally subject to the double bind of mourning *in advance* of death. One lives in love or friendship knowing that each person may outlive the other, so each consumes the spectre of the other in anticipation of their death – even a death that may never be experienced. One mourns the other from the exposure to the *possibility* of their death – from the beginning. In this sense, each is projected as *already* dead – already a spectre. Mourning, then, is the mode of anticipation *and* problematisation of dying together. One mourns the possibility of the death of the other from the outset. No rupture or fidelity overcomes the aporia because the experience of the aporia of mourning is constitutive of mortal life, this mortality is ineluctable, and so its spectres cannot be exorcised. Put simply, resolving the aporia is the object of neither justice nor its event.

What, then, might an event of justice be? Derrida writes, famously, that '[j]ustice in itself, if such a thing exists, outside or beyond law, is not deconstructible'; in fact, '[d]econstruction is justice' ('Force' 14, 15). To the extent that justice remains foreign to its codification in law, it demands an

impossible calculation of the incalculable: an event of decision. A sequence of aporias make decision both urgently necessary and radically insufficient; hence, it is an impossible possibility. A just decision must be responsible *and* singular – both ‘regulated and without regulation’. That is, each case must be treated with the ‘power to be of the calculable or programmable order’ (i.e., it must be universalisable, hence iterable) yet also such that no ‘existing, coded rule’ – no programme of law – ‘can or ought to guarantee’ it in advance (i.e., it must be unique, hence singular). Decision, then, must neither follow rule nor be without principle or responsibility but must impossibly ‘conserve the law and also destroy it or suspend it enough to have to reinvent it in each case’ (23). A decision can only be made on the undecidable, which is ‘foreign to the order of the calculable and the rule’; deciding the decidable – a problem with a calculable answer – follows a programme, so decision never occurs (24). Decision must ‘give itself up to the impossible’, the ‘ordeal of the undecidable’, and it is demanded that it does so urgently because justice ‘doesn’t wait’ (24, 26). One never has the time to know decision’s rectitude, effects, or possible future, so it cannot be responsible, but a responsible decision is demanded nonetheless, and it is demanded *now*. Derrida emphasises after Kierkegaard, then, that ‘the instant of the just decision ... is a madness’: one acts in ‘the night of non-knowledge and non-rule’, which leaves the decision irreducibly insufficient to its formidable task (26). As such, the decision is the impossible of justice: it occurs only when decision is not possible; it is absolutely singular and enduringly iterable; it is possible only as *the impossible*. If there is an event of justice, then, against its impossibility and the unbound possibility of may-being, it must risk the enduringly undecidable to sustain – not resolve – the aporia.



Meillassoux decides to bracket questions of justice other than the spectral dilemma and to think politics as becoming towards the fourth World. His account fails, therefore, to account for the many struggles for justice between the living and the dead that demand not an end of politics but rather *more* politics, and it fails to account for the fourth World’s may-being as a locus of injustice. I do not believe in an event of justice as Meillassoux conceives it, then. If there is an event of justice for the dead, we face its impossible possibility. We must decide – as Meillassoux has done – what we do with, to, and for the dead, to and toward what end. The real merit of this conception of an event of justice over Meillassoux’s is that this impossibility is not only its negation; it is also its condition.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Arbitrary Name / Signs without Meaning

#### ANOTHER FIGURE

In this chapter, I pursue the consequences of the may-being of may-beings with Meillassoux again by considering another figure of factual thought and its correspondence to a renewed concept of absolute music. Hecker et al.'s *Speculative Solution* is a uniquely pertinent work for this, having been commissioned by Urbanomic in response to Meillassoux's work; it serves, correspondingly, as a prosthesis of the speculative materialist project. As we will see, it seeks to make hyperchaos *felt* on the basis of the contingency of the sign. The “literalist” marks’ that the work proposes it may be – marks that ‘have no reason to be as they are’ – can, I think, be coupled with what Meillassoux subsequently elaborates as the figural sign devoid of meaning (or *dm*), which signifies only that ‘anything whatsoever could fulfil its task just as well as it does’ (Mackay ‘This’ 23; Meillassoux ‘Iteration’ 182). I will first discuss *Speculative Solution*, then the sign *dm*, and, finally, I will return the sign *dm*'s extraformal problem to *Speculative Solution*.

#### A RIGOROUS NEW ALTERNATIVE

*Speculative Solution* includes a CD of music – sound, if one prefers – by Hecker; a booklet of essays by Mackay, Meillassoux, and Ayache; and – more enigmatically – five metal balls (∅ 3.969 mm). These are presented in a box made of orange and yellow card, the outside of which is covered in blue textured paper and inscribed with silver lettering. Its Editions Mego blurb indicates that ‘[w]ith “Speculative Solution” Hecker proposes that the concepts of absolute contingency and hyperchaos offer a rigorous new alternative to the employment of chance and randomness in avant-garde composition’. Clearly, this distinction between extant aleatory practices and a novel music of contingency follows Meillassoux's disjunction of chance from contingency, but this proposition is provocative on two counts:

1. REPRESENTING HYPERCHAOS is, in a sense, impossible, as no phenomenal correlate thereof is adequately disjunctive. This is a difficulty of which Hecker's collaborators are keenly aware. It would be possible, Mackay notes, to create a piece for which the "control systems" that generate and organise material are subject to the same procedures of change as the material itself. While this would index the facticity of laws as well as objects or facts, it would represent the possibilities of hyperchaos no better than any 'series of facts from any existing source whatsoever' (Hecker et al. 'UFDOOI' 8). As Meillassoux insists, hyperchaos 'is not more disorder than chaos, it is order *or* disorder. Hyperchaos can mean order and stability, as well as a complete destruction of what is' (2). Although hyperchaos authorises possibilities that are unthinkable according to the principle of sufficient reason, it does so only to the extent that they can be without cause. As the principle of sufficient reason makes no claim that causes are intuitable, *no* experiential correlate distinguishes, in Meillassoux's terms, hyperchaos from metaphysics.
2. EMPLOYING CONTINGENCY is an opaque proposition. As the thesis of hyperchaos is that possibility is unbound from cause or law, how one might derive compositional methods from it – methods that may be rigorously adopted, not least – is very obscure. Whatever methods one might select, or whatever basis one might have to choose between them, compositional choice becomes a governing law or metalaw. Even the choice of randomness or the choice to relinquish choice become grounding orders. Any such principles of preference are anathema to hyperchaos, and, assuming that they index countable sets of possibilities, they are aleatory processes rather than possibilities specific to factual thought.<sup>1</sup>

On what basis does *Speculative Solution* operate, then? And, if it is possible, what is music of contingency?

Little scholarly literature on the work exists; the only substantial engagement of which I am aware is Christoph Cox's in *Sonic Flux*. He seems to feel that Hecker produces neither the sense of hyperchaos the work implies nor the novelty it promises. His 'sound world' remains 'remarkably

1. The musical sense of aleatory actually equivocates chance and contingency. Paul Griffiths's Grove entry on aleatory defines it as '[a] term applied to music whose composition and/or performance is, to a greater or lesser extent, undetermined by the composer'. Assuming that systematically determining every parameter of a work is impossible, all music is aleatoric to some degree. Typically, though, the term is applied to music that more substantially incorporates chance or unpredictability. Cage is an exemplary figure thereof, given that he both uses chance procedures to generate and organise material and produces indeterminate scores which leave their results substantially undefined. It is not clear, though, that such indeterminacy is restricted to chance: where Cornelius Cardew writes in *For Stella* that the performer can '[c]hange anything', for example, this neither pre- nor proscribes a set of possibilities. In this sense, aleatory provides a form of explicitly contingent music via indeterminacy, even if its possibilities are generally weakly thought. A *novel* music of contingency is presumably to be differentiated from this, then.

consistent', both with itself and with the experimental electronica released on Editions Mego; if anything, he remains wedded to 'a clear set of material and structural rules and fall[s] well within established traditions of electronic music' (269). As Cox notes, Mackay suggests to Hecker in 'UFD00R' that an experience of the contingency of law might be simulated through the violation of continuous sequences, as while incessant change evokes 'a feeling of randomness or disorder' that is not *equivalent* to hyperchaos, 'certain exaggerations' can be made in order to 'most effectively bring to mind the notion' (8). Cox relates this to the production of nonunified chronologies through techniques of cinematic montage and sonic collage; although such techniques are not novel, they do 'allow almost anything to happen'. Abrupt changes in material in *Speculative Solution*, however, 'are so regular as to be predictable', and their musical parataxis is not 'much more' pronounced than that in such 'classic electronic compositions' as Stockhausen's *Kontakte* or Ligeti's *Artikulation*. Far from having the sense that anything could happen, Cox feels that 'a relatively small set of things could happen, and that they consistently do'. In short, Hecker 'does not violate our expectations'. In fact, Cox argues that spontaneous ruptures do not belong to the 'time of hyper-chaos' in any case because hyperchaos is 'an untenable theory of time'. In his account, Meillassoux reduces temporal succession to occasionalism: hyperchaos intervenes at every discrete instant to recreate the world anew by 'replac[ing]' one 'instant or state of affairs' with 'another *without reason*'. The principle of succession is not 'immanent to the instants themselves' but rather 'requires a force that transcends them – namely hyperchaos' (268–9).<sup>2</sup>

Sonically speaking, Cox's characterisation may well be fair, but I do not think his perspective accounts well for the intellectual scope of the project. (Nor do I understand Meillassoux to support occasionalism: he does not think there is *no* causality or intraworldly becoming – he thinks these to be contingent rather than necessary.) If Cox does have in mind

2. Cox draws on Hägglund's argument from 'Radical Atheist Materialism' to support his claim. This argument, however, is opposed equally to Bergson's *durée*, the account of time Cox advocates. Hägglund writes elsewhere that for Bergson the moment does not 'disappear or cease to be' but rather 'belongs to the continuous movement of duration' – an "*undivided*" and "*perpetual present*", he quotes from Bergson, 'that never ceases to be'; thus, Bergson 'effectively denies time' ('The Trace' 42). The self-annulment of the now is equally opposed to the sovereign instant and the positive flux of *durée* – in fact, these are logically equivalent. This opposition has a musical form; Cox and Hägglund both index what Bergson writes on the near-coincidence of melody and duration. Isolated melody, he suggests, 'comes close' to the 'very fluidity of our inner life'. The two would be equivalent if only the 'difference among' and the 'distinctive features' of sound could be effaced, leaving 'multiplicity without divisibility and succession without separation' (Bergson 205). Cox infers that the drone might be the 'ideal sensuous presentation of duration', melody become 'a continuous, fluid mass' (248–9). Hägglund, by contrast, thinks a melody without distinct sounds 'would not be a melody at all, ... just as a time that were absolutely continuous would not be temporal at all' ('The Trace' 42–3).

a sufficient analogical experience of contingency to which *Speculative Solution* could appeal, it seems to evoke the disordered frequentist image, albeit obliquely. He suggests that change is frequent, of course, but where he laments that Hecker fails to subvert the listener's expectations, he implies a preference for a chronology that cannot be expected or projected. Hyperchaos is not identifiable with the violation of laws, however; it stipulates their contingency rather than their disappearance. Of course, this recapitulates the problem of representing or even evoking hyperchaos, so one can hardly fault Cox – that he finds the work to be an ineffective evocation of discontinuity is a reasonable criticism.

Otherwise, mention of *Speculative Solution* really is scant. Amy Ireland indexes it in passing in referring to the concept of the phenomenal analogon Meillassoux uses 'to talk about the ways in which art can instantiate the real' (6). (Meillassoux and Mackay refer to the concept explicitly in 'UFDOOI' rather than in *Speculative Solution*.) Ireland indexes the concept to the abyssal staging of consciousness in Beckett's *Worstward Ho*, in which consciousness is represented trying to think what it 'cannot perceive' – the 'noumenal thing that is thinking it' (5). As her conviction is that language 'can never touch the real', art, as a 'subsidiary of human experience', is essentially foreign to realism (5). Yet, the analogon of represented consciousnesses thinking their own lack (and the 'analogon of the analogon' doing so within the text) touches the real by representing 'representation's incapacity' (6, 9). Presumably, the concept of the analogon is derived from Sartre's use of the term, in which it refers to an object or mental image 'act[ing]' as an 'equivalent of perception' where no 'direct perception' is available (18). It does so, Jonathan Webber suggests, by 'presenting a sense' it does not 'properly hav[e]' but 'borrow[s]' from the thing to which it is analogical (xiv).<sup>3</sup> A phenomenal analogon, then, is an objective vehicle of thought through which representation *stands in* for the real. *Speculative Solution* is a phenomenal analogon for hyperchaos inasmuch as it permits one to 'imagine this sort of world' (Meillassoux in Hecker et al. 'UFDOOI').

In what sense, then, does *Speculative Solution* evoke, correspond to, or advance the thesis of hyperchaos to produce a music of contingency? The idea of the phenomenal analogon supports evocation, at least, though the problem of representation is still not easily overcome. The reading I will pursue here is idiosyncratic, but it is one I think *Speculative Solution* enjoins: I propose we take the analogon radically seriously and think the equal correspondence of any fact to hyperchaos. This implies that anything could serve equally well as the analogon, thus that the particular fact is entirely arbitrary. By consequence, this analysis will have the unusual quality of demonstrating that the content and experience of the artwork it concerns is

3. According to Webber's translator's note, analogon is an archaic synonym for analogue. Sartre revives it as a quasi-neologicistic technical term (xxvii–xxviii).

arbitrary, and the analysis, like the artwork, will show itself, in a sense, to be senseless. This analysis rehearses the ‘repeated aural administrations’ and ‘future writing’ Mackay advocates in the work (‘This’ 23). Or, it performs them – it stands in for *the real thing* as an analogon of the analogon. In this perspective, the compositional methods and representational strategies Hecker may use (and their evocative success) are inconsequential. I understand the meaningful proposal of *Speculative Solution* to be that it is without meaning, thus absolutely exchangeable: it could have been other than it is; it could still be other than it is; and *anything* can take its place and serve just as well as it does. In this sense, it touches the real of which it is nothing but an instance. Yet, inasmuch as *Speculative Solution* expresses this, it says the unsayable – i.e., it produces a contradiction of sense. This will indicate the inherence of impossibility in the real.

#### SPECULATIVE SOLUTION

We begin the analysis with sound, which is in four tracks: ‘Speculative Solution 1’; an iterative pair of ‘Speculative Solution 2’s; and ‘Octave Chronicles’. Scope for fine variation and the lack of theoretical preference for consistency or variation makes it difficult if not impossible to present an authoritative account. Yet, the purpose of analysis here is to simulate the listening experience: to make its phenomena manifest, then to vacate their significance. Accuracy and precision are actually immaterial, then.<sup>4</sup>

#### ‘SPECULATIVE SOLUTION 1’

‘Speculative Solution 1’ is an episodic track with a duration of over thirty minutes. Each episode is composed of limited material – often to the point that they are gesturally singular – which is typically subjected to extensive repetition with minimal internal development. Most commonly, it is subjected to shifts in frequency (i.e., modifying both pitch and tempo), volume, and frequency filtration. At points, recurring motivic content is thereby effaced or obscured, but the process is clear and the relation of its input and output remain discernible, so a sense of intraepisode identity is affirmed. Where episodes appear to develop more significantly, this can be understood as the coincidence of multiple episodes; one such example is the sequence represented in Figure 1.

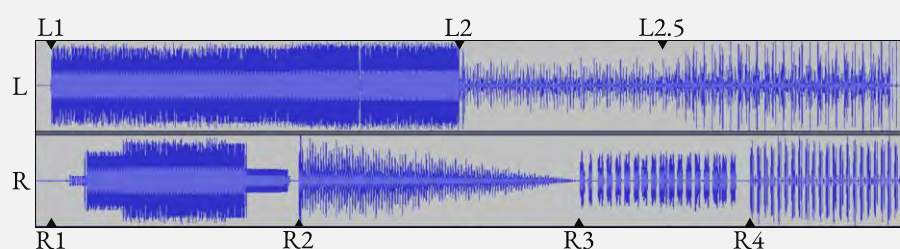


FIGURE 1: ‘Speculative Solution 1’ (04:08–06:14)

4. One could justly call this *low-risk* musical analysis...

Having noted that episodes tend to use minimally variable material, the overlapping arrangement of episodes will be manifest immediately: there are two distinct episodes in the left channel – labelled L<sub>1</sub> and L<sub>2</sub> – which begin at 04:08 and 05:08 respectively, and what might be understood as a third episode, though I think it is better understood as a transformation of the second episode – hence labelled L<sub>2.5</sub> – which begins at 05:37. In the right channel, meanwhile, there are four distinct episodes – labelled R<sub>1–4</sub> – which begin at 04:08, 04:44, 05:26, and 05:51 respectively. Each channel begins the sequence with an episode – L<sub>1</sub> and R<sub>1</sub> – that presents a recurring motif, first heard at 01:04, which is composed of five beeps that move in microtonal step (in relative terms,  $\sharp\sharp\sharp\sharp\flat$ ). In R<sub>1</sub>, this begins at an extremely high register (around 16–17 kHz, towards the upper limit of human hearing) and cascades in pitch while increasing wildly in speed. Each new episode thereafter uses almost entirely disjunct material: in R<sub>2</sub>, alternating wider-than-perfect fourths are progressively pitch-bent upwards from dominant frequencies of 608 + 1216 Hz and 855 + 1710 Hz; in R<sub>3</sub>, a slow, ornamented pulsing on a fixed pitch – predominantly 220 Hz – produces the psychoacoustic effect of something flying past the ear on each release; and in R<sub>4</sub>, high pitches and ticking combine to produce something resembling an archetypal long-short-short (or scrape-strike-strike) guiro pattern. There are congruous details – for example, ornamental rising fourths in R<sub>3</sub> at 05:39 and R<sub>4</sub> at 05:54 and 05:59 could be understood to be derived from R<sub>2</sub> – but the dominant gestures always seem quite disparate, and these similarities are often marginal or obfuscated: those ornamental fourths, for example, are obscured by a tremolo effect in L<sub>2.5</sub> which disorients the listener (me, at least) away from such details.

In L<sub>1</sub>, meanwhile, the same pitch motif ( $\sharp\sharp\sharp\sharp\flat$ ) gradually increases in pitch, speed, and amplitude. This continues until 05:08, at which point L<sub>2</sub> appears to join R<sub>2</sub> belatedly, albeit with the addition of a tremolo effect. In L<sub>2.5</sub>, from 05:37, the direction of this tremolo effect begins to invert (i.e., its phase alignment shifts) and its volume increases, emphasising sounds that were previously indiscernible. The alternating fourths seem to become disjointedly quasi-whole-tone scalic, but, in fact, it *may* be revealed that they always *were*. Resemblances of L<sub>2</sub> to R<sub>2</sub> and L<sub>2</sub> and R<sub>2</sub> to L<sub>2.5</sub> are manifest, but whether there is any genuine unity of identity is rather more ambiguous; this could equally be intuited as playful mimesis or a superficial correspondence that disintegrates as it transforms.

Elsewhere, while the durations of episodes are not particularly erratic – typically, they last between thirty seconds and two minutes – the disjunctions between sequential episodes are generally pronounced and abrupt as they oscillate between dynamic and registral extremes. There is little sense of the consecution of movement within episodes or towards new ones, which makes changes seem not just paratactical but irruptive. Motifs do recur in the piece, but they lack a clear recapitulating structural function



other than, perhaps, implying continuity through the episodic disjunction. For example, a pair of parallel chords appear at 03:10 and 23:46 *respectively*, as I have highlighted in Figure 2:

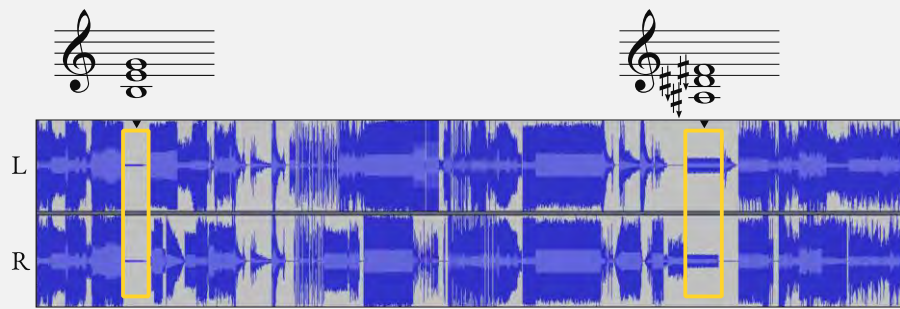


FIGURE 2: ‘Speculative Solution 1’, parallel chords highlighted

These resemble minor chords in second inversion with slightly augmented interval structures.<sup>5</sup> Given that they appear some twenty minutes apart, their correspondence seems weak. Their timbres are also distinct: the first is organlike, while the second, which uses sawtooth waves, is brighter and more abrasive. Yet, as the piece makes such limited use of sustained chords, their correspondences seem significant, even while they are so disconnected that their conjunction is neither necessarily intuitable nor purposive: they are parallel, static, (relatively) quiet, and (relatively...) gentle in timbre – gentler than most of the piece, at least.

‘SPECULATIVE SOLUTION 2’

The iterative pair of ‘Speculative Solution 2’s follow. Here, the interaction of different layers of sound and process produce three rhythmic pairs, the combination of which forms a rhythmic loop that persists throughout the piece. As Figure 3 shows, the first pair is sequential; the second, simultaneous; and the third, again sequential, but a little faster than the first.

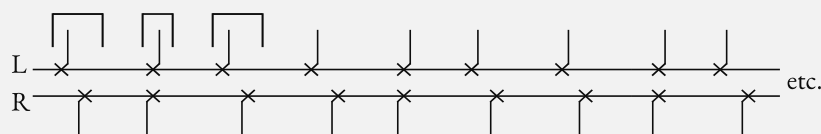


FIGURE 3: ‘Speculative Solution 2’, opening attacks, paired sounds bracketed

The rhythmicisation and structuration are *almost* danceable: the loop corresponds roughly to a four-beat bar of which the dominant rhythm remains nearly consistent throughout, though its articulation and emphases have no apparent consistency. One can infer from a reasonably strong articulation in both channels and beep loops beginning on the second pair that these might be understood to group as follows –

5. These notations are approximate: the first chord sounds sharper than written; the F# of the second, flatter; and it is difficult to discern whether the D# is actually articulated or only implied.

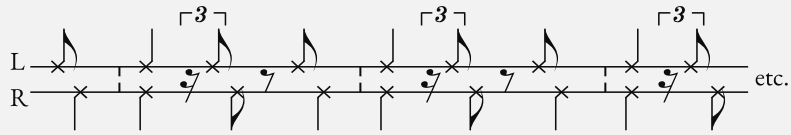


FIGURE 4: a possible rhythmic grouping

– i.e., suggesting this loop:

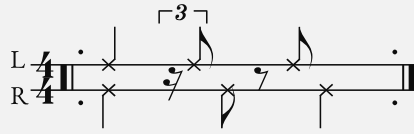
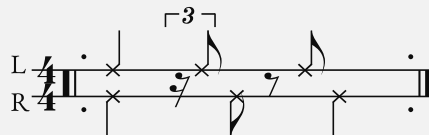


FIGURE 5: corresponding rhythmic loop

While such characteristics and correspondences are thinkable, they are neither manifestly determinate nor manifestly true – if anything, they seem outright obscure. The absence of strict repetition and the lack of clear hierarchy problematise identifying a repeating unit and any beginning of its circle. The characterisation above seems generally consistent, but it leaves an unusual irregular anacrusis (as we can see in Figure 4), and, in fact, it is easy to become displaced from *any* structured rhythmicisation in listening. Analysis – or, assiduous dissection – reveals that modifications tend to occur in loop multiples of four in correspondence with this characterisation, though this is not consistent, nor is it particularly manifest in conventional listening – modifications are often scarcely perceptible. Glitches – pauses, following which the next few gestures are condensed – also unsettle the continuity of these loops and subtly alter their material. These occur at 00:26 and 00:50, the second of which coincides with a beep loop shifting into a new rhythmic relation to the beat loops. The rhythmic coupling of a beat and a following beep that this produces then passes into the beat loops at 01:30, ornamenting the simultaneous attack pair into another sequential pair and so transforming the beat loop from this –



– into this:

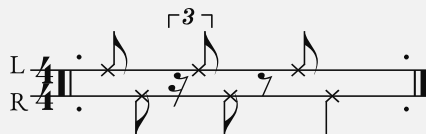


FIGURE 6: transformation of the rhythmic loop

Or, the sequence becomes simple left-right alternation. In other contexts, this may register straightforwardly as imitation, of course, but one could

understand here that it represents real transformation – it is as if one type of material spontaneously *becomes* another.

While many points of construction are ambiguous or obscure, it *is* manifest that the two iterations of ‘Speculative Solution 2’ are nearly identical. Comparison of the waveforms for each track confirms that they remain so almost throughout their duration. The similarity of the sound envelopes is apparent in Figure 7:

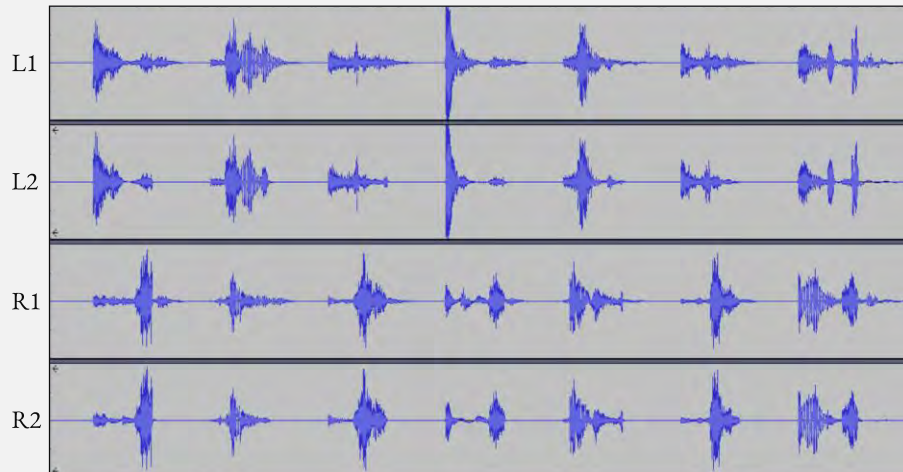


FIGURE 7: ‘Speculative Solution 2’, both iterations (00:00–00:04)

The second iteration sounds a little drier, as if a delay-based effect has been removed or a noise gate has been applied; inspection of the waveforms confirms that the first iteration (labelled L1 and R1) has longer releases, which are cut abruptly in the second (labelled L2 and R2); small pops are audible if these cuts are isolated, but they pass unnoticed in conventional listening. The two iterations ultimately diverge at their ends, as we see in Figure 8:

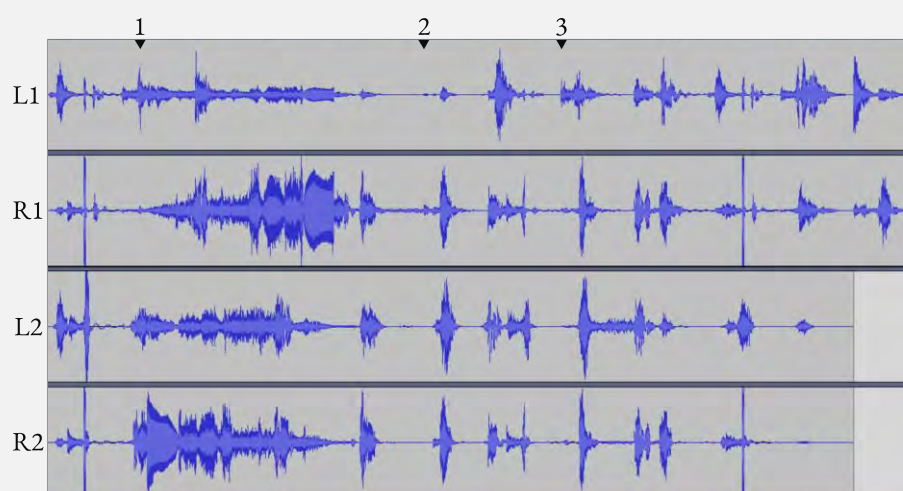


FIGURE 8: ‘Speculative Solution 2’, both iterations (02:49–02:56)

At label 1, each sweeps in pitch in a different direction. The sounds used for this resemble a reversible pair (in the right channels, almost perfectly so). Each returns briefly to the loop rhythm at label 2, after which the tracks end

divergently: the first iteration ends abruptly, as if to allow for a segue into the second – in abstraction, the loop is continuous across the two – but the segue is interrupted by a few seconds of silence. The iterations are ambiguously sutured together, then, and that – as I have presented it – the transition occurs within a loop repetition only intensifies the coimplication of continuity and discontinuity. The second iteration ends with a slightly disrupted rhythm: note the contracted rhythm at label 2 (02:52) and the missing attack at label 3 (02:53). The modification of the left-channel to rhythmic unity with the right gives a sense of lightly ornamented even pulsing, following which the piece ends without implying circularity.

‘OCTAVE CHRONICS’

‘Octave Chronics’ returns registral extremes and aggressive timbres to the palette, oscillating between saturated freneticism and quieter, sparser gestures more significantly still than ‘Speculative Solution 1’ does. There is less of a sense of outright disjunction here, though, partly because gestures and processes develop more clearly across sections of material that are typically longer (thus, they tend to appear more stable), and partly (and more significantly) because there is a simple, manifest structure at play: over the course of the track – so, for nearly twenty minutes – the tessitura generally rises from incredibly high to, incredibly, higher-still. The increasing density of high pitch content is apparent in the spectrographs in Figure 9 (white and magenta represent greater intensity than blue):

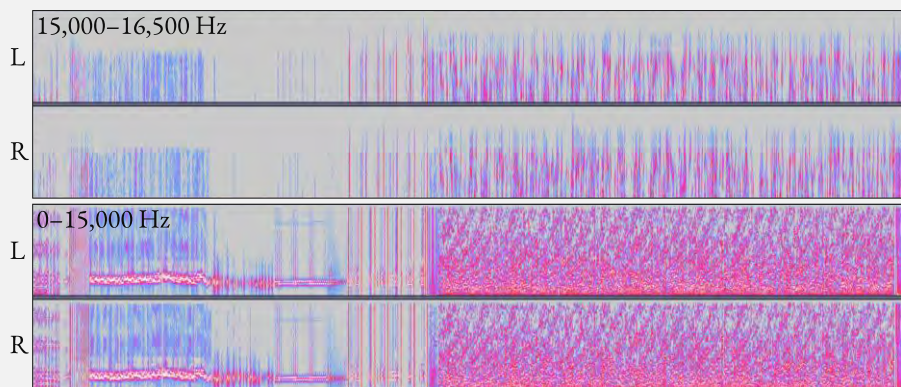


FIGURE 9: ‘Octave Chronics’, spectrographs (linear)



At this stage, I imagine various representations of possible chronologies of hyperchaotic worlds are apparent. My listening experience of ‘Speculative Solution 1’, for example, is characterised by the incessant overturning of tentative points of stability in which continuity and discontinuity alike are without manifest reason. In short, ‘Speculative Solution 1’ corresponds representatively to a vision of hyperchaos characterised by frequent change, but one which, contrary to the frequentialist account, is still *experienced*.

There are various points of congruence, but whether these attest to any substantial or real consistency in the material is never certain because the work breeds indeterminacy in the identity of its constituent parts. Resemblances may be clear or not, exact or not, significant or not; they amount to a mystery of what is given which is only resolved – and then only partially – in recognising that they need not correspond to anything. As such, resemblance and coherence testify to very little while nonetheless challenging the adequacy of representation to the real. What, they invite us to ask, really happens here? Conversely, the simple structure and trajectory of ‘Octave Chronicles’ resembles a world of preserved law and consistent order. The repeated rising gestures evident in the second half of Figure 9 (from 08:51) incessantly affirm this macro-order. Like repeated rolls of dice that do not break from calculable probability, the brute fact of this repetition indicates stability without, however, implying any attributable necessary cause.



These representations (or analogical evocations – it is much the same at this point) may evoke possibilities of hyperchaos, but they remain bound to those problems of representing hyperchaos I enumerated at the beginning of the chapter: that things occur without reason cannot be deduced; in fact, inasmuch as the work is demonstrative of an argument, this is not just impossible – it is specifically contraindicated. Nor have the compositional tools that contingency provides yet been revealed. We shall continue to the essays, then: Mackay’s ‘This Is This’, Meillassoux’s ‘Metaphysics and Extro-Science Fiction’, and Ayache’s ‘The Real Future’, though I will treat these strategically out-of-order here.<sup>6</sup>

#### ‘METAPHYSICS AND EXTRO-SCIENCE FICTION’

Meillassoux’s essay represents the bearing of his treatment of Hume’s Problem upon the literary genre of science fiction and its as-yet-obscure relation, extro-science fiction. He characterises the former as imagining possible futures that exceed the possibilities of contemporary science. These worlds differ from our own, but science is ‘*still*’ fundamentally possible within them: ‘Science may be profoundly transformed, but there will always *be* science’. Extro-science fiction, conversely, is a scarcely realised literature that imagines worlds in which science is impossible – not just ‘unknown in fact’ but ‘*impossible in principle*’ (27).<sup>7</sup>

He discusses Isaac Asimov’s ‘The Billiard Ball’, a detective story of sorts, to demarcate these genres. In this, James Priss and Edward Bloom are

6. Mackay’s essay is reproduced on his website (<http://readthis.wtf/writing/this-is-this/>), and Meillassoux’s essay is reproduced in his book *Science Fiction and Extro-Science Fiction* and the edited volume *Realism Materialism Art*.

7. In various respects, extro-science fiction seems to me quite similar to magical realism.

rivals in both work and pleasure – as scientists and as billiard players. Priss is the more significant intellect, while Bloom is effectively a celebrity inventor. Bloom insists that he can apply Priss’s Nobel Prize–winning theory of antigravitational fields to fabricate an antigravity machine, which Priss denounces as impossible on the basis that it demands an infinite electromagnetic field. Their rivalry ferments until Bloom announces a year later that he has built the machine without recourse to such an electromagnetic field. He invites Priss – along with the world’s press – to a public demonstration and extends him the dubious honour of being the first to test the machine upon a material object: fittingly enough, a billiard ball. Bloom is certain that the billiard ball will float gently upwards in the antigravity ray. Priss takes his mark and strikes the billiard ball at an indirect trajectory into the ray. Chaos ensues, after which Bloom is found dead with a billiard ball–sized hole in his chest. Priss ‘realises’ and explains that when the ball was liberated from gravity, it moved as if it were massless rather than weightless: rather than floating gently, it moved at the speed of light. The narrator ponders whether Priss could have predicted this: was it a freak accident? Or was the billiard ball’s trajectory calculated? That is, did he murder Bloom as vengeance for his humiliation?

An ostensibly unforeseen event is central to the plot, but Meillassoux insists that this does not constitute *extro-science fiction*. The intrigue of the story is precisely that this event is *not* unforeseeable in principle – it is consistent with the laws of physics and the protocols of science. It simply requires that inadequate theories (such as the need for an infinite electromagnetic field and how objects in the antigravity ray will behave) are falsified by new experimental data. This is in fact coextensive with Karl Popper’s characterisation of science’s corrigibility. Whether Bloom’s death is accidental or calculated ingeniously by Priss, the event is foreseeable in principle, at least: ‘Prevision must be possible for the story to function’, Meillassoux writes; ‘the event must be subject to a law, even if the latter is so unprecedented that our suspicion [of Priss’s guilt] must remain forever a suspicion’ (41). Here is where *extro-science fiction* is distinguished from science fiction, then: the former represents the feasibility, against Kant’s transcendental deduction, of worlds in which scientific discourses cannot be coherently constituted because their objects and means of enquiry lack the stability for experimental data to be reproduced or to remain pertinent. Meillassoux proposes three possible types of *extro-scientific* worlds:

- TYPE I WORLDS, in which physical anomalies occur, but they are of no threat to either consciousness or science. They may go unnoticed, be dismissed as aberrant data, or be experimentally unreproducible. In each case, science can dismiss them and simply acknowledge that it has lacunae. It is not disrupted because (at least after Popper) it is *constitutively* corrigible. As such, scientific practice remains tenable.

- TYPE 2 WORLDS, in which sufficient instability manifests for science to operate with limited consistency but not so much as to imperil consciousness. Thought remains possible, but there is no foundation for science to accurately predict future occurrences or consistently describe phenomena; it is reduced to reporting patterns of behaviour with no belief in their future constancy. One cannot trust physics so much as ‘hold on to a *chronics* of things’, temporary localised patterns of behaviour of which the continuity cannot be predicted (53).
- TYPE 3 WORLDS are sufficiently chaotic that both science and consciousness are untenable. Only this world-type corresponds to the chaotic rhapsody through which Kant deduces that physical laws are constant.

Type 1 worlds remain under the aegis of science, then, while type 3 worlds are inhospitable not only to science but also to thought, so they permit no experience. Only type 2 worlds are properly extro-scientific, therefore. In fact, while any of these worlds are possibilities consistent with factuality, type 2 worlds are meaningful literary correlates of our own inasmuch as the factual grounding of absolute reference for science (i.e., what we will see Meillassoux refers to as deuterioabsolutory truth) comes at the cost that one must accept that science *is* a chronics, whether the world has transformed or not. Meillassoux muses upon an analogy between irruption and historical epochal change through which future occurrences are unassimilable to any thinkable law, noting that even the most significant historical upheavals ‘have not suppressed all trace of social regularity’. A world in which science is reduced to a chronics of experience is not ‘the ruin of thought’, then (56).<sup>8</sup>

Meillassoux concludes that extro-science fiction might be realised in one of three ways in correspondence with such worlds:

1. An inexplicable rupture forms the central event of a story.
2. Multiple arbitrary ruptures lead to absurdity.
3. The world as it is known to us inexplicably decays.

The first of these remains bound to literature’s narrative cause, and the second, he feels, risks the association of absurdity with probabilistic reasoning, so it is the third that expresses the genre ‘most faithfully’ (60). He cites René Barjavel’s *Ravage* as an example of the first solution and Douglas Adams’s *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* for the second, but no archetypal example of extro-science fiction’s true form is forthcoming.<sup>9</sup> He feels, then, that the genre remains only a tentative possibility.

8. One meaningful modification of the text as it is presented in *Science Fiction and Extro-Science Fiction* is that Meillassoux emphasises there that a type 3 world ‘would *no longer be a world*’ as it would be entirely without sense (40; emphasis added).
9. Magical realist novels exemplify this procedure readily – it brings to mind Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, for instance.

In his essay, Ayache writes of the market as a medium of contingency.<sup>10</sup> The financial senses of future and contingency – the trading of futures and contingent claims as derivatives – are meaningfully indexable to their temporal and ontological senses. The idea that the future is predictable is a ‘morbid view’, he writes (63). It assumes that possibility can be projected – thus that probabilities thereof can be calculated – for a future which therefore only awaits its quasi-deterministic writing. He is clear in *The Blank Swan* that there is no such possibility for possibility: the possibility of the future is ‘truly, physically unavailable’ as it only occurs ‘*after* the real’ (16). It is only through the imposition of fixed states of being onto objects that probabilities regarding those objects – hence, their calculable *values* – may be derived. He insists that these states do not exist. They are ‘derivative, not primitive’, ‘stabiliz[ations of] the thing’ (‘The Real Future’ 63, 64). The contingency of the thing is real, however; this, he understands, is expressed in the thought that “‘the world is the way it is’ only ... mean[s] that “the world could have been different”” (64). This thought does not identify the state of the world; it affirms only that it could have been other than it is. Thus, he calls for a ‘conversion of the gaze’ to see in the ‘differential mark of being’ – “‘This is this’” or ‘ $A = A$ ’ – the ‘bare indication’ of contingency (64–5). Rather than programmatically written, calculable functions producing *value* from given sets of possibilities, then, for Ayache, *price* ‘recalls’ these functions only to the extent that it testifies that it could have been different in the writing of the exchange (66). This writing of price is absolute inasmuch as it is a material mark that speaks only to its contingency. The real is not assimilable to possibility and probability; it is ‘*unpredictable*’, not because it is ‘future and unsettled’ but because it does not exist in an ‘*identifiable and settled state*’ (68). One might calculate the possibility of winning at the roulette wheel by envisaging the world in a certain state, but this is not adequate to the contingency of what happens when the ball is thrown: ‘The stroke of contingency knows no delimitation of states; the photo finish of the roulette wheel includes the whole world that is contemporaneous with it’ (69). The capacity for something other than the calculable or the possible – the two are equivalent for Ayache – to take place must be suspended in order for calculation to occur, but this capacity remains strictly irreducible in reality. This is true of the future too: there is no set of future possibilities because the future is *real* – virtual rather than possible – and so too is the market of contingent claims that anticipate this future. Price, the writing of the market, is the expression of this real unpredictability; as the future does not exist in one state or another, price is ‘non-computable’ (71). Yet, price must, quite literally, be ‘deal[t] with’ (72). Ayache credits dynamic replication – simply put, trading the underlying asset of the contingent claim –

10. In *The Blank Swan*, he argues that the market is *the* medium of contingency.



with making this market possible. Traders make the market anew by continually trading in such a way that they are effectively *rewriting* contingent claims through their presence on the floor of the market they write – they abolish the time to maturity to make it ‘as if the contingent claim were expiring now’ (73). Thus, for Ayache, the market is the domain in which the bare indication of contingency is persistently inscribed and reinscribed.



Before turning to Mackay’s essay, we should consider again how hyperchaos is represented, evoked, or employed in a musical sense in *Speculative Solution*. The sense of what Meillassoux describes as a chronics of experience is variously evoked. It is manifest in the capricious instability that pervades ‘Speculative Solution 1’, in which motivic recurrence is not reconciled with a completed or generative structure but nonetheless provides some continuity within the disjunctive sequence of episodes. Things change without manifest reason, but all trace of regularity does not vanish. This is also true of the transformation of stable patterns that follow glitches in ‘Speculative Solution 2’, the most significant of which is the juncture between the two iterations. This presents a chronology in which the glitch retroactively appears to be a significant event – as if it effects a reconfiguration of the musical order. It evokes an irruption and its effects: the ‘failed’ segue makes for a strong disjunction and the new track connotes a new World. As readily, however, the glitch may provoke the thought of an event, a transformation, and their correspondence without these actually taking place: there is no necessary link between the glitch and the transformation that follows, if it indeed follows – there is a sense, of course, in which everything that happens in the second iteration has already happened in the first, so is anything really transformed? The glitch could be a nothing more than a red herring of sufficient reason. As with a chronics of experience, one can describe the order that one experiences, but the consequence of factuality is that its capacities for maintenance, becoming, transformation, or destruction without cause are thinkable. Confirming any coextension of causal relations or predicting future consistency are, in a strict sense, impossible.

Meanwhile, ‘Speculative Solution 2’ evokes the two forms of gaze of which Ayache writes. It can be thought equally on the bases of its regularity and its contingency inasmuch as (1) it is rhythmically consistent but articulated entirely variably (if there is true repetition, it is not discernible); and (2) its two iterations are nearly identical, yet they invite investigation of their difference and speculation on their iterability – one can readily imagine other iterations that are more or less dissimilar. Thought on the basis of regularity, one imposes a state of being on ‘Speculative Solution 2’ that reduces vast complexity to calculable reproducibility. Yet, thought on the basis of its contingency, these marks are irreducible to such a law. Inasmuch as these

perspectives both seem to be in play, ‘this’, whatever ‘this’ is, escapes an adequate characterisation.

If *Speculative Solution* dramatises certain possibilities of hyperchaos as they might intuitively be grasped, this still does not adequately represent hyperchaos or the experienceable possibilities thereof. However, what we see here is that this disjunction is itself represented within the work. *Speculative Solution* represents the gap between any representation and hyperchaos ‘itself’ inasmuch as it fails – as it must – to offer a sufficient representation, whether material is carefully produced *or* arbitrarily ‘curated’. In fact, it demonstrates that it cannot demonstrate its own priority over any other exemplifying fact – it represents that no representation will be better or worse. As Mackay suggests, the selection of material, whether produced through dynamic laws or arbitrarily sampling, may ‘create a “phenomenal analogon”’, but the analogon is ‘given qua inadequate’ (Hecker et al. ‘UFDOOI’ 8, 9). Hecker may simulate certain possibilities of factuality, but it is the inadequacy of these representations to hyperchaos *and* their consistency with it that indexes them to the unlimitation for which it accounts. At this stage then, hyperchaos appears to be registered at the levels of (1) dramatic representation and (2) evocation as a kind of representation of the unrepresentable. Any systematic employment of novel compositional techniques still remains obscure, however.

#### ‘THIS IS THIS’

Mackay’s ‘This Is This’ stages an internal exegesis of *Speculative Solution*; in fact, it is at its culmination that the work’s proposal is made explicit. He writes that ‘Hecker’s psychoacoustic experimentation focuses attention on the active role of the imagination in *constructing* [sound] objects’, and that the ‘image’ of what these are is conditioned by ‘prior contingencies’ (e.g., personal thought or cultural context) that permit ‘significance [to be] extracted’ from the objects that can be “recognised” (19–20; emphasis amended). In other words, the representation and sense of these sound objects are *supplementary* constructions of thought – they are *imposed onto* contingent being. Yet, resemblance, structuration, and understanding risk mistaking the object of experience for the *thing itself*, an error *Speculative Solution* appropriates in an ‘ironic performative use of Hume’s principle of habituation’ (23). The work turns representation against itself: it provokes thought of correspondences only to show that there need not be any as it indicates that the significance of these objects is not only that they need not be significant; they *are not* significant. Mackay suggests that as we recognise this, ‘objects yield’ and we *glimpse the thing* – ‘we stand on the threshold of the *proper being* of sonic sequences, confronted by *what they are and nothing more*’. Signification’s self-erasure places us on the threshold of the correlation, and there is no longer a grounding sense of experience – it ‘melt[s] down into a “pure chronics”’ that can do nothing more than

*describe* sound objects in their contingency (21; emphasis added). Mackay poses that this vacation of sense is *Speculative Solution*'s ultimate possibility, which may be reached via 'a circuit in which it, the accompanying texts, and diverse other objects, enter into a perpetual catalysis that must annihilate all priority, representation, reference, and even entity'. Thus, *Speculative Solution* is both the 'riddle' and the 'instruction manual' through which one undergoes the 'conversion of the gaze' – he quotes Ayache – that sees the identity of the sound object to the gaze that observes the contingency of the thing, the 'bare indication that this being could have been different'. The work transforms from a 'didactic' text (now-'obsolete[ly]' so) to a 'minimal encounter with marks[,] ... truly "literalist" marks which have no reason to be as they are, and which could have been – and still could be, at every moment – otherwise' (22–3).

So, *Speculative Solution* may represent possibilities of hyperchaos, but its representative function is self-annihilating. The circuit of music, text, and objects is significative, but it 'converts the gaze' to signify the inadequacy of its own representations to the strike of contingency or ontological may-being. Its referential bearing thus ostensibly dissipates. A truly literalist mark signifies nothing, indexes nothing, and has no reason to be as it is, or, indeed, to be at all. Any 'this' could take the place of 'this'; this, for Mackay, is the threshold at which we recognise 'bare' contingency.

There are, I think, two variants in which this can be understood – weak and strong. In the weak form, one recognises the contingency of marks in a strictly limited sense – this mark *could have* been different, but 'this' mark still has its particularity. In the strong form, any 'this' *really does* take the place of 'this', which is to say that *Speculative Solution* evokes its absolute substitutability such that its 'content' (not just its phenomena – also the underlying thing) becomes strictly arbitrary, hence *absolutely exchangeable*. The relation of contingency to the arbitrary mark is therefore central. Arbitrariness is discernibly indexed throughout the work, in fact: 'Speculative Solution 1' simulates lawlessness through arbitrary change; 'Speculative Solution 2' submits one piece to arbitrary difference; 'Octave Chronicles' maintains a broadly consistent law that is – or *might as well be* – arbitrary. In each case, anything would do just as well. Meanwhile, the embryonic genre of extro-science fiction incorporates the arbitrary in riposte to literature's narrative impulse, and price expresses only that it could have been other. In fact, *Speculative Solution* can be thought *as* extro-science fiction inasmuch as its didactic and representative narratives – the latter of which concerns fictive objects (they *are not real*) – break down in order to give factuality to experience. These are only referential correlates, of course, but they become significantly reflexive examples of arbitrary marks. As the didactic purpose of the texts withers when its bearing is understood and the representational quality of the sound is undermined when one recognises that it is at once excessive of apprehension (so one represents it imperfectly)

and has no reason to be submitted to representation (so one ‘overrepresents’ it, for want of a better term), the work stands at a threshold of meaning: it is both meaningful and meaningless.

If the contingent mark indicates only that it could have been different, any other contingent mark could stand in its place: signification is reduced to pure difference. Five metal balls, each  $\varnothing$  3.969 mm: these might represent Hume’s billiard balls, Priss’s fatal weapon and Ayache’s roulette ball. But, it is also a set of things that serve no obvious purpose within the world of the work. Unlike the other physical media, it lacks an obvious equipmental character. It is an arbitrary set of objects: it has no reason to be what it is; anything else could be substituted for it – toothpicks, a chair, a cat – and serve its task just as well. The five balls have a strong sense of regularity: they are the same size, shape, and colour (precisely so), so they intuit as indifferently interchangeable.<sup>11</sup> Their preliminary enigma gives way to the possibility of specific representations that then empty to exhibit arbitrary marks which *could be* (could have been, could become, could be exchanged with) anything else. More still than the sound or text do, the ball bearings *return* to nonmeaning.

I take the significant proposition of *Speculative Solution* to be that it could be anything else, then; anything could and can stand in its place. It is in signifying this that music of contingency can be distinguished from aleatory or indeterminacy, though as any mark can be subsumed under this aegis (both of the latter included), a rigorous application really has nothing to do with musical composition. It takes the form of an affirmation of contingency’s absoluteness. Music of contingency does not represent an alternative to aleatoric music, then, much as contingency provides no calculable alternative to chance; the reduction of marks to bare contingency makes them strictly exchangeable, and so, to the extent that any mark whatsoever can be indexed to *Speculative Solution*, the work becomes a system isomorphic with reality.

#### THE SIGN DEVOID OF MEANING

Here is where the arbitrary or literalist mark can be joined to Meillassoux’s sign devoid of meaning (*dm*).<sup>12</sup> With the sign *dm*, Meillassoux seeks to ground the capacity of science to produce ‘deuteroabsolutory statements’ (‘Iteration’ 157). Two senses of absolute must be distinguished: factuality and

11. At least, they generally do – one of mine has discoloured...

12. The essay that concerns the sign *dm* exists in two distinct forms: the first is a lecture that Meillassoux gave in Berlin in 2012, and the second was published in 2016. In a note appended to the 2016 publication, he writes that the 2012 script was not intended for publication but was circulated illicitly (‘Iteration’ 187n1). There are some substantive differences between the two versions, though only a few in the main section, Essay on the Derivation on Galileism, with which I am principally concerned here. Terminologically, 2012’s meaningless sign becomes 2016’s sign *dm*. References here are to the more recent version, though I have referred to both during the course of this research.

its figures are primoabsolutive – they are ‘necessary and infrangible’ (156); deutoabsolutive statements are absolute in the restricted sense that what they describe is independent of thought – the facts that they describe are contingent, as, therefore, is their truth. Deutoabsolutive statements permit thought to access the ‘Kingdom of the dead’ – matter without life and correlated thought – and ‘return so as to recount to the living the discoveries of such a journey’ (157). Meillassoux seeks, then, to ground the possibility of absolute reference for empirical science by overcoming the problem of ancestrality. Some see ancestrality as a pseudoproblem: Hallward avers that ‘almost no-one actually thinks or insists’ that a world that precedes thought is impossible, on which basis Livingston characterises Meillassoux’s fictive correlationist as a strawman (‘Anything’ 137; ‘Realism’ 20). Meillassoux’s point, though, as Brown emphasises in response to Hallward, is that when correlationism annihilates the ancestral sense of the ancestral statement, it annihilates the *real* sense of temporal priority (see Brown 143). Meillassoux’s impetus seems clear, at least. He proceeds towards a Galilean mathematisation of the absolute, then, for which – given that the intervention of meaning would return him to the correlation – the sign *dm* must be both the condition and the initial object.

Meillassoux derives the possibility of the sign *dm* from the use of structurally significant but constitutively undefined placeholders in formal languages such as those of formal logic or mathematics. He offers the axiomatic constitution of sets in set theory as a paradigmatic example. In such a formal axiomatic, while operator-signs have defined functions (pre-eminently, that of belonging), the base-signs that designate sets – the ‘individual constants and variables’ – receive no such prior definition. (This is contrasted to a Euclidean axiomatic, which would first define its terms.) Livingston counters that signs or sets can in fact be understood to be implicitly defined by the axioms of the system, but Meillassoux has already rejected such ‘definitions in disguise’ in no uncertain terms (‘Realism’ 27; ‘Iteration’ 161). ‘These terms are *named* as sets’, he writes, ‘but to name them, we cannot insist strongly enough, is not to *define* them’. Sets only name systematic positions upon which relations may bear, and any discoverable property of a set follows as an effect of the operations they support rather than from a prior definition. In fact, as sets are themselves composed of sets, any definition thereof would seem to be question-begging. Hence, sets, ‘the initial object[s] of mathematics, insofar as the latter is ‘founded’ upon set theory’, are taken to exemplify signs ‘devoid of signification, and a fortiori of any reference’ (160).

Meillassoux recognises that one may encounter meaningless words in natural languages – Mallarmé’s ‘ptyx’, for example – but he suggests that their use must remain marginal in order to conserve ‘ordinary meaning’ – the ‘ordinary function of communication’. Conversely, he understands formal languages to systematise the rule-structured use of meaningless signs.

The ‘formal meaning’ to which they therefore have access is a structural possibility of the sign that is disjunct from semantic meaning. This is the basis on which Meillassoux proceeds to think an ontology of the sign *dm*. Although devoid of meaning – it is neither indexical, iconographic, nor signifying – the sign *dm* is authentically a sign. Yet, it is not reduced simply to its ‘material support’ (164). The type-token distinction provides a ‘*stratum of immateriality*’ that is not related to meaning (165). The sign *dm* is constituted on the following basis, then:

- It is arbitrary in a sense prior to the “unmotivation” of the relation of signifier to signified in Saussure (169). It has *no* differentially determined signified, so it escapes the ideality of meaning.
- It is infinitely *identically iterable*, irrespective of differential repetition or dissimilarity. This observes the unity of sign types: every  $\alpha$  is an  $\alpha$ , irrespective of any alternative figuration, numerical repetition, or differentiation in time and/or space.
- Nonetheless, it remains ‘inseparable’ from the empirical basis of its instantiation as a token, so it is *reiterable* with a *differential* effect, which allows for empty sign types to be differentiated:  $\alpha \neq \beta$  (179).

In accordance with the figural status of the sign *dm*, these properties are directly derivable from factuality:

- ITERATION: signs may be identical inasmuch as contingency is identically iterable across any mark. They have an identical capacity to be other or not to be.
- REITERATION: contingency is identically indexable in nonidentical marks, which allows for differentiable series of signs *dm*. It is possible, therefore, to produce a differential system of signs *dm*.
- ARBITRARINESS: the contingency of signs *dm* permits their recoding – that is, their functional replacement by or substitution for another mark within the differential system. The emptiness of the sign permits any other sign to fulfil its structural role as an arbitrary mark.

Much as we have seen with *Speculative Solution*, then, by intuiting the ontological priority of factuality over factual beings, we move from ‘empirical things perceived through their determinations to empirical marks perceived through their arbitrariness’ – from grasping contingent things to the contingency of those things, from the semantic to the semiotic, and from meaning to meaninglessness. There is an ‘intimate ontological link’ between the sign’s iterability without limit and its arbitrariness. It is thus both ‘contingent and eternally the same’ (182).

Meillassoux suggests that the properties of iterability and reiterability can ground a naïve arithmetic and mathematical reasoning. An identically iterative operation of addition (i.e.,  $+ 1$  or  $+ I$ ) can produce the reiterative sequence of natural numbers (I, II, III, IIII, etc.) to the potential infinite. He understands that mathematical difference inheres in the absolute, therefore. Yet, while this may show that a mathematics ‘*capable of not speaking of anything*’ does so on the basis of the contingency of the sign, it does not show that it may describe a world independent of thought, for how can it do so, he asks, without ‘becoming once again a sign *provided* with meaning, hence capable of reference outside of itself?’ How, ‘through what paradox’, can a sign *dm* have a ‘(deutero-)absolute referent’ which is ‘more radically separate from us than every correlational apprehension?’ (183). It seems, then, that deuteroabsolutory statements may be lost to meaning and the correlation. Meanwhile, if the system of signs *dm* remains an abstraction through which nothing determinate can be said, it is a trivial formalisation that only provides a rudimentary mathematics (and one could scarcely claim that it provided the procedure of counting...). The thesis as it is advanced in the Berlin Lecture ends here, but in the published version Meillassoux projects the direction of a path forward. The question, he suggests, concerns what occurs when one moves from counting pure number to counting things: ‘What happens’, he asks, ‘when someone who counts on their fingers suddenly counts fingers?’ (184). If this mathematisation *is* to refer to things absolutely, two paths must be avoided:

1. *Number must not name its referent.* Number *qua* number is indifferent to the quality of the objects it counts; its meaning does not change according to whether it counts fingers, sheep, or metal balls.
2. *Number must not legislate over the concrete singularity of what it counts.* It must not depend on the material singularity of what it counts, nor can it impart this. If things are counted as singular, some unity is assumed, but if this unity were to lie necessarily in concrete singularity, number’s meaning would vary according to what it counts. Each ‘one’ would be ‘unique and irreplaceable by another’, so number could be subject to neither iteration nor reiteration – it could not be equated or summed with ‘another “one”’ of which the meaning ‘would be entirely other’ (185).

Meillassoux concludes, therefore, that what number counts must be things as signs devoid of meaning. It does not count the thing as a thing – the finger as flesh and bone digit – but the thing as an empty sign. The finger-sign can thus be counted with other finger-signs or in substitutable series – with other digits, sheep, metal balls, typographical marks, ... . As these signs are ‘equally empty’, they are equally countable as signs *dm*. The ontology of the sign *dm*, then, is a ‘*semiotization of things*’ that makes the Universe the

‘typographical variant of its operation’ without, however, ‘fusing’ the world ‘into its measure’ (186). Meillassoux suggests that the sign  $dm$  is its own signified; in fact, it seems to me that it re-presents its own absolute referent (i.e., the sign  $dm$  to which it is iteratively identical). The sign  $dm$  may thereby describe the world without referring to anything other than itself.

#### THE MEANING OF THE MEANINGLESS SIGN

I think there is a manifest correspondence between the sign  $dm$  and the literalist marks of *Speculative Solution*. The discourse for which Meillassoux thinks the sign  $dm$  is empirical science, but both empty sign-types are thought according to similar procedures, and each apparently indicates nothing other than itself (i.e., ‘this is this’, this contingent mark). They can be demarcated inasmuch as Meillassoux formalises the sign  $dm$  such that it *must* escape ordinary meaning: it is characterised by the *incapability* of reference beyond itself. Whatever the determinate characteristics of a sign, it will be possible in principle to view it as an arbitrary contingent mark; hence, it will always be possible to think it as a sign  $dm$ . If a sign indicates something other than itself, however, it is a sign that has become ordinarily meaningful rather than a sign  $dm$ , so the nonmeaning of the sign  $dm$  is necessary, even if the sign itself remains contingent. Inasmuch as *Speculative Solution*’s literalist marks are not explicitly formalised, they may register as a prototypical form of the sign  $dm$  or a weakly indicative variant – or, indeed, an analogon – thereof. The formalisation of the sign  $dm$  invokes (extra-)formal problems, however. I am not convinced that the paradox of meaningful reference that Meillassoux acknowledges is actually circumvented such that the sign  $dm$  evades the intervention of meaning to indicate nothing other than itself. I will suggest, therefore, that the sign  $dm$  needs to be understood on the basis of literalist marks instead.

The problem of reference is central to mathematical rationalisms. This is evident if one considers correspondences between Meillassoux’s ontology of the empty sign and Badiou’s set theoretical ontology, which parallel one another inasmuch as empty signs and sets both effectively designate what is counted as one – hardly surprising, given that Meillassoux takes the base signs of set theory to exemplify empty signs. Nevertheless, he counterposes his speculative ontology of the empty sign to Badiou’s subtractive discourse. He understands that what Badiou calls sets, ‘however nondefined, do indeed designate that remarkable ontological referent that is the “pure multiple”, the set all of whose elements are themselves sets’. In other words, Badiou’s ontology is articulated using signs that are not strictly empty: inconsistent multiplicity, of which ontology observes the counting as one, is a reference beyond the sign, a subtractive ‘hidden meaning’ that ‘must be discovered’ (*Iteration* 163). Set theory may encrypt this meaning, but inasmuch as this ontology observes the presentation of presentation rather than presentation itself, the signs through which it is articulated refer



beyond themselves, just as they do in the ordinary process of signification. This is what the sign *dm* must avoid, of course.

Mackay, for one, is not convinced that this is actually possible. While ‘general laws’ might be so formulated, if statements are to ‘actually refer to anything’ *in particular* – ‘thus, to be deuterio-absolutizing, in Quentin’s sense’ – he feels that they require references that ‘pass by way of natural language’ and ‘the empirical’ (‘Response’ § 7).<sup>14</sup> The empirical sciences require a more elaborate, more sensical apparatus than the counting of meaningless signs provides. It is possible, of course, that signs *dm* might ground absolute reference for a language in which meaningful signs are also incorporated. Presumably, any sensical language requires some such – whether through the ‘ordinary’ functions of natural language or as defined operator-signs that formalise relations – so what is in question is not a pure language of empty signs so much as access to rule-governed formal meaning. A language that has access to the sign *dm* is one that formalises the use of arbitrary marks. Meillassoux distinguishes strongly between natural and formal languages here, of course, but this is variously disputed. Armen Avanesian, for example, writes that rigorous distinction between natural and formal languages is symptomatic of the Saussurian semiotics on which Meillassoux draws, where, by contrast, it ‘disappear[s]’ with the Chomskian linguistic theory on which his language ontology and speculative poetics rest (209). Livingston feels that it is now difficult to maintain any such distinction between natural and formal language in any case, as poststructuralist texts have demonstrated many times over that the meaning of texts written in natural languages is determined by structures of repetition and difference rather than by direct empirical reference: these ‘structurally determinable aspects of natural language’ are understood, he writes, to be ‘analogous or identical to the parallel aspects of “formal systems”’ (‘Realism’ 30).<sup>15</sup> In fact, he points out that natural languages also make use in a rule-governed manner of various signs that are meaningless inasmuch as they lack ‘directly present intuitive referent[s]’, undermining any such distinction: ‘adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions, ... interjections, ... spaces and punctuation marks’ are constitutive elements of natural language text yet lack direct empirical referents (31).<sup>16</sup> Malik, meanwhile, suggests that a ‘counterintuitive homology’ exists between speculative materialism and deconstruction on the basis that they think aneidetic signs in formal and natural languages respectively (257). He sees parallels between Meillassoux’s argument and Derrida’s argument

14. Mackay wrote this in 2012 in response to the Berlin Lecture rather than the final publication. Meillassoux certainly elaborates upon these problems in the latter, so Mackay may since have reassessed, but I think they remain problematic.

15. Livingston’s response is also from 2012 and to the Berlin Lecture rather than the final publication. It is difficult to see that his argument would be at all altered by the latter, however.

16. Livingston’s arguments are prescient, but I do not think he is strictly correct to say that Meillassoux supposes meaningful terms to be ‘supplied with a directly present intuitive referent’; one may understand that this is actually what the sign *dm* provides (31).

that the absence of a transcendental signified (a grounding centre of the symbolic order) gives rise to the erasure of the ‘radical difference between signifier and signified’, hence between the ‘sensible and the intelligible’. For Derrida, the basis of these erasures cannot be the sign’s entire submission to thought, as the signifier would then be ‘reduc[ed]’ to and ‘deriv[ed]’ from a signified that would still be transcendental (Derrida ‘Structure’ 355). Malik argues that Derrida therefore ‘endorses’ the ‘asemantic and aneidetic’ sign, just as Meillassoux does (254). While the two do not think empty signs identically, Malik argues that they each constitute a ‘predicament of the languages of reason’ which their ‘obverse contiguity’ demonstrates is operative in formal and natural languages alike. While he feels that the ‘overt manifestation of the “pure” play of structurality’ is indeed to be found in mathematical formalism, the homology nonetheless shows the meaningless sign to be an equivalent concern for both formal and natural languages (257, 265).

If such rigorous distinctions between the structure of formal and natural languages and between meaningful and meaningless signs are not tenable, the question becomes how any language, whether formal or natural, can treat the sign *dm* in its emptiness. A given language can certainly establish axioms and protocols of reading that structure its use of meaningless signs – again, set theory typifies such a formal system. However, Badiou’s appropriation of set theory to ontology demonstrates that the meaningless signs of set theory were always capable of meaningful signification, irrespective of the formal status of their system. Because language and its protocols are contingent – necessarily so – they cannot prohibit metamorphosis or appropriation to meaning. This plasticity amounts to an extraformal possibility of but beyond the formal. It seems, then, that the sign *dm*’s nonmeaning must be (contingently) stipulated by whatever system treats it. In other words, a contingent gaze that views the sign as a sign *dm* is the equal requirement for *any* such language. Hence, there is little reason why formal meaning should be restricted or thought proper to formal languages. What can be said of the sign *dm* is simply that it is the sign’s form without or ‘before the intervention of meaning’ (Meillassoux ‘Iteration’ 164).

However, the sign *dm* appears to maintain a relation to signification that is scarcely even obscure. Contingency is a property of the sign, of course, but it is also something to which the sign may be ‘index[ed]’. While contingency is always the ‘contingency of such and such an empirical particularity’ – which is to say, it inheres in beings – it is ‘in itself’, as contingency, ‘always identical’ (180; emphasis added). It seems to me that the meaninglessness of the sign *dm* may already be lost here. ‘[G]rasping’ and ‘acced[ing] to’ the contingency and arbitrariness of the sign closely resemble the process of signification because things other than the sign itself – contingency and meaninglessness – are legible in and through the sign *dm* (182). As the sign *dm* signifies a contingency that is not wholly or solely its own, its necessary

property stands in for a systemic principle. The sense of its speculative derivation depends upon this, in fact. An indexical chain joins contingency to the empty coding of the sign *dm* – from the contingency of the sign to the property of contingency in abstraction to the principle of factuality to factuality itself – without which it would not be systematically conceptualised. This systematisation then also produces reference. Nonmeaning becomes a necessary meaning for what appears under the concept of the sign *dm*: it signifies its meaninglessness – it says ‘I do not say anything’ – and it indexes only its possibility to be other, but it does so with no other possibility because if it had another possibility then it would not be a sign *dm*. As it has a necessary meaning – which, purportedly, is its only possible meaning – neither the meaninglessness nor the contingency that it indexes can consistently be said to be its own. It is not empty so much as sovereign – it violates law with impunity. Yet, even as an empty placeholder, the sign *dm* indicates its constitutive alterity to other signs. This is a condition of its legibility as ‘this’ empty sign, hence that there is a systematic difference between distinct empty sign types. To the extent that empty signs’ signification of contingency and arbitrariness indicates their free substitutability, they also always possibly sign to and for the other for which they may be exchanged: the system that Meillassoux begins to elaborate entails that each sign may *stand for* something other. As such, the only apparently meaningless sign *dm* variously signifies. Meillassoux contends that the sign *dm* escapes ideality because it has no ideal signified – no ‘*eidos*, ... *idea*, or form’ – but it seems to me that meaninglessness, contingency, and alterity each become precisely such a signified through the sign *dm*’s formalisation (‘Iteration’ 176).

#### ENDURING MEANING

I think, then, that it is necessary to think the meaningless sign such that it can *endure* the intervention of meaning rather than evade it, paradoxical though this is. With this in mind, I will index Meillassoux’s iterability to Derrida’s, but it is not strictly a return to the linguistic concerns of early deconstruction that I have in mind here. Rather, it is the ontologisation of the trace structure and iterability’s implications for this, as, in certain respects, these echo Meillassoux’s semiotisation of things. These iterabilities diverge, however, where Derrida’s suggests that the self-identity of the absolute – the thing and the sign-type – is inconsistent. My argument does not seek to ground a mathematisation of the absolute as Meillassoux’s does; its consequence, however, is that because meaning cannot consume the sign in *any* language, it becomes thinkable that the meaningless sign speaks. This amounts, then, to a strong reading of arbitrary marks in *Speculative Solution* on the basis of a trace ontology. Reaffirming iterability as a limit of idealisation through which we know the noncorrespondence of the sign to itself nevertheless parallels aspects of Meillassoux’s anticorrelationism: this meaninglessness of the sign traces the absolute.

Derrida's quasi-concept of iterability is significantly distinct from Meillassoux's in that it joins the infinite repeatability of the sign with its infinite capacity for alterity. Iterability, he writes, does not 'simply' signify the 'repeatability of the same'; it also signifies the concomitant 'alterability of this same idealized in the singularity of the event'. Without 'identificatory' iterability – which is to say, identical repetition – there can be 'no idealization', no conceptualisation or identification. However, this identificatory possibility is bound to iterability's othering possibility, which dictates that no such idealisation 'keeps itself pure, safe from all contamination' (Derrida 'Afterword' 119). What is iterable is already divided in and from ipseity, so no given context can exhaust the capability of the mark to mean something other, nor does one ever have a meaning that is given absolutely. Derrida's iterability corresponds strictly to neither identical iteration nor differential reiteration in Meillassoux's terms because its differential effect is a condition of possibility and impossibility for any repetition of the same.

This much is familiar, orthodox deconstruction. Yet, while Derrida formulates this quasi-concept in the context of the possibility of language and meaning, its bearing is not so restricted. Iterability is the condition of possibility of writing, but writing should not be understood as the 'means of transference of meaning'. '[S]peech, consciousness, meaning, presence, truth, etc.' are 'only' 'effect[s]' of writing. Meaning does not belong to the sign, then; it is rather an effect of a writing that ultimately consists only of *material inscription*. Derrida avers that writing is what 'is read' ('Signature' 20–1). Yet, we should understand neither writing nor reading to be exclusively phenomenological; they have an absolute sense inasmuch as everything writes its tracing. In Häggglund's response to Meillassoux, he argues that anything that survives does so on the basis of material inscription: 'what is' is 'never present in itself; it is already marked by the destruction of a past that is no longer while persisting for a future that is not yet'. This survival, in its 'most elementary form', has nothing to do with life or thought; it observes the persistence in time of *any* material inscription. The ancestral event, then, writes the tracing that persists despite its destruction in its becoming (already) past, just as any correlated event does. Matter must write its own absolute tracing or disappear absolutely: 'the isotope that has a rate of radioactive decay across billions of years is *surviving* – since it remains and disintegrates over time – but it is not alive'. This 'arche-materiality' accounts for 'the minimal synthesis of time ... without presupposing the advent or existence of life' – it requires no 'animating principle, consciousness, or soul' ('Radical Atheist Materialism' 122–3). It is not only linguistic meaning that is submitted to iterability's othering effects of repetition, then: if survival through succession is a minimal condition for persistence and this logic involves that what is materially inscribed is never self-present, ontological identity is also subject to these effects and the self-identity of the absolute is already iterative in Derrida's sense. (As such, temporal tracing can be said to

have at least a deuterobabsolute sense.)<sup>17</sup> In this case, a sign that is not correlated with a consciousness may be aneidetic inasmuch as it is not simply a vehicle for the transmission of meaning. Indeed, its capacity for meaning is conditional upon a deficit of meaning, so the sign is always without meaning in a certain sense: it never has a full and present meaning, so nonmeaning is inherent to the sign. (This may even be intuited as a reserve of contingency inasmuch as it gives the possibility of other meaning.) Yet, on the other hand, as any sign implies its own iterative tracing, the correspondence of the sign to itself is always a reference to something other than itself. This indexical correspondence amounts to an absolute reading in which the sign *reads itself* as a measure of (non)identity. The absolute sign signifies itself, but the self it signifies is also not itself. In this account, ontological identity *assumes* an ontology of the impossible. This means the sign *dm*'s self-reference is a reference to and beyond itself. It is both meaningful and meaningless, which is appropriate, given that it signifies its meaninglessness. A certain meaninglessness may endure, then, if iterability is a contaminating limit of self-identity in an absolute sense. By consequence, however, any mathematisation of reality cannot represent its absolute referent self-identically, because, from the outset, thing and sign are traced absolutely.



The sign *dm*'s signification of nonsignification brings to mind Laclau's logic of the empty signifier again. He writes that empty signifiers emerge only if 'there is a structural impossibility in signification' that can 'signify itself as an interruption' of the sign, only if limits of signification 'announce themselves as the impossibility of realizing what is within those limits' ('Empty Signifiers' 37). He has in mind a particular representation of universality that necessarily involves a sign being emptied of particular reference in order to express a limit for which it will always be 'constitutively inadequate' (40). The sign *dm* is also an impossibility that indicates itself inadequately – the term 'sign *dm*' and the sign *dm* itself alike. If Meillassoux has effectively inverted one possible priority of meaning for the sign, then one excess – one centre of structure that is absent or outside itself – has been exchanged for another. Meaning's excess of meaninglessness has given way to meaninglessness's excess of meaning, exhibiting the impossibility of pure nonsignification.

*Speculative Solution*'s 'literalist marks', then, are stripped of significance to reveal the bare contingency of the mark, but they too signify this in-significance in their arbitrariness. Yet, what seems more convincing about

17. To what degree temporality is primoabsolute depends on whether it is infrangible. Hägglund argues that what exists must do so in time, but if everything was annihilated and **nothing** existed, would this have temporal being? If so, temporality and tracing would indeed be primoabsolute. They are not *necessarily* necessary, however.

these marks than the sign *dm* for me is that they refuse formalisation even while it is implied by the work. *Speculative Solution* is at once this particular analogon and everything, vehicle of thought and absolutely arbitrary mark, this and not this. If this is this, as *Speculative Solution* proposes, what this is eludes determination, and it does so absolutely.

PART THREE  
Sovereignty





## CHAPTER FIVE

# Absolute Dismemberment

### THE SOVEREIGN: WHO, ALONE, DECIDES

The conjunction of the topics with which I have latterly been concerned – God-to-come and the sign *dm* – can be stated plainly: they are joined by their subjection to a disordered–disordering quasi-concept of sovereignty. The task of this chapter is to explicate this quasi-concept.

In its classical political concept, which emerges comprehensively with Bodin (Hobbes following soon after), sovereignty is the supreme right to the authority of law.<sup>1</sup> Bodin writes that sovereignty is an ‘absolute and perpetual power vested in a commonwealth’: absolute inasmuch as it is *subject* to no other; perpetual, as it endures through the life of the sovereign (25). It is also in principle indivisible and incontestable. The sovereign may be bound by a divine law that sovereign law images, and they may be committed through covenant with others, but they are not *subject* to the law that they have the right to produce.<sup>2</sup> Hobbes concurs: it is possible for the sovereign to commit ‘Iniquity’ but not ‘Injustice ... in the proper signification’ because they alone have ‘the whole power of prescribing the Rules’ and of ‘Judicature’; thus, ‘no man that hath Sovereigne power can justly be ... by his Subjects punished’ (136–8). Rousseau also agrees: ‘by the mere fact that it is’, the sovereign power invested in the body politic is ‘always all that it

1. Certainly, Bodin recognises himself to be the father of the proper concept. He writes that ‘Aristotle, Polybius, and Dionysius Halicarnassus alone among the Greeks discussed the attributes of sovereignty. But they treated the subject so briefly that one can see at a glance that they did not really understand the principles involved’ (40). Bodin may be the first to raise sovereignty to the level of a concept, but its implications are at work much earlier.
2. ‘If justice is the end of the law, the law the work of the prince, and the prince the image of God, it follows of necessity that the law of the prince should be modelled on the law of God’ (Bodin 36). The sovereign is not exempt from divine law, however, because divine law is the injunction of responsibility that makes the sovereign sovereign – it dictates their power to respond and a concomitant ethical injunction to act responsibly.

ought to be' – 'wholly absolute, wholly sacred, wholly inviolable' (19, 35).<sup>3</sup> The concept of sovereignty, then, elevates humanity from subjection towards divinity, to what we will see is *the right to decide*. Indeed, where Hobbes pronounces that 'The Power and Honour of Subjects vanisheth in the presence of the Power Sovereign', is the palpable fervour with which he writes not as if it were ecstatically religious (140)?

Sovereignty is a familiar term of rhetoric for contemporary politics, of course, in which use it typically refers to the unicity of the nation-state as an autonomous, self-determining political body. We can note immediately that its recent figures correspond variously better and worse to the concept outlined above, however. The sovereign has the right to suspend law: 'If the law of nations is iniquitous in any respect', the sovereign 'can disallow it within his own kingdom, and forbid his subjects to observe it', Bodin writes (36). Yet, the reclamation of sovereignty which animated Brexit remains, at the time of writing, in contest on the basis of various borders of Ireland – within, between, and beside Ireland(s). This dispute observes the historic political difficulty of constituting a properly autonomous domain amid competing sovereign claims. Even while the Good Friday Agreement is explicit that it entails 'no derogation from the sovereignty of either Government', British or Irish, Northern Ireland seems to represent a problem of determining or crossing the border of sovereignty in quite literal senses (15). It involves the *negotiation* of sovereignties, national and supranational, past, present, and future, which subjects sovereignty to a horizon of law to which it should be foreign. Similarly, Donald Trump's infamous wall is an icon of American exceptionalism that purports to guard against the so-called alien, thus securing the ipseity of the sovereign USA and the USA's sovereign (who else claims the right to self-pardon?).<sup>4</sup> In fact, by decree – by an invention of law or unilateral contract – it is the so-called alien who 'must' pay to be blockaded, as if nothing of American ipseity will be conceded to the other (who is, however, also American).<sup>5</sup> Of course, this gesture of sovereignty was negotiated, stalled, and itself blockaded by the legal process of American governance. Meanwhile, some who are not granted the dignity of subject or citizen do not adhere to this purportedly sovereign rule; '[w]ithout asking permission' they cross 'national and institutional frontiers' – that is, they

3. While Rousseau's sovereignty, unlike that of Bodin or Hobbes, is by dint of the body politic never alienated from the citizen, who is by covenant both a member of the unitary sovereign body and a citizen subject to it, these same ontotheological characteristics discussed of Bodin's and Hobbes's sovereignties clearly prevail.
4. So-called sovereign citizens who deny their subjection to law warrant mention here, the irony being, of course, that they typically generate attention because their claim to sovereignty is weak: it is manifest where it lacks the force to prevail.
5. The United States of America has no total claim to the term 'American', of course, but the USA's other is also American in the sense that the USA is politically and culturally expressive (i.e., it presses outwards). Inasmuch as it operates *beyond* its own borders *as if it were* sovereign, determining the regime of 'America' becomes, in a sense, impossible.

cross the wall with ladders (Derrida *Beast I*: 4).<sup>6</sup> So much for the whole power to prescribe rule.

#### THE SOVEREIGN ABOVE MAN BELOW THE BEAST

The concept of sovereignty has an unusual recurrence across Derrida's writing. The sense detailed above, the lineage of which continues via the likes of Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben, is certainly never far from Derrida's reference. Indeed, the interrogation of ontotheologico-political sovereignty is a preoccupation of his later work: besides the array of monographs he authored on the subject, sovereignty was a recurring theme in his 'Questions of Responsibility' seminars at *l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales*, including those dedicated to pardon and perjury, the death penalty, and – manifestly – the final seminars, the beast and the sovereign. Nonetheless, sovereignty is idiosyncratically overdetermined. One sense of this can be found in sovereignty's correspondence with bestiality – its apparent conceptual other – as the exception of the sovereign and the animal to the law presents a certain symmetry or fraternity between what is above and below the law, thus a beastliness of sovereignty – even a possible *unity* of sovereignty and bestiality. While Bodin may be the father of the concept of sovereignty, this conjunction actually pervades the history of Western philosophy, from Aristotle's characterisation of the human as *zōon politikon* and *zōon logon ekhon* (that is, as a political animal and as an animal with the power of *logos* – rationality and speech) to Heidegger's characterisation of 'the animal' as *weltarm* (poor in world), whereas 'man' is *weltbildend* (world-building). What is in question in each case is whether humans possess such a power. Here, Heidegger is dissatisfied with Aristotle, and Derrida is in turn dissatisfied with Heidegger: Derrida dwells, for example, upon Heidegger's terminology of *Walten* and *walten* (noun and verb), which translate as reign, rule, or prevailing (and doing so with violence). What distinguishes man from the animal – access to beings-as-such – does not follow from 'a power, [from] a faculty that man has at his disposal', Derrida infers, 'but consists in taming and joining ... forces or violences ... that come to grip man' (*Beast II*: 289). That is, it is not clear that man *has* the power to form world, which Heidegger denies to the animal merely encircled by world; it seems rather that man is driven or even forced by a power to which he is subject or – recalling *Ereignis* – appropriated. This prevailing force would be excessive of all sovereignty, therefore: '*Walten* would be too sovereign still to be sovereign'. In fact, this 'excess of sovereignty would nullify the meaning of sovereignty' – it would deny it in advance (279). Man's own power of world-forming is thus impoverished; sovereignty, like the animal, denied power.<sup>7</sup>

6. This was reported in Luke O'Neil's *Guardian* article 'Ups and Downs', for example.

7. Similarly, for Aristotle, 'man is the only animal who has the gift of speech', a power 'intended to set forth the expedient and inexpedient, and therefore likewise the just and the (footnote continues)

The question of humanity's relation to animality, then, is one of 'knowing who can die. To whom is this power given or denied?' (290). Heidegger claims that the animal can perish but a relation to death-as-such belongs only to *Dasein* and world-forming man. Yet, if man lacks such a power, it is not clear that these relations to death can be so denied or affirmed.

The deconstruction of sovereignty – and perhaps its debasement – is operative much earlier in Derrida's work, however, as early as *Writing and Difference's* 'From Restricted to General Economy', where it is Bataille's concept of sovereignty that is in question. Derrida later refers to this as a 'counterconcept' of sovereignty 'beyond or even contrary to the classical notion' (*Rogues* 68). Bataille's sovereignty is certainly grounded in the classical concept: the sovereign, who 'does what he pleases – his pleasure' – is free of all servitude (Bataille 'Hegel' 291). Thought to its conclusion in the theory of general economy, however, this sovereignty amounts to pure expenditure: wild, self-destructive acts (even 'evil', Derrida suggests) as the noninvestment of economic excess (*Rogues* 68). Though this sovereignty is explicitly referenced only fleetingly in Derrida's later work, it seems to me that a far greater debt is owed to Bataille than is immediately apparent; indeed, I will argue that in the wake of Bataille's counterconcept the concept of sovereignty begins to invert into disorder, to lose efficacy and ipseity, and to subject sovereignty to a perverse reflexivity.

#### FACING DEATH WITHOUT REASON

Derrida asks whether Bataille's sovereignty does not, 'at first glance, translate the *lordship* of [Hegel's] *Phenomenology*?' ('Economy' 321). Certainly, both Bataille's sovereignty and lordship in Hegel's master-slave dialectic amount to putting oneself at risk, but their crucial distinction is to be found in the form of value or meaning – not a difference in meaning but rather the difference *of* meaning: 'It cannot even be said that this difference has a sense: it is the difference of sense, the unique interval which separates meaning from a certain non-meaning. Lordship has a meaning' (321).

It is Bataille's reading of the failure of sovereignty in Hegel that is in question. Bataille considers Hegel to be a pre-eminent thinker of classical sovereignty where he thinks the relation of the conscious subject and death. For Hegel, with recognition at stake in particular historical struggles and, correspondingly, in the development of the subject across history, those who prevail do so by risking being – that is, by risking death. As such, Bataille understands that facing death has a real subjective efficacy:

[D]eath alone assures the existence of a 'spiritual' or 'dialectical' being, in the Hegelian sense. If the animal which constitutes

unjust'. Man 'alone' has a 'sense of good and evil, of just and unjust', then (*Politics* 1.2,1253a9–19). As such, *logos* is the power that elevates man above the animal, but it is also precisely what elevates the sovereign above man, who therefore cannot *possess logos*.

man's natural being did not die, and ... if death did not dwell in him as the source of his anguish[,] ... there would be no man or liberty, no history or individual. ... [I]f he is the being, identical with himself, who risks (identical) being itself, then man is truly a man: he separates himself from the animal. ('Hegel' 281)

As with Aristotle before and Heidegger after, to transcend base animal-being and become man (an animal with *logos*, world-forming, a self-conscious subject), it is necessary to face death – to recognise one's own being-towards-death, or to be and think 'death which lives a human life' (Kojève qtd. 286). For Bataille's Hegel, it is through the subject's unveiling of the dialectical unity of Spirit that sovereignty – the zenith of this elevation of the subject beyond animal-being – would obtain in absolute knowledge. Here, then, sovereignty would be a quasi-divine knowledge, epitomised, Bataille suggests playfully, in 'the Sage' – Hegel himself – 'in whom history revealed, then revealed in full, the development of being and the totality of its becoming', and who would thus occupy a sovereign position 'which God only provisionally occupies as a regent' (281). Facing death, then, is essential to achieving absolute knowledge and its correlate, the sovereign subject. Indeed, these obtain only 'if the Sage raises himself, if I can put it this way, to the height of death' (282). The problem of how one can face death looms, however, as Bataille understands that it is not sufficient to 'stake' one's life in a 'trial by death', as Hegel writes in the *Phenomenology* (114). What he has in mind is actually a theory of sacrifice represented 'implicit[ly]' in the *Phenomenology's* preface, but which I think is made most explicit in § 32. Hegel writes here that 'the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that *endures* it and maintains itself in it'. It finds truth only in 'utter dismemberment' (19; emphasis added). While one can justly understand Hegel to intend here a confrontation with death as risk – this is certainly the more common understanding – Bataille, idiosyncratically, if not perversely, understands that what is called for is really a revelation *in* death. Yet, how can one *experience* the revelation of death if death is truly faced?

[D]eath, in fact, reveals nothing. In theory, it is his natural, animal being whose death reveals man to himself, but the revelation never takes place. For when the animal being supporting him dies, the human being himself ceases to be. In order for man to reveal himself ultimately to himself, he would have to die, but he would have to do it while living – watching himself ceasing to be. In other words, death itself would have to become (self-) consciousness at the very moment that it annihilates the conscious being. (Bataille 'Hegel' 286–7)

The problem is clearly that a revelation of death would demand that one *lives* one's own death. The condition for the revelation is that the animal being that the human is perishes, yet the human must persist beyond their own end for the enlightened subject to emerge and endure. The subject that finds its ultimate expression here would have to do so impossibly *with and as* death, then. For Bataille, therefore, knowing death always involves a subterfuge – a simulation through which man 'live[s] at the moment that he really dies' or 'live[s] with the impression of really dying' (287). This simulacrum of death entails *sacrifice*, in which the other dies in one's place as a subjective substitute. Bataille discerns two attitudes to sacrifice: that of naïve ritual, which approaches death with ecstasy, and that of Hegel's absolute wisdom, which recognises the horror of death but sacrifices the other as a means to acquire revelatory knowledge. These two attitudes are to be subjected to inversion, however. He is 'not sure' that the naïve attitude 'is the less *absolute*', as the Hegelian mode remains obviously servile (290). Man is sovereign, he writes, only when he is '[f]reed from animal need' and so does 'what he pleases'. While one acts with an 'end in view' – the 'natural, animal satisfaction' of subsistence – one's acts are servile inasmuch as they are 'subordinated to a final result'. He stresses, though, that intelligence and discursive thought are themselves 'functions of servile labour'. Sacrifice, therefore, may only be sovereign 'to the extent that it is uninformed by *meaningful* discourse' (291). On this count, both the naïve and the sage approaches fail. Naïve sacrifice may once have had an 'impotent beauty of poetry' if it were mythologically indexed to 'appeasing a god or the purity of beings', but it fell into 'vulgar, self-serving' calculation and discourse as it acquired a servile *purpose* such as the production of 'the abundance of rain or the city's well-being' (292).<sup>8</sup> Sovereignty escapes the Sage orientation, meanwhile, because it remains sutured to meaning and purpose where it seeks truth in death – '[d]ismemberment is full of meaning' (293):

[S]overeignty in Hegel's attitude proceeds from a movement which *discourse* reveals and which, in the Sage's spirit, is never separated from its revelation. It can never, therefore, be fully *sovereign*; the Sage, in fact, cannot fail to subordinate it to the goal

8. Really, these are not so different for an economy of sacrifice. Bataille does recognise this, perhaps begrudgingly: 'It is true that in a very arbitrary manner, which never merited the credence of rigorous reason' – it never reached the level of legitimate discourse, he seems to feel – 'people attempted, and must have laboured[,] to submit sacrifice to the laws of action' – in other words, to calculation, economy and reason (292). Yet, is naïve sacrifice not always essentially *for* something, thus drawn into such economy? He even suggests that there exists in 'the world of efficacious activity ... a form whose meaning is, on the contrary, sovereign. A slippage *cannot* fail to occur, to the benefit of servitude' (292; emphasis added). Meaning *always* recuperates nonmeaning, even if it does so incompletely. The sovereignty of naïve sacrifice is really lost to this double in its very event rather than to the historical development of sacrificial discourse.

of a wisdom which supposes the completion of discourse. Wisdom alone *will be* full autonomy, the sovereignty of being... At least it *would be* if we could find sovereignty by searching for it: and, in fact, if I search for it, I am undertaking the project of being-sovereignly: but the *project* of being-sovereignly presupposes a servile being! (292–3)

That the revelation of death is subordinate to the *project* of wisdom denies sovereignty to sacrifice and to the subject. To seek sovereignty, to seek to be or to remain sovereign, is self-negating because it subsumes sovereignty to reason. For naïve sacrifice and absolute knowledge alike, therefore, ‘the pure revelation of man to himself’ always lapses ‘from sovereignty to the primacy of servile ends’ (292).

If, as Derrida suggests, ‘[t]o rush headlong into death pure and simple is thus to risk the absolute loss of meaning’, the *telos* of recognition for which death is risked in Hegel’s lordship is clear (‘Economy’ 322). Bataille’s sovereignty, conversely, is a simulacrum of this putting at stake in which the meaning of sacrifice is barred because ‘discourse’ – to which this *telos* belongs – is ‘the loss of sovereignty itself’ (331). The sovereign act approaches annihilation as pure expenditure: it is towards *no end whatsoever*. This risk of annihilation is not dialectically productive in the sense that Hegel intends, therefore; there is no *Aufhebung* of or towards reconciled meaning. Annihilation is foreign to meaning, and it is the failure of meaning: it is ‘the limit of discourse and the beyond of absolute knowledge’ (330).

#### SOVEREIGN WITHOUT SUBJECTION

Sovereignty is central to Bataille’s theory of general economy. A restricted economy (against which general economy is counterposed) is a ‘*rational economy*’ which observes the production and circulation of wealth according to calculable value (Bataille *The Accursed Share* I: 22; emphasis added). A general economy, conversely, observes the production of an excess that cannot be productively invested but must nonetheless be consumed: ‘it must necessarily be lost without profit; it must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically’, and it ‘must be spent lavishly (without return)’ because ‘profitable operations’ must lead, in one way or another, to ‘the squandering of profits’ (21–2). Sovereignty, then, is this squandering.<sup>9</sup> Or rather, because, as Derrida emphasises, ‘sovereignty dissolves the values of meaning, truth and a *grasp-of-the-thing-itself*’, ‘there is no sovereignty

9. Derrida maintains that it would be a mistake to read sovereignty in any reactionary divestment of wealth by a privileged class, however – this would not be ‘the destructive consuming of meaning, but the significative reappropriation of a surplus value within the space of restricted economy’ (‘Economy’ 439n33). This resembles the slippage of sovereignty to its simulacrum in the world of efficacious activity in mythological sacrifice and is similarly orientated towards meaning and value.

*itself*’, so sovereignty ‘is’ the lacuna of meaning of which general economy can only speak of the effects (‘Economy’ 342). If sovereignty were to have a meaning, it would lapse into the circulation of restricted economy, so this squandering is not sovereignty itself so much as the effect and relation to meaning of sovereignty’s disordering relation to nonmeaning. In this sense, one can rightly say that sovereignty is with-out meaning – they have a particular relation of foreignness. This, of course, Derrida takes as a model for general writing. The determinate meaning that a restricted economy of writing would observe hypostatizes discourse by purging itself of non-sense, but this would bar *any* meaning. Sovereignty is an excess of nonmeaning which is the condition for meaningful discourse. Familiarly, this implies that no utterance has a true or proper meaning. Yet, it also has absolute implications which are manifest when the effects of sovereignty are visited upon sovereignty: sovereignty, which we will see involves an impossible bind of relation and nonmeaning, implies a general writing of the absolute which dissolves the value that grasps the thing-itself. In other words, sovereignty provides a scheme for thinking the corruption of identity at the level of the absolute such that the thing is always self-othered.

We should return to Bataille’s general economy so we can proceed towards this conclusion. In *The Accursed Share*, Bataille once more places sovereignty beyond the satisfaction of any need: sovereignty begins when, ‘with the necessities ensured, ... life opens up without limit’ to ‘possibilities which utility doesn’t justify’. In other words, it entails ‘enjoy[ing] the present time without having anything else in view’ – without employing it ‘for the sake of the future’ (III: 198–9). The temporal distinction Bataille makes here is important. The world of work is essentially one of constraint. One labours not to produce objects of sovereign pleasure but to satisfy animal needs that are indexed to a future of continued servility: one works to eat so that one can continue to work so that one can eat ... . Indeed, the logic of labour exchange operates via promises indexed to the future: work will be done, wages will be paid, money will have value, goods will be purchasable, ... . Inasmuch as it serves future need and conserves alienation, productive work *always* finds meaning outside its own moment.

Simply put, sovereignty is strictly opposed to such servility. It is foreign to utility and function, so the sovereign eschews care for the future and instead does what they please with care only for the moment. At least, they do in theory. Is the quasi-divine sovereign subject actually nonservile? Again, it is a question of the dialectic, and this is the basis on which Bataille turns the classical concept of sovereignty against itself. The sovereign’s consumption of their subjects’ labour replicates the dialectical subordination of object to subject. The servile do not recognise themselves as subjects; they see their alienated subjectivity in the sovereign. That is, they, ‘the masses’, become the subordinate object of the sovereign whom they see ‘as the subject’ (239). The sovereign ‘alone enjoys a nonalienated condition’ and so ‘epitomiz[es]



the *subject*' (214, 241).<sup>10</sup> So far, so good, but it is under this condition that the sovereign and their subjects must reciprocally recognise one another to construct the social order. The classical sovereign, then, is mired in the function of social rank according to their particular role in a system of recognition. The majesty of the sovereign must be recognised by their subjects – indeed it must be recognised by the most esteemed, whom the sovereign must recognise as such in turn. This process constitutes social hierarchies (archetypally, those of monarchic courts) which allocate ranks and the functions which they serve. 'Inevitably', Bataille argues, such functions are 'degrading', 'servile' labour. The 'degradation of ranks' may leave the sovereign 'least servile' inasmuch as it displaces labour elsewhere, but it 'does not spare the king himself'. For all that the function of kingship is 'the least degrading', it is a 'function nonetheless' (248). The classical sovereign might represent the zenith of subjectivity, then, but they do so according to a system in which they remain essentially servile – the least servile, perhaps, but servile nonetheless.

The sovereign of Bataille's counterconcept destroys this form of subjection by effacing the subject-object relation. 'To know is always to strive, to work', he argues, so knowledge is 'never sovereign'. If knowledge were to be sovereign, it would 'have to occur in a moment', but the moment is 'outside, short of or beyond, all knowledge'. In fact, we 'know nothing' absolutely of the moment that is not subject to the 'servile modality' of its 'concatenation in time' (202). We are 'conscious of the moment', but this consciousness 'is at the same time a slipping-away of the moment' equivalent to 'knowledge of an object' that is 'caught up in duration'. Consciousness of the moment is only sovereign – in fact, it is only consciousness of the moment – if it 'cancel[s], or at least neutraliz[es]', this operation of knowledge (203). In this sense, knowledge must remain foreign to the moment – it '*unfold[s] in time*', and in full only 'as the result of a calculated effort' (202). The moment is at once beneath and beyond knowledge – it is insufficient to knowledge and insufficient for knowledge to unfold, but it is also inaccessible to knowledge, which can only find meaning outside the moment. If objectifying the moment for knowledge relinquishes it from consciousness, sovereignty and consciousness of the moment must therefore consist in *unknowing* – in a pure attention that is without object and thus is foreign to the operation of knowledge.

*Pace* Hegel, then, the sovereign, who cares only for the moment, does not project towards death; such projection or anticipation is 'the unavoidable calculation of reason' and would grant the moment meaning from beyond at the cost of servitude to an end (210). Representation of one's

10. The symmetry between sovereign and beast to which Derrida draws attention is already apparent here with Bataille: the sovereign 'alone has a condition comparable to that of the *wild animal*, and he is *sacred*, being *above* things, which he possesses and makes use of' (214; emphasis added).

future death is alien to sovereignty: it is ‘impossible, for the present is not subject to the demands of the future’. Rather, Bataille’s sovereign *denies* death (or, ‘if not death, at least the anguish of death’) and projection towards death by miming death (219). Sovereignty, then, involves refusing to ‘accept the limits that the fear of death would have us respect’ (221). Recall that Bataille acknowledges death as an aporia for knowledge – any revelation of death is barred because the subject cannot endure its own death. If, as Bataille writes, death ‘reduces to NOTHING the individual who took himself, and whom others took, for a thing identical to itself’, the annihilated individual is nonidentical with the subject who anticipates death (216). Each is nothing for the other: death annihilates the subject, and the annihilated subject is a barred projection for the subject. Sovereignty is also foreign to knowledge, so it is also ‘NOTHING’ – ‘how clumsy (but inevitable) it was to make a *thing* of it’ (256). Sovereignty mimics or simulates death *without reason*: without production, revelation, or return. It resists objectification for knowledge, just as death does; in negating the dialectical operation of knowledge, it elevates the subject by annulling the relation that is constitutive of subjectivity. This is really what is at stake where Bataille writes that ‘sovereign man cannot die *humanly*’ and the sovereign moment’s ‘meaning in no way depends upon its consequences’; sovereignty is foreign to humanity’s relation to death and the dialectical productivity of meaning, even while it mimics death (219, 227).

Bataille radicalises the classical concept of sovereignty, then – that of the supreme, nonsubjected power of judgement. In one sense, he *frees* the sovereign subject: from divine law, from social hierarchy, from being-towards-death, and from the pursuit of knowledge. While this represents an apotheosis of the concept of sovereignty, that same gesture *effaces* the subject, debases sovereignty, and turns it against itself. There is a particular conjunction of what is *above* the human subject – what purportedly transcends it – and what is *below* the human subject – what is denied the dignity of subjectivity (of world-forming, *logos*, politics, ... ): the sovereign *is* the beast.<sup>11</sup> Bataille insists, therefore, that ‘the truth of the I-itself is in question when we cease to subordinate ourselves’: ‘It is only at this moment’ – the sovereign moment, when man refuses all servitude – ‘that he assumes in himself, in himself alone, the full truth of the subject’, but ‘what if, in this burst of negation, the rebellion – the *subject* itself, that inner truth that suddenly dawns at *sovereign* moments – were itself negated?’ (252). The highest form of subjectivity negates the subject; any ‘I’ of which we could speak here eschews all knowledge, refuses persistence in time, and neither cares for nor projects its survival. The sovereign act mimics death without care for death; it is pure expenditure as self-destruction: everything is at stake for nothing.

11. In *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Derrida plays on the homophony of *et* and *est* (‘and’ and ‘is’) to evoke this fraternity of sense: the beast and the sovereign/the beast is the sovereign.

On this basis, sovereignty can be understood to be bound to the question of autoimmunity that Derrida thematises in his later work. Indeed, it amounts, in certain respects, to a quasi-concept of the autoimmunity of the human subject. Let us turn, then, to its significance in *Rogues*.

#### THE SOVEREIGN: THE ROGUE STATE

The titular reference of *Rogues* is to the concept of so-called rogue states – states that act outside the law and so are deemed outlaws or renegades. In public discourse, such states are generally understood to fail to uphold obligations to their citizens, to the international community, and under international law. This definition is to be disputed immediately, however. According to the reason of the strongest – a recurrent allusion of Derrida’s to La Fontaine’s ‘The Wolf and the Lamb’ – a rogue state is any that the sovereign, the strongest or ‘most’ sovereign, declares. For example, Derrida avers that in the international War on Terror led by the United States, a rogue state is ‘whomever the United States says it is’ (96). He derives this definition (perhaps indirectly, per the translators’ note at 169n62) from Robert Litwak, who served on the Clinton administration’s National Security Council. The implication is that this is not only a scholarly critique or a political jibe: it is a statement of actual foreign policy – of sovereignty at work. By what authority, though, does the United States decide who is rogue?

In *Rogues*, Derrida interrogates sovereignty as it is theorised by Carl Schmitt: as the right to suspend law. The sovereign is thereby defined to have ‘the right to give or to take some right’, to ‘attribute’, ‘make’, or ‘suspend law in a sovereign way’ (xi). Derrida draws attention to the homonymity of right and law in French (*droit*) because sovereignty – the *right* to be *above* or *beyond* the *law* – is a concept, name, and, in truth, an ‘ontotheological fiction’ which appears ‘less legitimate than ever’ (xiii). Schmitt’s sovereignty clearly follows the concept Bodin inaugurates: the sovereign, who is ‘above’ law inasmuch as they have the power to create or suspend it, is the exception who may determine the exception. While sovereignty may well be constitutionally enshrined, it cannot in principle be *bound* by law. Accordingly, it should not depend on law to bestow its sovereign right. Indeed, elsewhere, in ‘Force of Law’, Derrida argues that authority is mystically founded. Any foundational legislative gesture lacks the authority (i.e., the authority it will ground) to legitimise its founding, so such a gesture must be beyond law – in other words, it must be sovereign. This might be counter to extant law (which is itself similarly mystically founded), but the assertion of authority or counterauthority is not *illegal* as such. Neither authority recognises the right of the other to subject it to law, to legislate over it, or to violate the law which it prescribes, and neither authority can claim an ultimate *legal right* to legislate. Prevailing, whether in foundation or conservation, is a matter of force – of the reason of the strongest – rather than law or right *per se*.

It is *beyond* law: it is ‘neither legal nor illegal’ but rather il-legal *qua* extralegal (‘Force’ 6).

It is on a similar basis – and also following Schmitt – that Agamben suggests that the sovereign power to determine the exception produces a paradoxical legal indistinction in which ‘the law is outside itself’: the sovereign, ‘who [is] outside the law, declare[s] that there is nothing outside the law’ (*Homo Sacer* pt. 1 ch. 1.1).<sup>12</sup> The state of exception upon which the sovereign decides extends law beyond itself by giving a certain nonlaw the force of law. Sovereign decree or executive order *takes the place* of law, even while it lacks law’s proper legal value or constitutional ground: it is constitutively distinct from law because it is the exception. Agamben insists, then, that ‘[t]he state of exception is an anomic space in which what is at stake is a force of law without law’. What is in question is really a ‘force of ~~law~~’ through which ‘law seeks to annex anomie itself’ (*State of Exception* ch. 2.3). This argument parallels and inverts Derrida’s: Agamben thinks the annexation of il-legality by law; Derrida, the foundation of all law on il-legality. This conjunction could hardly be more topologically evocative: law, which is foundationally il-legal, annexes anomie by *returning* to it; anomie actually annexes itself. *Pace* Agamben, this observes an abyssal il-legality of law. There is no adequate distinction between law and ~~law~~ that has the force of law.<sup>13</sup>

12. All Agamben citations are from *The Omnibus Homo Sacer*, but for the sake of specificity, I will cite the books contained therein.

13. Agamben cites Badiou’s theory of the event as ‘a rigorous thought of the exception’. In the terms of *Being and Event*’s typology of presentation and representation (in which multiples may be normal, singular, or excrescent), he suggests that Badiou understands the exception to be singular inasmuch as the extralegal exception is not represented by the state (i.e., in the body of law). He proffers, however, that the exception should actually introduce a fourth term that blurs singularity and excrescence into Badiou’s typology, ‘something like a paradoxical inclusion of membership itself’, because the exception ‘cannot be included in the whole of which it is a member and cannot be a member of the whole in which it is always already included’. The exception is singular inasmuch as, by definition, it cannot be accounted for in law (in other words, it is not represented), but it is also excrescent inasmuch as it representatively exceeds any presented body of law: it represents law beyond law. Agamben suggests, then, that the exception is a ‘limit figure’ that represents a ‘radical crisis of every possibility of clearly distinguishing ... between what is outside and what is inside’ (*Homo Sacer* pt. 1 ch. 1.5).

He risks slightly mischaracterising Badiou here, however: certainly, *Being and Event*’s evental site is singular, and the event is itself errant and of undecidable belonging. The exception is not necessarily singular for Badiou, though. One might understand that the invention of law is actually symptomatic of the immeasurable excess of the state over the situation. The exception could be understood to be simply excrescent, therefore – much is contingent upon a view of a determinate context or regime of counting. This amounts to a problem of distinguishing between sovereign exception and totalitarianism – the latter of which, in Badiou’s *Ethics*, is an evil of disaster in which the state has an unlimited purview. Agamben wrote here in advance of the latter publication, but he has effectively invoked the problem of distinguishing between event and simulacrum.

If the sovereign is free to determine exceptions, no legislation can remove or limit this right: ‘pure sovereignty is indivisible or it is not at all’ (Derrida *Rogues* 101). Sovereignty must be absolute – indivisible and incontestable – which excludes it not only ‘from being shared’ but also ‘from time and from language’ because ‘[a]s soon as I speak to the other, I submit to the law of giving reason(s)’, which already ‘divide[s] my authority’. Any demand for the sovereign to answer for themselves subjects them to law, which is precisely what they are constitutively exempt from. To escape any such intervention, an absolute sovereignty (which, in the classical discourse, is *any* sovereignty) would be ahistorical and unbound by *any* relation. (This, of course, is the implication Bataille pursues almost to absurdity.) Yet, paradoxically, sovereignty is ‘incompatible with universality’, hence with its own absoluteness: ‘There is no sovereignty without force, without the force of the strongest, whose reason – the reason of the strongest – is to win out over everything’ (101). Sovereignty is always sovereignty *over* the other, but the moment the sovereign is subject to the other (in time or language, as Derrida says – the moment it is in relation), its power fails to be absolute. Not absolute, then, so, perhaps, not at all: there is *no* legal right to determine who is a rogue state, only the reason of the strongest, the force of authority whose claim to legitimacy is without legal foundation.

Derrida argues, following Noam Chomsky’s *Rogue States*, that the ‘most *roguish* of rogue states are those that circulate and make use of a concept like “rogue state”, with the ... [rhetorical and political] consequences we all know’ (96). It is in fact the state that claims the right to intervene *against* rogue states (often covertly in its own interests), to violate or suspend law in the name of protecting law, that is really the ‘first and most violent of rogue states’ (96). In the War on Terror, then, the United States, the military superpower whose reason is the strongest, epitomises the rogue state. That its interventions respond to situations shaped – even created – by its own foreign policy confirms this time and time again. Globalisation, Westernisation or Americanisation are tantamount to the unbinding of American legal purview in a quasi-annexation (via regime sponsorship, change, regulation, etc.) of the non-American world. In other words, the United States acts or acted as if it were globally sovereign.

Did sovereignty not just appear to be impossible, though? Relation and temporalisation intervene in sovereignty as conditions of possibility and impossibility alike. In this sense, sovereignty is always both inadequate to and other than itself. As Geoffrey Bennington puts it, ‘sovereignty is from the start a little less than sovereign ... . A sovereign that remained merely itself, purely sovereign ... would not *even be* sovereign’; it would ‘do nothing and be nothing, certainly not sovereign’ (99). That there is no sovereignty without force has a double sense: sovereignty requires the il-legitimate founding force of authority to give it right, and sovereign power is only

power insomuch as it is exercised against an other. It must exist in relation to an other in order to produce subjection – again, in a dual sense – yet this also subjects the sovereign to the other. Even if the sovereign is the least demeaned, they *must*, however minimally, account for themselves, which makes sovereignty always-already corrupt: ‘Even the most despotic monarch or totalitarian dictator is engaged in a “democratic” relation, since he must negotiate with past and future selves that may overturn his rule’, Hägglund writes, so ‘[t]he exercise of power cannot be an act of indivisible sovereignty’ (*Radical Atheism* 177). This is a paradox of sovereignty: on one hand, sovereignty is absolute, or it is not at all; on the other, there is sovereignty only where it is divided such that an economy of subjection can operate. As such, there is sovereignty only if there is not.

#### SOVEREIGNTY AND AUTOIMMUNITY: THE ROGUE CONCEPT

This conceptual disorder is symptomatic of the autoimmune condition Derrida diagnoses in democracy (which is itself an issue of sovereignty). Alongside the War on Terror in the wake of 9/11, the other paradigmatic case to which he refers is the Algerian election of 1991, the likely result of which was that power would pass by legal, democratic means to a majority perceived to be intent on rewriting the constitution in such a way as to ‘abolish the normal functioning of democracy or the very democratization assumed to be in progress’ (*Rogues* 31). Not only did it appear that the democratic process would result in the abolition of democracy (which Derrida understands to be democracy’s suicide), the majority expected to prevail was, symbolically speaking, both the other of and immanent to democracy. The majority in question, he notes, ‘presented itself as essentially Islamic and Islamist’. ‘[T]his Islam’, he suggests – he emphasises that he refers to ‘this particular one and not Islam in general (if such a thing exists)’ – is ‘the only religious culture that would have resisted up until now a European (that is, Greco-Christian and globalatinizing) process of secularization, and thus of democratization, and thus, in the strict sense, of politicization’ (31). *Prima facie*, this statement may seem naïvely Eurocentric, but there is a point here: so-called religious fundamentalism is certainly in question, but what is more significant, to my mind at least, is how ‘this Islam’ can be identified as the other of democracy – how this particular ontotheocratic culture becomes the constituted and constitutive other of democracy as a tradition of thought, a concrete political structure, and an ideological commitment of the West. In this regard, democracy should be understood to be a particular concept inherited from Greco-European philosophy, culture, and politics (and passed, more generally, through the West and Judeo-Christianity).<sup>14</sup>

14. This is not to deny transmission of thought between these and Islamic cultures; rather, it is a question of what has been translated and what occurs in and through translation. Derrida notes that Aristotle’s *Politics* has been a significant omission from the translated Arabic (footnote continues)

If ‘this Islam’ is the other of democracy, it is because it remains to some degree anterior to Greco-Western thought and its particular concepts of politics, the state, and democracy – of the human as *zōon politikon* (political animal), the constitution and theorisation of the *polis* (i.e., the (city-)state), and the conjunction of *dēmos* and *kratos* (people and power).<sup>15</sup> Yet, ‘this Islam’ to which Derrida refers is not just a tradition that does not share these concepts or has not been assimilated by Western thought; it functions as a *projected* other of an ideology of Western democracy, even while it may figure within the very same political ‘body’, whether that is democracy in general or one in particular.<sup>16</sup> (It is specifically an *ideology* of democracy I have in mind here inasmuch as it is indexable to the ‘double “functioning”’ ideological and repressive character Louis Althusser diagnoses in Ideological State Apparatuses: democratic values are valorised while antidemocratic activity is taboo or even criminalised [19].) Faced with just such an apparent threat to the continued democratic functioning of the nation, the Algerian government determined it better to suspend the election than to permit democracy to fall. The problem is clear: the government made the sovereign,

philosophical corpus, one which he feels has a ‘symptomatic, if not determining, significance’ similar to that of the ‘privilege granted by this Muslim theologico-political philosophy to the Platonic theme of the philosopher king’ (32).

15. It is worth emphasising, though, that the most significant thinkers of classical Greek thought did not favour democracy as the contemporary West does, despite their proximity to Athenian direct democracy. For Plato, democracy is an arrogant, dysfunctional system that neglects the good in favour of the equal. With little respect for efficient governance, democratic society ‘gets drunk on excessive quantities of undiluted freedom’ and ‘lawlessness seeps into everyone’s homes’ (*Republic* 562d–e). If what he calls necessary desires ‘help one work and therefore make money’ while ‘unnecessary’ desires involve ‘spending money’, citizens of democracies ‘overflow with [unnecessary] pleasures and desires’, unlike those who would live under systems of philosophico-aristocracy or oligarchy (559c–d). Curiously, Plato’s formulation evokes Bataille: citizens of democracy do what they will with no thought to productivity or work – to servility and the meaning of futurity. In fact, he understands democratic citizens to be ‘ruled by the unnecessary’ – these desires remain something to and through which the individual is *subjected*, observing already the problem of the sovereign–subject (559d; emphasis added). For Aristotle, similarly, democracy is a deviant system that serves the interests of the poor rather than the common good. Democracy is really the rule of the ‘indigent’, he insists, irrespective of their relative number; that the poor greatly outnumber the wealthy is ‘an accident’ that has little conceptual bearing (*Politics* 3.8, 1279b.21, 37). Nevertheless, he recognises that the principle ‘that the multitude ought to be in power’ might contain ‘truth’ because the many who have ‘a share of excellence’ are ‘better judges than a single man of music and poetry’ (3.9, 1281a40–50). Polity, or constitutional government, unites the participation of these economic classes (and so more closely resembles the modern popular concept of democracy), though Aristotle himself favours governance by a middle class, thus barring the dominance of the interests of either economic extreme.
16. The increased racial violence and discrimination against people of or perceived to be of Muslim faith in the wake of 9/11 and throughout and beyond the War on Terror would thus be emblematic of a certain failure of globalisation or Americanisation inasmuch as it fails to assimilate the other. In this sense, the Algerian election and 9/11 correspond more closely than might first appear to be the case.

undemocratic decision to suspend democracy in order to protect democracy from the democratic election of an undemocratic power. Or, in order to protect democracy from a threat perceived as foreign but ultimately issued to and by *itself*, democracy's would-be protectors attacked democracy themselves.

As Derrida puts this, '[t]he Algerian government and a large part, *although not a majority*, of the Algerian people ... thought that the electoral process under way would lead democratically to the end of democracy. They thus preferred to put an end to it themselves' (33; emphasis added). Again, note the rhetoric of democracy's suicide; in fact, Derrida thinks '[d]emocracy has always been suicidal' (33). He indexes this to the biological condition of autoimmunity, in which the immune system fails to differentiate adequately between a foreign body and itself. In order to guard against a perceived threat, the body inadvertently attacks itself, thereby showing the border between inside and out to be indistinct. As with the biological concept, the logic of autoimmunity that Derrida elaborates observes the sovereign body attack itself in an attempt to guard against a threat. In doing so, it compromises not only the integrity of its body but also its *ipseity* – the 'I' that it is. The autoimmune, he writes, 'consists not only in harming or ruining oneself' such that one 'commit[s] suicide or threaten[s] to do so'. Manifestly, autoattack risks self-destruction, but it is not merely the empirical body (biological or otherwise) that is imperilled. This autoattack threatens 'the I [*moi*] or the self [*soi*], the *ego* or the *autos*, ipseity itself'. One does not commit suicide so much as compromise '*sui-* or *self-*referentiality', thus 'the *self* or *sui-* of suicide itself'. The noncorrupted *concept* of a self and the *self* of the self-same are under attack, so the very identity-reference of suicide is insecure: autoimmunity threatens to 'rob suicide itself of its meaning' (45). The very possibility of the 'I' – thus the possibility of sovereignty – is under threat.

Democracy is subject to autoimmune attack because it is doubly bound. In order to secure power for its body, democracy must guard against whatever imperils it or face its own demise. This demise would be undemocratic – even if it were the result of a democratic election – because it disempowers its people. This is tautologically truthful: where democracy ends, the undemocratic begins. If democracy does not guard against its demise, it denies its own power to empower and its right to grant right – it reserves just enough power to capitulate to the demands of the undemocratic and extinguish itself. But, if democracy is to guard against this threat, it must risk committing the undemocratic to do so – it must suspend law sovereignly and deny the other. In doing so, however, it becomes its own other – by refusing power to the 'undemocratic', it denies its own democratic body. So, whether it accepts or guards against death, democracy necessarily betrays its proper concept. It always has a contaminated relation to its other and to itself, therefore. This contamination of democracy is a necessary condition



for any concept of democracy, then, but it also bars any proper concept that is self-sufficient and does not already include its own negation: the sovereign concept, in other words. Democracy must be other than it is, and it must be more and less than itself.

More concretely, this is manifest if we consider the constitution of the group that participates in power – nominally, the people. Political positions that are considered to be extreme are often suppressed, and systems perceived to be antidemocratic are excluded – the Algerian election shows fundamentalist theocracy to be one such. Such disenfranchisements may well serve to bar the rise of oppressive regimes and the disempowerment of citizens. Yet, it is also familiar that those deemed unfit to participate are excluded. Slaves, for example, were historically excluded in this manner. For Aristotle, the *dēmos*, whether in a democracy or a constitutional government, is constituted not of all but of the poor, and not simply of the poor but of poor *freemen*: citizenship is not freely associated to the place in which one resides because ‘resident aliens and slaves share in the place’ (*Politics* 3.1,1275a10). To modern sensibilities, of course, this is abhorrent, but subtractions from the *dēmos* that have been accepted in recent history – on the bases of property ownership, sex, or race, for example – or that are accepted today – children, criminals, the mentally ill (*de facto*, at least), ultimately, anyone denied the rights that accompany citizenship (‘resident aliens’) – are no more proper to democracy.<sup>17</sup> Some such subtractions serve to bar the manipulation of the vulnerable, no doubt, but they also persecute the marginalised, whether through the disproportionate criminalisation of the poor or citizens outside a dominant ethnicity or by empowering autophilic credos that claim a monopoly on political belonging by virtue of genesis, birthright, or any other fraternity. By what metric, then, are citizens *justly* qualified? Who *freely* votes? In fact, does Western democracy not itself resemble a so-called fundamentalist ideology of the sort against which it apparently guards?

A democracy that does not protect its residents from those actions it considers to be harmful disempowers them. It fails to live up to its name. A democracy that does not claim the sovereign right to suspend law is open to an attack which denies its *dēmos kratos*, but this sovereign right also mounts an attack upon the *kratos* of the *dēmos*. This attack really is demanded, and it really is unjustifiable. This is not merely a question of a failed or imperfect democracy, then; universal or selective enfranchisement are inculcated alike. Rather, the contamination of the democratic and the undemocratic is the condition of possibility *and* the condition of the impossibility of *any*

17. This logic of exclusion from citizenship may find its fullest expression with Agamben’s *homo sacer* (sacred/accursed man), who, excluded from both ‘human and divine law’, is subject to ‘unsanctionable killing’. As an exception from homicide, sacrifice, and capital punishment, they can be killed with impunity *without reason*: ‘*homo sacer* is the one with respect to whom all men act as sovereigns’ (*Homo Sacer* pt. 2 ch. 3.2–3).

democracy. On the basis of sovereignty, then, a proper concept of democracy is unrealisable because its contamination by its opposite makes the concept constitutively corrupt.

#### THE SOVEREIGNTY OF SOVEREIGNTY

We should be clear, then, that what is at stake in the question of the relation of autoimmunity to sovereignty is ipseity as a regime of self-identity: a self that does not find meaning outside itself but is what it is *without relation* would be the self proper to sovereignty. As Bataille suggests, however, this absolute meaning annihilates meaning; the nonrelation of sovereignty is the failure of the dialectic, and so sovereignty is (a) void of (non)meaning. To mean something, it must be other than itself. Much as Bataille pushes sovereignty from subjectivity's highest order to destruction, sovereignty passes here from pure identity to the *impossibility* of pure identity as the interruption of relation opens the infinite possibility of defacement, destruction, and alteration. Let us be clear: what is in question is not just the human subject, linguistic meaning, or the right to decide. The problem of constituting ontological identity as such underlies each of these: the temporal unconditionality of annihilation subjects *what is* to iterative division through which self-relation is also relation to the other. If sovereignty as such would be the in-itself, bereft of meaning, it can only be meaningful if it is corrupted by the self-othering relation a trace ontology observes – hence, if the concept of sovereignty fails to be adequate to itself. Contrary meanings are united without reconciliation – without, or with only fleeting, univocity – under the name sovereignty: the subject and the asubjected, a quasi-divine figure of ontotheology and the minimal inscription of the absolute, the meaning of meaninglessness, the pure self that is already other. If it means anything at all, sovereignty means *both* sovereignty and the failure of sovereignty, subject and nothing, monarch and animal, identity and its irremediable excess. The disordering concept of sovereignty is thus itself subject to sovereignty, which is its autonegation and condition of impossible possibility: sovereignty *is* the apotheosis and destruction of the singular, pure identity and its infinite fracture; its self-negating concept imbricates a certain givenness into the absolute.<sup>18</sup>

18. The significance of Bataille's disruption of the Hegelian dialectic for Derrida leads to an interesting relationship between Derrida and Adorno as negative thinkers of identity. The intersection of the concerns of the two thinkers has long been advanced and contested, and many feel that similarities between the two thinkers are too readily inflated. Fredric Jameson proffers that any 'impression of a family likeness here rests on the ambiguity of the so-called "history of Western metaphysics", borrowed from Heidegger, and its grandly mythical and unhistorical lines seeming not unlike "dialectic of enlightenment" itself' (10). Peter Dews is more adamant still: he argues that Adorno's dialectical materialism is incompatible with what he sees as Derrida's latent idealism: Derrida's emphasis on the constitutive play of *différance* in the constitution of experience ultimately leads, he feels, to the (footnote continues)

I have suggested that the event of justice would be the decision, which is always subject to a demand to respond singularly and urgently and to the enduring ordeal of the undecidable. Decision, we will see, is bound to the question of sovereignty. Justice cannot follow a programme of law; it demands the suspension of law for the unique instance. This suspension must be responsible – as if it could be or were law. Decision is sovereign, then, in that it joins the exception to the law with the force of law. Yet, it is also subject to sovereignty as the self-negating iterative division of the singular. The consequences of decision are incalculable because its effects remain to come – no calculation exhausts the possible effects of the event or the contingency of the future. The decision does not find meaning beyond itself; it cannot be confirmed or validated, so it must risk the unjust without

eradication of all particularity; ‘mediation itself becomes immediate’ and *différance* lapses into a totalising first principle (42). For Dews, Adorno is a thinker of the particular; Derrida, problematically, the universal. There are no doubt substantial disparities between these bodies of thought that cannot simply be overlooked. Yet, Derrida not only recognises that their work shares affinities; ‘in truth’, he feels that he owes a ‘debt to Adorno’ (‘Fichus’ 176). He points to the disruptive ambition their work shares and suggests that he ‘even took from’ Adorno an interest in what the arts ‘critically decenter in the field of university philosophy’ (180). There is a far more specific congruence, though, between the conceptual disruption that both sovereignty and nonidentity enact upon themselves, which draws the two into a kind of sovereign relation. Adorno speaks readily to sovereignty in *Negative Dialectics*:

The concept of freedom lags behind itself as soon as we apply it empirically. It is not what it says, then. But because it must always be also the concept of what it covers, it is to be confronted with what it covers. Such confrontation forces it to contradict itself. (151)

For Adorno, the concept ‘lags’ inasmuch as the identificatory movement of conceptualisation loses something of the object irremediably. The concept is obligated to take account of disparate particularities as it unfolds in time but fails to do so. This tension between universal and particular is not only the failure of conceptualisation to be adequate to the particularity of the object, however; it is a failure of the concept to coincide with itself. Nonidentity is thus not only a remainder of the object but also an absent interiority of concept. The anteriority of nonmeaning, simultaneously within and without the borders of meaning, precludes the sovereign fullness of identity: in Derrida’s terms, sovereignty is effectively turned against sovereignty. Adorno sees this threat to ipseity in the constitution of the subject. Ego, independence, and autonomy ‘uphold’ the subject’s ‘claim to sovereignty’, yet these depend upon their ‘adversar[ies] and antithes[es], on the object which either grants or denies autonomy to the subject’. Detached from such relation, ‘autonomy is fictitious’ (223). In other words, the autonomy of the sovereign subject can never be what that autonomy would claim. The subject cannot be the subject without a relation of alterity to itself. Yet, as Adorno’s argument on sovereignty is itself subject to another sovereignty whereby determinate meaning cannot be finally given, one can understand here a nonidentity of the concept of nonidentity – it is significant to thought of the absolute. We can observe a sequence of determinations of sovereignty, then, each acted against by another. Sovereignty folds back against itself time and time again, demonstrating the undoing of the identity of concept from within.

justification. If decision is aimed at justice, it is an autoimmune sovereign act.

This structure is manifest in various figures of justice – ethics and hospitality, for instance; Hägglund refers to a nonethical opening of ethics on this basis (a phrase of Derrida’s from *Of Grammatology* [140]). Such figures involve a double bind of their unconditional and conditional forms. Derrida’s insistence on the unconditional form has often been understood as a prescription: one *should* unconditionally welcome the other. Hägglund argues, though, that unconditionality cannot be a prescription; the other might wish to do one harm, so such a prescription would relinquish the care for survival senselessly. What is unconditional, he contends, is that the other will come; this is coextensive with the destructive, self-othering succession of time. If temporality has an absolute sense, ‘the other’ refers minimally to the temporal production of alterity – to *what happens*. One is unconditionally exposed to the other, and this provokes and makes possible conditional response: “‘hospitality’ to otherness’ is not an ethical prescription but the condition of ethics as such; it describes that we are ‘necessarily susceptible to unpredictable events’ (‘Non-Ethical Opening’ 299). But, ‘the other’ is not only a temporal promise; it is also *what happens to the self-same* in the absolute sense of sovereignty. The disorder of sovereignty implies that the other is both to-come and *already here* because it throws the borders of identity and alterity into disarray. The possibility of justice is conditioned, then, by the disorder of identity that sovereignty describes, a disorder that corrupts the absolute as much as the ideal.

The disorder of sovereignty gives the possibility of ethical responsibility insomuch as one is able to *respond* outside the law. Derrida returns to the question of responsibility in *The Beast and the Sovereign* where he asks by what possible justification Lacan (among others – nearly a tradition, in truth) maintains a border that on one side denies the animal the ability to respond (for Lacan, they merely react) and on the other preserves such an ability for humans. By what merit are world and discourse provided to humans but denied to animals (even universally such that he refers to them as ‘the animal’)? The impetus here is not to erase the distinction between human and animal, however: elsewhere, Derrida is explicit that he ‘never wanted to blur th[is] difference’ and claim that ‘the animal can *also* respond like the human can’. What he doubts is the ‘linear and oppositional limit’ that provides or denies the possibilities of ‘speech, laughter, economy, clothing, tears, mourning, death’, of any “‘as such’”, ‘signification’, or ‘response’ (*For Strasbourg* ch. 2). This limit is clearly ‘as classical as it is dogmatic’. What he actually endorses, then, is ‘a thinking of difference and not of opposition’ between humans and animals but also across ‘what one calls the “non-living”, “vegetal”, “man”, or “God”’ (‘Eating’ 269). What this contests is not so much the subjugation of the animal as the exceptionality of the human – that humans ‘can respond without reacting’ (*For Strasbourg*

ch. 2). It contests the very possibilities of sovereignty and responsibility. What he questions in Lacan, then, is the ‘purity, rigor, and indivisibility of the frontier that separates, already among ‘us humans’, reaction from response’ (*Beast I*: 118–9). Such a rigorous distinction depends upon the free exercise of a responsibility that is uncontaminated by reaction, which is to say, sovereign nonsubjection. This, he holds, is never less clear than with Lacan and the unconscious, which denies such a freedom in advance by inscribing a logic of reactionary repetition within the constitution of the subject. With Lacan, one is never strictly or wholly a thinking subject. Yet, Derrida feels that ‘having doubts about responsibility, decision, one’s own being-ethical, can be, ... and ought perhaps to remain, the indefeasible essence of ethics, of decision, and of responsibility’ (119). That is, it is only in the contamination of reaction and response – in the impossibility of pure responsibility – that these latter are animated.



As Hägglund posits, then, ‘infinite responsibility is but another name for the necessity of discrimination’, which is to say, the need to decide (*Radical Atheism* 95). No one ever decides with free and full responsibility, though; one must respond, one must decide urgently, but this is constitutively inadequate to a calculation of a just choice, whether by human or God. As even the apparently impeccably just decision *risks* its future corruption, it is already corrupt in advance. Its corruption is something that has already happened. Justice is necessarily autoimmune, then, because its contingency – its possibility to be other than it is – and its sovereignty – its being other than it is – are irremediable. This much is evident in both Meillassoux’s speculative ontology and this elaboration of the effects of sovereignty. Yet, justice may inhere in this inadequacy: the sovereignty of sovereignty is the death and rebirth of responsibility. The sovereign decision entails a certain irresponsibility – a risk *and* denial of death. The sovereignty of sovereignty is also, however, a scheme under which a certain absolute givenness may be thought after the defacement of the correlation. Once more, sovereignty seems to be what it is not. But, of course, the sovereign ‘has the right to a certain irresponsibility’ (*Beast I*: 57).



CHAPTER SIX  
What's in a Title? What's in a 'Meadow'?

THE SOVEREIGN AND THE COUNTERFEIT

In this chapter, I will transpose the logic of sovereignty – of the sovereignty of sovereignty and sovereignty's lack of sovereignty – to art, which in this context becomes a discourse of the thing. I do so under the figure of the counterfeit. The conjunction here might appear a little obscure at first. Counterfeiting seem incongruous with (though perhaps figuratively opposable to) the classical concept of sovereignty. Sovereignty is supposedly pure and inviolable, while simulacra are necessarily parasitic (even if this parasitism is without a true host) and of dubious or impoverished value. Such a characterisation of the counterfeit is certainly pertinent where art is concerned; the supposed veracity of the work – its legitimate, titratable genealogy – remains a prevailing concern for its value, whether as an auratic work or as a commodity, even while technical reproducibility is endemic in, if not inherent to, art's dissemination, practices, and pedagogies and the possibility of iteration is a minimal condition of the possibility of the work. Sovereignty and the counterfeit are less distant than they first appear, though. Sovereignty may participate in or even imitate divinity, but it is not divinity itself. In fact, sovereignty is a simulacrum that, inasmuch as it is *quasi*-divine, observes that divinity is violable. If sovereignty is always other than itself, as I have suggested, what, we might ask, is really given as sovereign? In fact, the sovereign and the counterfeit each bring to mind something roguish: operation outside the law, deceit, impropriety. In a sense, is sovereignty not actually already counterfeit?

The counterfeit – certainly in its 'proper' concept, if such a thing were possible – is not simply an imitation of the original, something with a resemblance that might be more or less strong. (One would scarcely call a little print of Rauschenberg's *White Painting* or a watch bearing the questionable inscription 'Rollecks' counterfeits.) A counterfeit worthy of the

name – it is tempting to say a true counterfeit – is one of which the deceit is such that it serves the function of the original *indistinguishably*: it is given and taken as if it were the thing that it counterfeits. The ‘proper’ counterfeit depends upon the secret of its il-legal being, then. Understood so, a counterfeit that is straightforwardly identifiable as counterfeit is not really counterfeit because, with its ruse laid bare, it fails to *take place*. A counterfeit coin worthy of the name circulates unimpeded, and a counterfeit artwork is admired or traded without its provenance being seriously disputed. The counterfeit – the substitution without legal validation – thus denies the properness of the purported original and, as we will see, shows that the ‘proper’ thing always depended upon a logic of counterfeiting for its apparent value. The counterfeit and the sovereign act alike, then, are the beyond-law of an economy upon which that economy depends: each ‘takes place as place-taking’ (Derrida *Beast I*: 54).

In what follows, I will first give an account of the counterfeit as it figures in Derrida’s analysis, in *Given Time*, of Baudelaire’s prose poem ‘Counterfeit Money’. Following this, I will elaborate a possible counterfeiting of sense (which, recall, is itself without any unity of meaning or clear derivation) across a number of pieces by Werder. I will suggest that despite these being given as text scores (as *parergonal* notations for the becoming-actual of sounding musical works), these particular values are not final calculations of the possibilities of their senses. In fact, they are not even adequate calculations; the possibilities of sense here are abyssal: graphic, linguistic, semiotic, epistemic, formal, metaformal, transcendental, appropriative, vegetal, ... . There is no *proper* or *true* sense as or for music.

#### COUNTERFEIT MONEY

Derrida writes of counterfeiting at some length in *Given Time*, where, as we saw in chapter one, he writes of the gift as the impossible of economy. The counterfeit is not a particularly prominent motif of his, but this belies its significance. He recognises, in fact, that ‘only an hypothesis of counterfeit money would make the gift possible’ – there may only be giving (rather than economic circulation, strictly speaking) if the value of what is given is incalculable (157). Having already discussed the gift at some length, my attention here will be on the counterfeit, though, as will become apparent, it is the relation of the two that is really significant. It is to Baudelaire’s ‘Counterfeit Money’ we must turn, then, which the narrator relates roughly so: upon leaving the tobacconist’s with his friend, the narrator remarks to himself upon the manner in which his friend separates his change, scrutinising one coin in particular. They encounter a beggar, to whom they both give money, of which the friend’s offering is considerably larger. The narrator is moved to voice his admiration: ‘You are right; next to the pleasure of feeling surprise, there is none greater than to cause a surprise’. The friend reveals, however, that the coin he gave – the one he scrutinised, we are to understand



– was counterfeit. The narrator then ponders whether good fortune or bad might befall the beggar when he attempts to spend the counterfeit coin, before the narrator’s friend surprises him by returning his statement: ‘Yes, you are right; there is no sweeter pleasure than to surprise a man by giving him more than he hopes for’.<sup>1</sup> The titular reference of ‘Counterfeit Money’ might seem immediately apparent: it surely refers to the counterfeit coin the narrator’s friend lingers over and gives to the beggar. Derrida’s account demonstrates that there are other possible references, however:

1. The reference of ‘Counterfeit Money’ is immediately split, and from here follow ‘many other dehiscences, virtually to infinity’: it refers to counterfeit money as a thematic object, and it names the narrative – thus, we already have counterfeit money *and* a narrative of counterfeit money. These two referents ‘both title it – or titrate it as one titrates money and guarantees it’ (85).<sup>2</sup> These titrations appear to conflict, as they each measure a different value, yet they are given under the purportedly unitary name.
2. ‘Counterfeit Money’, then, refers to counterfeit money as an object – to ‘counterfeit money *itself*’ (85; emphasis added). This reference is also divided, though: is the object in question the counterfeit coin in the narrative, or is it counterfeit money elsewhere or in general? And are these not engaged in a form of substitution – a taking place – inasmuch as the former serves as a fictive icon of the latter? In fact, counterfeit money ‘itself’ would always risk being mistaken for something other than what it is. It has a feigned identity through which it takes the place – indistinguishably – of what it simulates: the ‘I’ that it pronounces is not its own.
3. The object counterfeit money, then, is (perhaps) counterfeit. An object that is substituted for another is no less an object than the object it replaces, though. If counterfeit money is an object that is counterfeit, it is still legitimately an object. What, indeed, Derrida asks, would a false object be?<sup>3</sup>
4. Rather, in giving itself as real money although it is not titrated or vouchsafed, counterfeit money is a counterfeit sign. In signifying successfully, however, the sign is surely as authentic a sign as any other. Indeed, Derrida asks again, what would a false sign be? A sign that misdirects or is misunderstood is no less a sign because the relation of signifier and signified is not dependent on the truth of the referent or its validation. In fact, a sign that purposefully misdirects successfully is a paradigmatic example of the logic of signification.

1. Quotations from ‘Counterfeit Money’ are taken from the single-page text printed in the back matter of *Given Time*. Otherwise, page citations throughout the following section are to Derrida’s text unless otherwise indicated.
2. Titration is a metallurgical analysis of, say, a coin, which may be performed in order to verify its value (whether to corroborate its precious metal content or its promise – that it is indeed underwritten for exchange in the economy in which it circulates).
3. The question is rhetorical, but one possible answer is that an inconsistent object might be a false object, possibly nonexclusively so.

5. 'Counterfeit Money', then, refers to fictionality; indeed, as a narrative of counterfeit money, Baudelaire's story is a 'fiction of fiction' (85). In the conceit of literary presentation, it is not Baudelaire who gives this fiction but the fictitious narrator. To whom, then, does the narrative belong? Baudelaire, the author who signs the fiction? Or the narrator, who is another fiction of fiction, 'whose discourse is not in principle assumed by the author' (85)? To whom it should be credited is uncertain. It is possible that Baudelaire encodes his voice in a narrative prosthesis yet maintains (at least by convention) that the narrator's discourse is not his. He would thereby give something of himself while claiming that he gives something other. It is just as possible, though, that he signs, signs for, and underwrites a narrator (someone other than himself – fictional or real) whose perspective he would in truth wish to denounce or abjure. He would thereby give something other than himself under his name. The title thus refers to (1) the fictionality of the story Baudelaire tells, or (2) that the (supposedly) fictitious narrator tells, or (3) to the narrator as (supposed) fiction.
6. 'Counterfeit Money' refers in this manner to a particular conceit of literature: that the author's voice is displaced by that of the narrator, who is fictive and whose function for the fiction is to present fiction as nonfiction. Through the fictive narrator, the narrative is given as true. The effects of fiction appear from this apparently nonfictional narrative through a covenant between author and reader.
7. Inasmuch as this is a convention, it 'permits us to know ... that this fiction is a fiction, [so] there is no phenomenon here of "counterfeit money", that is, of an abuse of trust that passes off the false for the true' (94). These effects of simulacra would account for the possibility of counterfeit money, but it appears that there is no deceit here – one knows what one bargains for. It is possible, though, that Baudelaire abuses this convention of literature by giving 'Counterfeit Money' *as if* it conformed to it, *as if* it were literature, when it in fact inverts or extends the convention by presenting a nonfictional narrative under the guise of fiction. He might present nonfiction as fiction (which then presents it as if it were nonfictional) by writing of something nonfictive or something that legitimately happened. He might, for example, give an abyssal narrative of counterfeit money as if it were literature; or, he might feign his relation to literary convention, giving rise to a narrative on undecidable value, the value of which is itself undecidable: it is neither simply and purely fiction nor nonfiction.
8. Although convention suggests that the title is Baudelaire's rather than the narrator's, this is no more certain than to whom the narrative belongs. The title, which purportedly 'does not belong to the narrative fiction', is 'as fictive, as freely chosen or *invented* by the author', as the narrative it precedes (85). In one sense, then, the title *is* fictive, but Derrida's reference here is also clearly feigned – what this analysis shows is that we cannot be at all sure of the fictive value or free invention of either the narrative fiction or the title.

- ‘Counterfeit Money’ might be the narrator’s titling of a story of counterfeit money, presented as if it were Baudelaire’s. That is, it is not clear what the relation of the title to the narrative is.
9. In fact, as we are beginning to see, the title is so replete with possible meaning that it might itself be the story, of which the narrative that follows could be a ‘gloss or a long note’ (86). What is given as the story is *parergonal*; it is the condition of appearance of the ‘real’ story – the title, which must, however, title something to appear as a title. Derrida writes that ‘[c]ounterfeit money’ – note that he does not use the proper name ‘Counterfeit Money’ but rather refers to the thing ‘counterfeit money’ – ‘is the title of the title, the (titleless) title of the title. The title is the title of the text’ (87). ‘Counterfeit Money’ is the title (name and deed) of the *parergonal* text, while the title ‘Counterfeit Money’ is a text (and *the* text) without a title: it is illegitimate – the title, which it does not have, is counterfeit money.
  10. Derrida then considers possibilities associated to another textual border: those of *Paris Spleen*, the book in which ‘Counterfeit Money’ is published. ‘Counterfeit Money’, ‘in its very unity, in its irreducible identity’ – what these are seems all the more dubious the further we proceed, of course – is an ‘excised morsel’ that ‘cash[es] in ... a whole’ (87). It is a synecdochic icon or token of *Paris Spleen*, with which it shares an uncertain or porous border. Both part and whole are of unsecured value. One cannot really be sure what the ‘whole’ that is being cashed in is, whether ‘Counterfeit Money’ or *Paris Spleen*. ‘Counterfeit Money’ is an opening of credit in an ambiguous contract or incalculable debt – but of what and for what?
  11. Just as the title disrupts any calculation of value of ‘Counterfeit Money’, so does the dedication – ‘the at least apparent dedication’ – of *Paris Spleen*, of which it is ‘difficult to say’ whether it ‘is or is not a part’ of the whole, given its location on the border (87). This dedication, which exists in at least two forms, in fact explicitly invokes the question of the relation of part and whole. Baudelaire writes in its final form that ‘everything in [*Paris Spleen*] is both head and tail’; one can ‘[t]ake away a vertebra and the two parts of this torturous fantasy will come together again painlessly’ (qtd. 88). It is not just that the stories that constitute the collection can be excised and function independently; the corpus of the collection is neither dismembered, disfigured, nor otherwise compromised by this operation. It remains intact – whatever that might mean – through any such subtractions, as if each vertebra can be waste as readily as valuable. What is given as *Paris Spleen* might thus be ‘Counterfeit Money’ and vice versa, not just in a synecdochic relation but in one in which the part actually *becomes* the whole and the whole becomes the part: a real cashing in of a whole.
  12. This invokes a further sequence of questions of border: does the dedication then belong to ‘Counterfeit Money’ itself? Does it belong to *Paris Spleen* as ‘Counterfeit Money?’ Does *Paris Spleen* become the title of the (titleless) title of the title? Could it thereby not announce itself as counterfeit money?

13. Derrida asks, '[i]s [the dedication] still fiction? Does Baudelaire sign it as he does the book, according to the same modality?' (87). Certainly, it is included in a work of fiction (albeit at its border), but, again, by convention, one understands that an author speaks truthfully in a dedication – they do not yet cede the right to speak to the narrator. One might understand, therefore, that the fiction has not yet commenced and that Baudelaire does indeed sign in the modality he signs the book: I, Charles Baudelaire, give this work of fiction. (Given all of the foregoing, though, it remains ambiguous to what modality and to what work of fiction we might refer here.) Yet, he might violate this convention if the dedication – again, the 'apparent dedication' – produces the effects of fiction, not least those of *this* fiction: of 'Counterfeit Money' and counterfeit money. Consider the draft form of the dedication:

to Houssaye:

The title.

The dedication.

Without head nor tail. All head and tail. (qtd. 89–90)

- Baudelaire might indicate various senses and topographies of *Paris Spleen* here. First, there is the title; then, there is the dedication; finally, there is the body of *Paris Spleen*, which is without and all head and tail. Or, he might give *nothing but* the title and the dedication, which are both without and all head and tail – they are without corpus, and they are the entirety of the corpus. There is only title, appendage, and chance (the chance of a coin that is perhaps counterfeit). Is there anything but title and dedication, sovereign signature and gift? Is it not 'as if the text did nothing but play with its title' (97)? Does the corpus – 'the false-true corpus' that is other than it appears to be – not traverse an impossible sequence of borders like an economic ouroboros: all heads and tails, but no head or tail? The dedication is perhaps counterfeit, then: a machination of fiction presented as truthful dedication, apparently outside the work but in fact internal to it.
14. Can one genuinely encompass the dedication in this movement, though, thus internalising or domesticating it properly to the work of fiction? If Baudelaire's gesture is feigned, if he hides fiction as if it were a dedication, he still, in the mode of a performative, gives the work to Arsène Houssaye: 'I dare to dedicate the whole serpent to you' (qtd. 88). Even if this dedication is feigned, it can still be taken for real – Baudelaire could be defrauded here as readily as Houssaye. If the dedication belongs to the work of fiction, it still operates beyond it.
15. It is also possible that Baudelaire and Houssaye are other than they appear. Although historical evidence will presumably attest to the nonfictional existence of a Charles Baudelaire and an Arsène Houssaye, we cannot be

- sure that here they are not the characters of a work of fiction. Their legitimacy is neither vouchsafed nor titrated. It remains possible that they are fictionalised (rather like when actors play ‘themselves’) or that they are *noms de plume* concealing their identities through fiction.
16. It is possible, in fact, that they are entirely fictitious: they could be objects of a systematic conspiracy to deceive, the purpose of which might be aesthetic as readily as nefarious. Evidence of the existence of a man named Charles Baudelaire does not in principle rule out the possibility that the Baudelaire who wrote this work is a fictive writer of fiction and thus, perhaps, a counterfeit author.
  17. It is always possible that the work is counterfeit; that someone other writes a work signed ‘Baudelaire’. Derrida credits the signatory only as ‘whoever effectively signed this text *beneath* the patronymic and accredited signature of Baudelaire’; that is, it is possible that the text that appears under the legitimate signature is illegitimate, or that a counterfeit signature is credited as true (100). There might in effect be multiple Baudelaires, true or false – true *and* false – which circulate as if they were one.
  18. Whatever the case, the Baudelaire who signs the work is not identical with the Baudelaire of any other encounter. Derrida writes that ‘the structure of trace and legacy of this text – as of anything that can be in general – surpasses the phantom of return and marks the death of the signatory ... in the writing itself’ (100). Whoever signs does so on the condition of their radical disappearance; the signature is a mark entrusted to a future in which one no longer is, even if one survives. One sees one’s signature as if it were that of someone other. ‘Neither death nor immortal life can ever give anything, only a singular *surviving* can give’, and it gives the writing of the future through the radical disappearance of the past (102). *Any* ‘Baudelaire’, then, is perhaps a counterfeit of others – identity constitutively depends on the possibility of counterfeiting.
  19. The work is apparently dedicated to Houssaye, but this does not fully account for the giving of the work: ‘There is nothing in a text that is not dedicated, ... and the destination of this dative is not reducible to the explicit dedication’ (87). While the dedication names Houssaye as the addressee, in truth, he takes the place of every other to whom *Paris Spleen* is given.
  20. In fact, for the work to be an object of encounter – which is to say, for it to be an object – it is necessary (even ‘trivially and massively obvious’) that it is ‘for us a *given*’ (99). It must be given to experience and so must be given to tracing – to ‘dissemination without return’, ‘above and beyond any determined addressee’ (100).
  21. The dedication does more and less than it says, then. It produces ambiguity; it feigns reference or, at least, lets reference slide; it both gives and does not give what it says it gives; it is given to others than it claims to be; it is given in ways other than it claims to be; and so it gives Houssaye more and less than the whole serpent – what is given exceeds every calculation of the value

of the text, but it is not donated wholly and unreservedly. It does not mean clearly what it says or say clearly what it means, so the dedication is not purely and simply the dedication it presents itself to be.

22. With all this said, it becomes apparent that the dedication is the double of 'Counterfeit Money'. There are two friends, one of whom speaks in the narrative voice. The narrative departs from a scene of exchange and remainder. On one hand, the friends depart from the tobacconist's with change in hand, and on the other, Baudelaire fails in his attempt to write in the mode of Aloysius Bertrand. He hoped to follow Bertrand's model of evoking the picturesque through poetic, musical prose (albeit transposed to modern life). Even as he attempts this imitation, he finds himself far from it, in 'an accident which anyone but me would glory in, no doubt, but which can only deeply humiliate a mind convinced that the greatest honor for a poet is to succeed in doing exactly what he has set out to do' (Baudelaire qtd. 89). His humiliation is that he thought or hoped he knew precisely what he was given and what he would give, but, as Derrida suggests, even the most 'direct' or 'concrete' writing is 'on credit' (100). That is, in the form of the event (narrative, gift, accident), it is consigned to the economic effects of the counterfeit and il-legal value. As Derrida writes, then, '[t]he whole economy of the narrative, as well as the narrative of the economy, proceeds from a *remainder*' (102). The story concerns an event of giving of uncertain value and a token that might give more than one expects. This is a fiction of fiction – a fiction about what is perhaps fiction and the possible effects of what is possibly fiction.
23. Of course, those same questions of border, title, and fiction might then be asked anew with regard to this doubling. Does the dedication simulate 'Counterfeit Money', or does 'Counterfeit Money' simulate the dedication? We can be no more certain what 'Counterfeit Money' is, nor, indeed, what is counterfeit money.

#### THE PARADOX OF ALMS

Meanwhile, any number of aspects of the narrative (or, shall we say, what is taken at face value to be the narrative) might be counterfeit, hence the counterfeit money to which the title refers:

24. The two friends proceed from the tobacconist's shop. This scene of modern life appears to be a chance event of narrative, but it is not consumed without remainder by this identification. Rather, symbolically, we depart from the consumption of excess. Tobacco, Derrida notes after Claude Levi-Strauss, is ultraculinary: generally, one does not consume it raw or cooked; one incinerates it to consume the excess that remains after its destruction. One rarely consumes tobacco 'itself'. Nevertheless, insomuch as this consumption 'necessarily follows the incessant movement of *reappropriation of an excess*', this destruction is both with *and* without remainder (III):

Tobacco symbolizes the symbolic: It seems to consist at once in a consumption (ingestion) and a purely sumptuary expenditure of which nothing natural remains. But the fact that nothing natural remains does not mean, on the contrary, that nothing symbolic remains. The annihilation of the remainder, as ashes can sometimes testify, recalls a pact and performs the role of memory. One is never sure that this annihilation does not partake of offering and of sacrifice. (112)

That is, even if this annihilation appears total, there remains the possibility that annihilation itself assumes the symbolic value of the remainder.

25. We also begin from the possibility of consuming or putting to use excess *without expenditure*. Insomuch as unwanted small change can be disposed of without giving thought to its value – in fact, thought as waste, value is precisely what it lacks – it resembles an economic foreign object, much as the counterfeit coin does. The scene of the tobacconist's gives the possibility of the narrative through the remainder of change, then – and perhaps this change in particular. This site of chance is certainly not unremarkable, then: it gives the chance for the particular economy of this story to be put into motion.
26. The character of the beggar is not merely what he seems: in fact, he is a *man of fortune*. The narrator speculates that the beggar might accrue wealth through financial speculation with the counterfeit coin: it might be the seed of 'several days' wealth for a poor little speculator', even 'multiply into real coins'. The beggar represents this chance for and of speculation.
27. In fact, 'is not the truth of capital', Derrida writes, 'inasmuch as it produces interest without labor, by *working all by itself* as we say, counterfeit money?' (124). Capital does not just exchange money for labour; capital puts *itself* to work in self-replication – it exchanges itself for more of itself. Both its system and its value are thus other than they profess to be. This is a narrative of the possibility of false money becoming real, then, of reproduction without legitimation, and of the accrual of fortune by and through fortune and the effects of fiction, capital, and credit.
28. The beggar represents the good fortune that something occurs, without which there is no narrative. Nothing occurs without the gift. Is this really an aleatory event, though? Is it really a narrative gift? This good fortune is itself the product of an economic sequence: the condition of the monetary donation is the chance encounter with the beggar. Nonetheless, this encounter 'will never be a sufficient cause' – it does not have a precise, secure value commensurate with the donation it provokes (125). The manner in which the chance encounter proceeds is in turn conditional upon the good fortune of the two friends. They belong to a socio-economic class that has means beyond necessity, so they can donate the surplus or remainder of their luxurious expenditure: their change. (Symbolically, tobacco epitomises

luxury here: it offers nothing to the maintenance of life, so it is consumed without reason (even, one might say today, mocking reason – taunting death) – it is consumed for pleasure alone.) This social standing is without apparent reason – it is not narratively or socially accounted for – which, Derrida suggests, makes it appear ‘as if nature has decided this belonging ... . Fortune is nature. It gives *gratis* to those who have the grace to receive from it this gift, it gives them a gift that gives them the wherewithal to give’ (126).<sup>4</sup> It seems that the ‘gifts’ of the privileged classes (understood, one imagines, to be aspects of so-called human nature or a natural order) are mocked for their hubris here, but also in question is originary (rather than derived) nature, that is, *givenness* before any division of nature and culture. Prior to law, and so to any legitimation or accreditation of giving, *there is* givenness.<sup>5</sup> Nature gives us (to) fortune – (to) chance, an abundance of chance.

29. The beggar also represents the bad fortune (another possible fortune of fortune, of course) that sees the two friends on trial or in competition with each other. As they are given the possibility of giving, the beggar appeals to them to give generously. The scene of charity requires them to account for themselves and their capacities to give; they are to do so by giving the greater donation. They are obliged and in competition to be the more generous.
30. A beggar is sociologically defined, Derrida claims, as someone who ‘does not work’ (134). They produce nothing but live a life of pure consumption and expenditure as an ‘*apparently* useless mouth’ (134). They do as the sovereign does, then: they consume and expend the wealth of others. One might even say that they generate money from nothing. This definition and appearance are deceptive, however: in fact, the beggar

has a regular activity, ordered by codes, rites, socio-topological necessities. ... [T]he activity of beggars may be of the most intense kind, even if it remains non-labouring and seems to produce no material wealth. It is in any case regular and ordered to the point that the beggar’s estate has often been considered – and sometimes designated in a barely metaphoric fashion – *as a profession*, a status, or social function. (134; emphasis added)

4. Elsewhere in *Paris Spleen*, such natural gifts are abundant: in ‘The Fairies’ Gifts’, infants receive ‘Talents, Faculties, good Fortunes’, and ‘invincible Conjunctions’ from generous fairies (37). The despotic prince of ‘A Heroic Death’ has had ‘faculties greater than his domains’ bequeathed to him by ‘heedless Providence’, including, it seems, the faculty to preclude insurgents being granted ‘*favor*’ – not only his favour but that of Providence itself (55–7). And Satan promises the narrator of ‘The Generous Gambler’ ‘the same stake [he] would have won if chance had been with [him]’ in a game in which his soul was staked and lost: a life without the ‘strange disease of Boredom’. Insomuch as the narrator cannot decide whether he dares to believe in this ‘prodigious good fortune’, this ‘unheard-of munificence’, the exercise of this secret may well be the gift that alleviates boredom (62–3).
5. We might think here of *Ereignis* and *Walten* in their originary sense, noting that *Ereignis* is already economic insomuch as it *appropriates* man.



The distinction between the beggar's activity and an occupation begins, at least, to break down here. They are governed by the same social practices and regulations, and they may be equally demanding and intensive. If we understand an occupation to be regular remunerated work – though it can of course refer simply to an activity or the inhabitation of an area – any distinction might seem tenuous if not for the fact that the quasi-labour of begging remains nonproductive. Does it, though? In fact, the beggar 'play[s] a role of symbolic mediation in a sacrificial structure and thereby assure[s] an indispensable efficacy' (134). This sacrificial structure, of which the giving of alms is the altar, depends upon the beggar's labour, which makes this giving (im)possible through the appeal for giving to occur. The beggar's labour produces the underwriting of the symbolic production of generosity.

31. What appears to be charitable giving might, therefore, be an altogether different phenomenon. Derrida insists that 'the encounter with a poor man and with a poor *beggar* ... is never aleatory in a given social space' (134). Whether through a prohibition on their presence or through their need to better their chances of encountering people who have the gift for giving – the given possibility of giving, the economic means with disposable excess, and the social obligation to give – the restrictive codes, determinative practices, and economic conditions to which beggars are subject produce a site of work, a locale that they occupy. That beggars are tolerated only in certain areas institutionalises them there such that to pass through is to be called upon for a toll. If one expects to be called upon to pay – and doubly so if one buys the sash of generosity – this is not an aleatory encounter so much as the price of being in a particular social space.
32. In what sense is this charitable giving distinguishable from taxation, then?<sup>6</sup> While it resembles a form of taxation, it is nonetheless without legitimacy. On paper, it has no standing or mandate issued by the state. Yet, the conditions for such a toll to be taken are produced by prohibitions that the state issues and the manner in which it manages its economy. The state knows full well that the impoverished depend upon alms to survive, and, unlike the beggar, whose appeal to the generosity of the donor is without legal force, it maintains the right to issue a tax. The state could draw this toll into the body of law, then, though at what cost, we can only speculate (the rancour of some citizens, the loss of sacrifice, etc.). This situation does not obtain, however. Rather, the state's nonintervention conserves the il-legality of this taxation while outsourcing its administration. The beggar administrates a tax without law, as if it were law, yet without the force of law, and they do so under a contract that is neither spoken nor properly signed. This, again, is the beggar's employment – the beggar, who appears to be 'useless' and 'neglected by the state', is by covenant with the state a civil servant.

6. Baudelaire asks this too: 'The Paradox of Alms' was 'Counterfeit Money's working title.

33. The beggar is still further other than he seems; he ‘takes on the figure of an animal, at once too human and inhuman’ (143). He appeals to the friends, Baudelaire writes, through ‘supplicating eyes that contain at once ... so much humility and so much reproach’, evoking the ‘complicated feeling’ of ‘the tear-filled eyes of a dog being beaten’. ‘The poor man is a dog of society’, Derrida surmises; the dog is the ‘fraternal allegory’ of poverty (143).
34. This returns to mind the border between the human and the animal according to which the animal is denied discourse. Both humans and dogs can beg, but whether they beg equivalently is another matter. A beggar, who begs, may have a dog, which begs, but these are not strictly the same. Many would have us believe, for example, that when animals beg for food, they do so in reaction – nothing more than reaction – to hunger. This is not equivalent to what we have seen here might be an *occupation* of begging. One does not typically say that an animal works or labours: they are *put to* work as a tool is. The animal’s incapacity to work (which is also to say, to produce and to form world) even while it may perform work is the consequence of its lack of access to the signifier as such – that is, to discourse. So the story goes. Yet, as Baudelaire writes in ‘The Faithful Dog’, ‘[l]ike the rest of us’, animals ‘go about their *business*’ (*Paris Spleen* 105; emphasis added). The beggar, then, is a border figure of the human and the animal. Purportedly, he does not have an occupation, does not work or produce, and does not participate in economy, yet the narrative depends upon these capacities and the fact of their symbolic productions. It is as if prior to the event that sets in motion the psychological drama of the narrative – the giving of the counterfeit coin – there is another event in the strong sense: an appropriation of the quasi-animal to man, mirroring and repeating the appropriation of man to *Dasein* (i.e., *Ereignis*). The fact of this repetition – that is, the fact that it is possible in repetition – exposes the border that separates the categories of man and animal as corrupt.
35. The giving of the counterfeit coin remains the central narrative event of the story, of course; it sets in motion the imaginative, psychological drama in which the narrator ponders the fate of the beggar and the impossibility of forgiving his friend for his misdeed. This event is presented as a true event within the fiction, but it would be naïve to assume that this narratively ‘true’ event is free of the effects of fiction. Are we sure that the event that apparently fictively occurs really does fictively occur as fictive truth, or is it fictive falsity? Naturally, this brings to mind the literary technique of unreliable narration, and it is certainly possible that the narrator deceives, spins a yarn, or leads the reader on – that is, presents the false as true. The possibilities of the secret, however, of the *perhaps* of counterfeit money, cannot be adequately assimilated to this literary device, because it is just as much a condition of what is taken to be reliable narration. For example, the narrator might speak a fiction that dramatises without seeking to deceive, a fiction given in earnest to reveal a certain truth (the character of the friend or the

narrator, say) by smuggling truth in apparent falsity. It may be that the encounter did not really happen but the donation of the counterfeit coin is precisely the way the narrator's friend behaves when met with such a demand, the ponderance of the possibilities of fate is characteristic of the narrator, the two friends often spar verbally in this manner, or the narrator thinks his friend is rather witless. The narrator might tell us this in a fictitious construction that nonetheless can be justly credited with a certain value. Equally, the narrator might himself be deceived. His friend might lie about the counterfeit coin and pass real money as if it were fake. If so, the narrator responds faithfully to the friend's announcement; he treats it and recounts it as truth, and it has true narrative effects – his ponderance of the fate of the beggar and his vilification of his friend. The narrator speaks in earnest, without distortion and without giving us reason to suspect distortion, but, strictly speaking, the event that defines the story does not occur. It is true narration of a false narrative.

36. Why, though, would the friend lie about giving a counterfeit coin if in doing so he inculpates himself in the eyes of the narrator? To what end would the friend betray himself? I have suggested already that the encounter with the beggar places the two friends on trial; they must answer before a figure of the law. The beggar, whose purported nonproductivity makes him foreign to economy, 'signif[ies] the absolute demand of the other, the inextinguishable appeal' (137). 'The absolute demand passes by way of his mute gaze' through which 'he begins to persecute like the law, justice, the imperious order' (142). Because he has nothing, he claims the right to demand restitution. The two friends must respond with what they can and will give to the other. Each is challenged to give more than is expected of them. Derrida insists, though, that the characters of the story are exchangeable, that each can take the places of the others, so they are challenged to give not only to the beggar but also to each other. In this sense, the trial is competitive – combative, even. The friend's admission may thus be a feint, a doubled gift that grants both the greater donation to the beggar and victory (a sense of generosity and righteousness) to the narrator.
37. By this same logic of exchange, though, the friends are authorised to take for themselves, much as the beggar claims the right to do (as, indeed, does the state that perhaps acts through him): to cash in on extended credit, even to do so with exorbitant interest. Recall that the narrator's friend repeats – almost repeats – what the narrator says of the pleasure of giving surprise. The narrator says, 'You are right. *Next to the pleasure of feeling surprise*, there is none greater than to cause a surprise'. The friend replies, 'Yes, you are right; there is *no sweeter pleasure than to surprise* a man by giving him more than he hopes for' (emphasis added). For all that the friend voices agreement and the narrator calls his friend's statement a repetition, this corrupted paraphrase exchanges one meaning for another. For the narrator, the pleasure of surprising is second only to the pleasure of being surprised, but his friend

truly covets *causing* surprise. A veil of agreement seems to obscure this substitution for the narrator, just as it might for the reader. The narrator credits his friend with giving the beggar the greatest pleasure and finding secondary pleasure in his own benevolence. The revelation that the coin was counterfeit causes the narrator to understand that his friend was seeking to ‘win paradise economically’, however – to appear generous despite giving nothing (or, at least, nothing of value – something with the value of nothing). The narrator takes this to expose the stupidity of his friend as the calculation is liable to be perverted if ill should befall the beggar upon attempting to spend the counterfeit coin. Paradise would then be lost. Perhaps the narrator misjudges, though. The friend actually seeks the pleasure of surprising a man, the cost of which is giving the other more than he hopes for – more than he bargains for, even. The greater gift could well be the greater dose of poison – the friend actually professes no care for the pleasure of the other. The donation to the beggar, who might get more than he hopes for from the coin, whether it is real or counterfeit; the admission that grants the narrator victory; or the feigned admission that grants both would each only be the cost of the purchase of pleasure. Paradise might indeed be won economically (two for the price of one, even), here and now, in the aftermath of the calculated purchase of pleasure for oneself which masquerades as a gift to the other.<sup>7</sup>

38. The friend’s revelation, we must see, is of *unsecured value*; he might as readily relish deriving maximum gain from minimal expenditure as confess guilt. He might expose his stupidity, or he might demonstrate superior wit and foresight. He might ask for forgiveness, try to take forgiveness without asking, or have no care for forgiveness whatsoever. He may have given something that he cannot, dare not, or will not use but the chance of which he will not deny to the beggar. Though the friend may fear the consequences of attempting to spend the coin, must the beggar? Must someone who lives in abject poverty fear the economic or penal consequences of attempting to pass false money as true? Is punishment of any particular, legitimate value? *And is the beggar aware of this aleatory drama?* The narrator’s friend says, ‘It was the counterfeit coin’; he uses the definite article – not *a* counterfeit coin, *the* counterfeit coin. He does not imply, ‘The coin I gave to the beggar was (a) counterfeit’, so much as, ‘The coin I gave to the beggar was the one to which you know I refer when I say, “it was the counterfeit”, the one of which you are aware and which you know to be counterfeit’. The friend knows the coin is counterfeit, the narrator knows the coin is counterfeit, and it is as if the friend tells us that the narrator *already knew* that the coin was counterfeit, even though the narrator tells us otherwise. The characters

7. Such caprices resemble those of the narrator of ‘The Bad Glazier’, who says that ‘erratic pranks are not without danger and one often has to pay dearly for them. But what is an eternity of damnation compared to an infinity of pleasure in a single second?’ (Baudelaire *Paris Spleen* 14).

of the story are all exchangeable, Derrida insists: do they exchange, and exchange with, this knowledge, then? Is the beggar aware that the narrator's friend might, in effect, say, 'Here is a counterfeit coin with which you can do what you will'? Does the friend thus (or, indeed, otherwise) force the beggar into his debt at no cost to himself, without having to extend credit? Or is this a mere shedding of waste? Should the beggar be grateful for waste which might yet be fortuitous? These questions have no answer that could lay their economy to rest with a secure value; rather, they circulate.

39. Nonetheless, these questions might still be understood to circulate around or even be the circulation of one other: *is this what giving is?* The gift itself, properly speaking, should be a rupture from economy: it must be beyond any horizon of expectation; it can neither demand nor take in return, provoke no countergift, no satisfaction for the giver; it can bear no possibility of turning poisonous; it cannot be a calculated expenditure of excess; it must be *beyond reason*; it must be subtracted from economy and iterability. These are the conditions of possibility for the gift, but they are also conditions of impossibility for the gift, which is thus, perhaps, counterfeit. '[O]nly an hypothesis of counterfeit money would make the gift possible. ... [Counterfeit money is] the chance for the gift itself. The chance for the event' (157–8).

40. ...

Beyond the above, one should not forget that this analysis (or these analyses) involves feigns of meaning, presents things it does not say, and is not ultimately vouchsafed or secured by anything. Given this abyssal potential of meaning and the ultimate lack of any titration to verify value, the title, 'Counterfeit Money', and the thing to which it apparently refers, counterfeit money, are themselves perhaps counterfeit money:

The title says, in effect: 'since I say so many things at once, since I appear to title this even as I title that at the same time, since I feign reference and since, insofar as it is fictive, my reference is not an authentic, legitimate reference, well then I, as title[,] ... am counterfeit money'. (86–7)

The logic of counterfeiting to which Derrida draws attention indicates that a counterfeit worthy of the name – not merely a recognisable imitation, but something that presents itself convincingly as something other – is indistinguishable from the thing which it counterfeits.<sup>8</sup> The counterfeit comes to

8. In 'A Heroic Death', Baudelaire's narrator distinguishes in this way between a good actor, whose performances one still recognises as artificial, and the simulation achieved by the fool Fancioulle, who succeeds in being 'what the best statues of antiquity, if miraculously they lived, ... would be in relation to the general [idea of beauty]'. Fancioulle plays 'such a perfect idealization' that one believes 'in the impersonation as alive, possible and *real*' (*Paris Spleen* 56; emphasis added).

act in place of the counterfeited; in doing so, it breaches the border between counterfeit/counterfeited. The identity of the counterfeited was never proper, true, or classically sovereign but rather depends on an economy of counterfeiting – of iterability and exchangeability without validation, thus of annihilated sense and the (non)sovereignty of sovereignty – to grant it *value*. This relation is in fact necessary for economy, the exchange relation of which substitutes things that are incommensurate with one another while proffering their calculable relative values, thus their possible identity, not least via the familiar prosthesis of money.<sup>9</sup> ‘No one ever gives true money, that is, money whose effects one assumes to be calculable’, but ‘as long as money passes for (real) money, it is simply not different from the money that, perhaps, it counterfeits’ (157, 153).

The stakes here are not merely economic or fictional: these effects of fiction and economy – of possible fiction and the possibility of economy – parallel the effects of *ontological exchangeability without secure value*. This is an irremediable condition of and for givenness: of the impossible possibility of the event, of the autoimmunity of justice, and the sovereignty of sovereignty, which may only take place on this condition of place-taking. The thing says, in effect, I, as thing, am counterfeit money.

#### COUNTERFEITING AND SENSE

I have noted that Nancy asks whether philosophy can listen, whether it can surrender its ipseity and the security of its sense to open itself to the other. Can music do this, though? It is constitutively open to futurity, at least, without which melody and rhythm, for example, would lose all sense. Does music really relinquish its sense if the sense of aurality remains secure, though? In this way, music and aurality might be understood to be coextensive with world and sense. The readings I have presented of *Silent Prayer* and *Speculative Solution* already suggest that music may not have a proper sense. If silence seems to be both an intelligible thing that may be aurally apprehended and an empty presentation of nothing as a mark of anteriority to sense, does this not invoke an economy of counterfeiting in which something is given as, taken as, and serves as something other? This is one basis on which one might understand that nothing is indicated by intelligible silence and that silence-as-nothing can be given to sense. Yet, as I have also suggested, the sense of *Silent Prayer* might simply be found elsewhere than in sound – pre-eminently, in thought. Similarly, *anything* can take place in and as *Speculative Solution* – any fact whatsoever, sounding or not – but it is nonetheless conceived as a *musical* work. These circulations of sense (and non-sense as sense) show music’s sense to depend upon *the counterfeiting of sense*. If this resembles what Nancy calls ‘the all-too-tempting game [of] the

9. In ‘The Temptations of Eros, Pluto and Fame’, the narrator is tempted by Satan’s offer of money, ‘the thing that will procure you everything else; that is worth everything else; that takes the place of everything else!’ (Baudelaire *Paris Spleen* 42; emphasis added).

infinite circularity of the senses', which he rejects as nihilistic, I do not think this game should be abandoned (*Sense* 163). In fact, I think the coextension of this abyssal economy and the logics of identity in the phenomena of gift and value may be thought decisively through this play.

#### NOT HEARING REAL MUSIC

In what follows, then, and with the preceding analysis in mind, I will address several pieces of Manfred Werder's [year<sup>n</sup>] series, my central concerns being the taking place of sound, quotation, language, and the thing, which are ultimately thought together in, under, across, and through the *pré* of 2009<sup>2</sup>.<sup>10</sup>

Werder shares with Cage an interest in listening to the world – what Cage calls 'an attention to the activity of sounds' ('Experimental Music' 10). Each suggests that this transforms their sense of the world, Werder no less explicitly than Cage:

I find the sounding of the world exceedingly exciting, and I recognize what we call 'music' in a concert or from a CD as one rather specific section in it. Basically I work on scores that would be capable of *extending my sense of the sounding world*, rather than on scores that I would inflect with my pre-existing view. (Reynell and Werder; emphasis added)

The music of the Wandelweiser collective with which Werder is associated often follows Cage's attention to silence. This is reflected in their sparse use of intentional sound and, often, in the extreme quietness of those sounds that are produced. (The latter is more an orthodoxy of performance practice than an explicit commitment across their scores.) Barrett rightly notes that '[i]t is possible that no other single work has shaped the overall understanding of music for the collective as significantly as Cage's 4'33"' (47). He suggests that Werder's scores in particular 'often exhibit a liminal space between his implicit acknowledgement that sounds must always occur ... and an explicit call for sounds to be performed' (51). This is certainly representative of the *stück* [year<sup>n</sup>] series and the early [year<sup>n</sup>] pieces (between 2003 and 2007, roughly speaking). In Werder's work from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, he often explicitly prescribes sound and silence in (near-)equal measure; to my mind, silence (whatever its quality) is structurally determinative for these pieces. Each piece in the [instrument year] series, for example, comprises equal lengths of sound and silence (as does the *stück* [year] series): '*eine aktion besteht aus 12 sekunden klang und 12 sekunden stille*' (an action is composed of twelve seconds of sound and twelve seconds of silence). The *ein klang und eine stille* series, meanwhile, indicates that silences should be

10. I use this square-bracket styling ([year<sup>n</sup>]) and variations thereof to indicate series of pieces that Werder titles according to some combination of the year of composition, instrumentation, and their position in that year's work; these are not proper names.

‘*einweniger länger*’ (a little longer) than the sounds with which they alternate. These silences are certainly less prolonged than those of, say, his colleague Pizaro, who notates substantial pauses in much of his work, bringing an inheritance from Cage’s silent works to mind more readily. Extended silences proliferate in *The Collection* and between parts of his *Pieces on Texts by Francis Ponge*, for example. *Braids*, meanwhile, involves the performer reading in silence (besides any incidental sound produced while reading – page turns and so on) throughout its thirty-minute duration.

From 2005, though, Werder does not write (of) silences at all. Nor, from 2008, does he write (of) sounds. This is not to say that silence and sound are not significant to him or the performance of his work; rather, they disappear from his scores. While these scores undoubtedly become oblique in their possible reference, they are certainly given as if they are for actualisation.<sup>11</sup> Various conventions concerning the relation of score and sounding music might obtain, therefore, whether these are thought on the basis of type and token, *parergon* and work, object and simulacrum, ... . This is a concern across the scholarship on Werder’s work, which includes Nicholas Melia and Will Montgomery’s contributions to *Writing the Field*, Barrett’s *After Sound*, and entries in *Word Events* and *The Ashgate Research Companion to Experimental Music*. Melia finds that while ‘a reading of the score is “discretionary”’ and instruction may not be ‘at all necessary’, Werder is ‘not nearly naïve enough’ to think that such conventions and relationships are completely dissolved (55). Indeed, Montgomery understands that even if ‘the directive function of the score melts away entirely’, the text nonetheless remains ‘a decisive and determinate anchoring point for a mode of performance’: realisations thereof ‘cannot be heard on their own terms, divorced from the words that engender them’ by offering a ‘suggestive frame’ (99–101). For Barrett, Werder’s works even ‘lead a kind of double life’. There is the work as it ‘unfolds in performance’, and there are ‘strands of text’ that serve as a score inasmuch as they ‘prompt the performance’ (he, like Montgomery, assigns the score a framing function here), but these strands of text also ‘somehow speak behind’ the performed work (56). Yet, while Barrett recognises that these texts *invoke* the question of ‘what one can say in music’, he is not convinced that they move beyond this ‘in order to actually *say* anything at all’ (57; emphasis added). He may understand the content and precise bearing of the texts to be somewhat arbitrary, then, but he certainly acknowledges that they have meaningful structural effects. Each of these accounts suggest that while the aforementioned conventions around the score are somewhat unsettled, something of them unavoidably

11. One could say perform rather than actualise, the term Werder seems to prefer, with the caveat that we need only understand performance here as the process of making the work appear, however minimal such a process may be. There are no implications of the ritual, quasi-dramatic, or communal senses of contemporary musical performance. Performance would be better understood here on the basis of performative acts – as making actual.



lingers. I, on the other hand, do not think it is clear that these texts must obey such logics to find their sense.

Barrett suggests that '[s]ince 1998, Werder's scores have displayed a striking similarity to one another' (51). I agree with this to a certain degree. Werder's work in this period is often concise, similar work-to-work, and written in natural language rather than staff (or other) notation, and it includes little stipulation of – or even reference to – many musical parameters. Nevertheless, there are meaningful distinctions to make between different series: the [instrument year] series, the [n] *ausführende* series, and the behemoth *stück 1998* are hardly models of concision in either notation or performance length. There is also a discernible break in the mood of the texts in 2005: typically, texts written before 2005 prescribe the actions of the performer(s) directly. Consider *stück 2003*<sup>1</sup>, for example:

three performers determine a common pitch.  
the duration of the performance is not determined. the players  
do not use a watch.  
two of the performers play the pitch, lasting three to seven  
seconds, once during the performance.

This adheres fairly closely to a commonplace model of the text score – it presents a clear set of present-tense instructions (albeit grammatically indicatively rather than imperatively) which are written in full sentences and which performers are presumably expected to enact. From 2005, though, the brevity and form of the texts makes such a characterisation less convincing. Compare this to *2007*<sup>2</sup>:

four sounds, or three, or five, for kô ishikawa, taku sugimoto,  
toshiya tsunoda and taku unami

One might still derive directions from this text, of course, but its construction is obscure. It does not form a sentence unless one understands that sounds is a verb – that is, that it is a number or numbers that resonate. 'Sounds' might be the object of the fragment, though – it is certainly more likely to be read this way. Or rather, it might be the object of the *first* fragment; it is not certain that there is only one because what appears to be a dedication occurs within the unbroken line of the text. It does not precede it, as is commonplace, or follow the text after it is clear that the work of the score is complete. The apparent dedication follows a comma, as if what the text says is that there are, could be, should be, or shall be four sounds (or 'four' will sound), or three or five, for Kô Ishikawa, Taku Sugimoto, Toshiya Tsunoda, and Taku Unami. It calls for sounds for them and it *demand*s dedication. It scores the giving of dedications in a dedication that it gives and does not give: the dedication may be given in the text, but according to the

convention that dedications appear at the periphery of texts – prior to them – it has no dedication. It says little of sounds – only that there can be four, or three, of five – because it dedicates itself instead to the giving of dedications. That is, it is dedicated not to Ishikawa, Sugimoto, Tsunoda, and Unami but to the giving of dedications to them. Yet, as it does not clearly state ‘do this’ – ‘make these sounds’ or ‘give these dedications’ – it lacks force: it does not make the giving of dedications imperative. It could inhabit the realms of fantasy or memory as readily as instruction or provocation. If the undedicated–dedicated piece *2007*<sup>3</sup> is indeed dedicated to dedications, then, it is still not sufficiently dedicated.

A disparity of sense between *stück 2003*<sup>1</sup> and *2007*<sup>3</sup> is apparent, then, even while one can recognise that neither is reducible in a final analysis to a clear set of instructions with a present meaning. We will proceed with this in mind in turning to *2005*<sup>1</sup>, the piece that inaugurates the period of Werder’s work that interests me. We will see that the possible counterfeiting of sense is far more abyssal here.

( SOUNDS )

It may well be that *2005*<sup>1</sup> is the zero-degree of musical expression. It consists – let us say preliminarily – of the following text:

place  
time

( sounds )

This appears to articulate the coextension of a place and time and indicate the occurrence of sounds, which may be intentional or nonintentional, performed or encountered. As such, it seems to offer the least direction possible (or the least determinate direction possible) while nonetheless functioning as an instructive score. To the eager performer, *2005*<sup>1</sup> might well be the musical encounter of openness *par excellence*, an invitation to sonically engage in the indeterminate, to do as they see fit or encounter what comes to the ear, under the title *2005*<sup>1</sup>, underwritten and undersigned by one Manfred Werder.<sup>12</sup>

12. On this basis, *2005*<sup>1</sup> would be eminently post-Cagean, implicitly acknowledging sound (from which silence cannot be extricated) as unavoidable in any spatio-temporal context (i.e., ‘place / time’). One might draw similarities of stature with the tacet edition of *4’33”* or the original (i.e., shorter) form of *0’00”*, though these include further notes that make them by comparison positively loquacious. A greater structural resemblance may be found with *One*<sup>3</sup> = *4’33”(0’00”)* +  $\frac{1}{6}$ , which defines a situation (a place and time), albeit more restrictively, and destructures the border between intentional and unintentional sound: sounds produced without intention *return* with intention. *2005*<sup>1</sup> might be understood to identify ‘sound’ with ‘silence’ in a similar way if ‘( sounds )’ includes both, in which case it replicates Cage’s ‘silent piece’ in its apothecic constructivist form.

Is this the self-evident, determinate value or sense of *2005'*, however? In *Word Events*, Lely acknowledges that the text is at least polysemous:

[The] words have several potential meanings; they could be regarded as nouns, or as verbs. ... [T]he lack of a definite article, i.e. 'a' [sic] or 'the', as in 'a place', 'a time', etc. may suggest broader philosophical meanings, as in the general concepts of 'place', 'time' and 'sounds'. (382)

Lely conflates the indefinite and definite articles here – his point is rather that each word lacks *any* article. In correspondence with Lely, Werder acknowledges this to be significant in the piece's evocation:

If you say: 'Die Zeit', you imply a shared understanding of what you're talking about in terms either of a possible content or the term itself.

If you say: 'Zeit', the word refers much more to an abstract (indefinite) materiality, and its signification and style is much more floating. (383)

Some of Lely's references here are a little vague (the 'broader philosophical meanings' or 'general concepts' of place, time, and sound), and Werder's, opaque ('abstract materiality', clarified or modified by 'indefinite'), but they agree that there is a difference. One might understand that they are really speaking to the syntactical difference between the uses or absence of articles, in which case the point is straightforward. It seems that to Werder's mind the noun without an article resembles the noun used with the indefinite article; at least, it is closer to this than to the noun used with the definite article. His inference from the word '*Zeit*' is not intuitively unconvincing, though words without definite articles can certainly be specific in reference rather than ambiguous, whether they are used as abstract nouns or otherwise. One can call 'time' in many contextually specific ways, for example ('tell me the time', 'tell me what time is left', 'record time', 'this is the end', ...); in fact, various characters in *Paris Spleen* 'kill Time' – a proper noun, hence a *determinate* thing (89, 90). The solitary word may well evoke its floating across these meanings, but this is not actually any less possible for the syntagma 'the time'. All this said, Lely is content to confirm (as if Werder underwrites this) that the 'original intended meaning' is or was that 'all the words be nouns' and that 'place' and 'time' 'refer to the "where" and "when" of an actualisation'. The bracketing of '( sounds )' and its separation from the other words, meanwhile, are 'intended to signify that while time and place are determined, any sounds that occur might or might not be intentional' (382–3). For all that other possibilities are indexed, then, Lely returns swiftly to this given value.

Pisaro also draws attention to the significance of the grammatical structure and number of this text, in relation to two others. He feels that in engaging with *2005<sup>1</sup>*, *2006<sup>1</sup>* ('a place, natural light, where the performer, the performers like to be / a time // ( sounds)'), and *2006<sup>2</sup>* ('places / a time // ( sounds)') one 'considers the difference between the indications "time" and "a time" or between "place", "a place" (with a description) and "places" and that one does so precisely because the texts appear to be so minimally dissimilar ('Writing, Music' 63). He leaves it to the reader to infer that these differences are meaningfully illuminated by these pieces, but this is not as obvious as he seems to feel. For example, there are differences between 'place' (abstract noun), 'a place' (singular concrete noun) and 'places' (plural concrete noun), and these differences can be understood as grammatical, real, subjective (i.e., phenomenological), ... , but what is the significance of this 'consideration' of difference? If, as Lely feels, the indication of 'places / a time' in *2006<sup>2</sup>* 'suggests simultaneous realisations at different locations', is one thus to experience something of the order of being-with (383n7)? Or the withdrawal of the thing as it exceeds and retreats from experience, say, after Marder's thing or Harman's tool-being? Or is this just an affirmation that one is different from multiple? Are *these* questions said 'consideration'?

Sounds are the element that remains unchanged across *2005<sup>1</sup>*, *2006<sup>1</sup>*, and *2006<sup>2</sup>*. Both Barrett and Lely advance the view that the bracketing of '( sounds )' suggests their indeterminate intentionality: Barrett feels it 'creates an even greater ambiguity between the call for an active realization of sounds and a passive listening or observing'; Lely, that, 'with the slight spatial separation from the other words', they are 'intended to signify' that 'any sounds that occur might or might not be intentional' (51; 383). Do parentheses have such a clear value? This does not seem to me to correspond to conventions by which parentheses are used, which *can* suggest that their contents are not a primary concern. Bracketing something (like this) often structurally marginalises it, indicating that the sentence or syntagma in which it occurs (e.g., this one) can do without the contents of the brackets (brackets separate from their milieu). Bracketing '( sounds )' debases the significance of sounds, then; they are marginalised, framed, spaced, framed by space, and set below, as if to indicate their insignificance.

Yet, this rather brings to mind Derrida's suggestion that if one wants to ensure something will be read – read first, 'even before the main text' – one may place it in a footnote 'situated in what could be called the inferior margin'. Because it appears auxiliary to the principal text, the footnote is subject to 'a sort of framing' within the margin, between the principal text and the edge of the page, which 'gives it a paradoxical independence, a freedom, an autonomy' ('Oral Footnote' 193–4). The hierarchy of the page is subject to inversion: if the important point might be in the footnote, the marginal might become most important and paradoxically prior to the text it annotates. Given this, the parentheses may indicate the indeterminacy not

of sound's intentionality but of its *significance*. They suggest a certain triviality (yet one made *most* significant) inasmuch as the final line perfunctorily articulates the structure that precedes it. '( sounds )' is an empty but nonetheless excessive description of content. After Cage, it is a trivially obvious result of the synthesis of place and time: one is in a place at a time, one *is* in space and time, even (there are sounds).<sup>13</sup> Yet, if this is indeed secure knowledge, '( sounds )' also *precedes* place and time in a quasi-titular fashion. In a musical actualisation – which, presumably, could be any musical situation whatsoever – this synthesis is isomorphic with the actualisation: one is, in place and time (this *frames* sounds). The final line acts, then, as a grapheme of the piece, enclosing or framing just as the actualisation does. The piece is the graphic sense of itself within itself: it presents an image of the whole placed within the whole. This is just the first step in an abyssal topology and topography. As with many of Werder's scores, *2005'* is bilingual: the German text is placed above; English, below. Thus, it appears in this arrangement:

ort  
zeit

( klänge )

place  
time

( sounds )

While the text as I first presented it seems at first to be an appropriate reduction, it obscures the relation of the marginal part to the whole. If '( sounds )' is an image of the whole placed within the whole of the (English) text, this text is itself an image of the whole placed within the (bilingual) text (at its foot, in fact), and if '( sounds )' is the marginal footnote of the English text, '( klänge )', for which this syntagma is apparently given as equivalent, inverts the graphical, logical hierarchy to become prior to the (English) text in a quasi-titular fashion – just as '( sounds )' does.

13. '( sounds )' are *doubly* bracketed, however – by parentheses and spaces. As with *4'33"* and *0'00"* in chapter two, one can distinguish '( sounds )' from (sounds) or sounds – thus, from the trivially obvious result of such synthesis – on the basis that a certain void appears.

As we know, it is customary in musical scores to indicate the title of the piece at the top of the first page – not on a title page but on the first ‘proper’ page of the work – and the composer’s name generally sits beneath. This convention is not dissimilar to the announcement of pieces in concerts. *2005<sup>t</sup>* / Manfred Werder: ‘(I am going to play) *2005<sup>t</sup>* (by) Manfred Werder’. Whether on the page or in concert, this amounts to a *parergonal* practice – it makes the precedent border of the piece manifest by promising that what follows will be the work thereby announced. So, in Werder’s earlier piece *für eine(n) oder einige ausführende(n)* – also a bilingual score – one understands that the title relates to the body of the work in the usual manner –

manfred werder  
*für eine(n) oder einige ausführende(n)* (2001–)  
[German text of the piece]

– and the English version that follows is announced by its translated title:

*for one or a few performers* (2001–)  
[English text of the piece]

With *2005<sup>t</sup>*, however, Werder begins to adopt an idiosyncratic title styling: he titles and signs at the foot of the score rather than at its head. So, rather than the structure presented above, *2005<sup>t</sup>* is of the following structure:

ort  
zeit  
  
( klänge )

place  
time  
  
( sounds )

*2005<sup>t</sup>*  
manfred werder

This styling recalls the conventions of citation. In fact, there are many such possibilities here, each with a distinct topography. Does Werder quote himself at length? From this text or from another of the same name? Does he cite his name? That is, (how) does the proper name Manfred Werder belong to the text *2005*<sup>1</sup>? Does the cover page of *2005*<sup>1</sup> give the title of the text, which is then quoted, cited, or given in translation? Does this occur within one text or across the borders of multiple? Does he self-referentially quote or cite *this* quotational or citational text? Is the text an epigraph? Is there text after the epigraph? If not, does the epigraph misquote or misattribute a text that it does (as epigraph) and does not (as text) contain? Is ‘*2005*<sup>1</sup>’ a footnote or epilogue to itself? To its body or to its title? Is it a further marginal articulation in the chain

*2005*<sup>11</sup>

1. ort / zeit<sup>2</sup>
2. ( klänge )<sup>3</sup>
3. place / time<sup>4</sup>
4. ( sounds )<sup>5</sup>
5. *2005*<sup>16</sup>
6. ... ?

These possibilities give rise to the suspicion that this is really a game of en- or even inclosure.<sup>14</sup>

14. Werder’s explicitly quotational pieces – to which we will turn in earnest shortly – also raise such questions. In *2010*<sup>5</sup>, for example, he quotes Meillassoux’s *After Finitude*:

- that *what is* always remain contingent, and that *what is* never be necessary  
(Quentin Meillassoux: *Après la finitude, Essai sur la nécessité de la contingence*, 2006) (transl. Ray Brassier)

manfred werder, *2010*<sup>5</sup>

Does Werder thus enclose Meillassoux’s text in his own, as if the fragment belongs in fact to the quotation in which it is nested? Or does it quote itself quoting Meillassoux in an act of self-nomination which comes from above (title) and below (attribution)? Can we still say above, though, when nothing gives the title *before* the text? Nothing in the body of the document does, and although the digital file has a title, it is not *2010*<sup>5</sup> – it is published under its Wandelweiser catalogue number, ew13.049e. This can be easily changed, of course, so *2010*<sup>5</sup> is – in a particular sense – without a title, or without a proper title, which, strictly speaking is equivalent to being without a title. Yet, is this work not precisely an act of self-nomination? Does the artwork, which is more, perhaps, than a simple quotation, not (im)possibly make itself come into being through the act of *self-quotation*?<sup>15</sup>

15. - that *what is* always remain contingent, and that *what is* never be necessary  
(Quentin Meillassoux: *Après la finitude, Essai sur la nécessité de la contingence*, 2006) (transl. Ray Brassier)

manfred werder, *2010*<sup>5</sup>

Dave Bainbridge, *165m15*

It is not at all clear that in the syntagma ‘place / time // ( sounds )’ place and time define the spatio-temporal location of a musical realisation as it is conventionally understood. In fact, these directions are so indeterminate in what they apparently prescribe to a performer – context and action – that they can be referred to no less appropriately as conditions of possibility for music. There must be space and time for music to have a medium. *2005'* is not ‘just’ a musical score, then; it is a score for making scores, a scoring of score-making, a score for making scores for making music or for making music in the form of scores: [place] / [time] // [( sounds )]. It is possible – trivial, even – to construct *2006'* and *2006''* on precisely this basis. *2005'* is perhaps the score for the scores of *2006'* and *2006''*. Nevertheless, these scores are no more simply scores for making music: they too are metatexts, placeholders composed of placeholders – they are for *exchange* without titration or law. [A time] is no more determinate than [time] (indeed, [a time] is precisely indefinite), and the multiplicity of [places] does not denote any concrete singularity of [place] – they are distinct only in grammatical number. *2005'*, then, is not just a score for making scores, but a score for making scores that are themselves scores for making scores. Given the proliferation of the text’s self-reference, it is also clear that *2005'* is the score for making the score of *2005'*. Sounds ([( sounds )]) are bracketed in this process: they are promised but not presented, perhaps in perpetuity. This debt itself, *as itself*, as the true or proper value of ( sounds ) which are put to work on credit *as credit*, might never be called in, which is to say that this art can be put to work or circulated (as I am doing here) without ( sounds ) ever appearing as such.

#### WRITING OF THE THING

From 2008, quotation occupies a central role in Werder’s compositional practice. His texts are soon dominated by quotations – ostensibly, they even comprise only quotations and their citations. On his personal website, Werder refers to these texts under the aegis of two series: ‘found sentences’ and ‘found words’. The ‘found sentence’ series begins with *2008'*, though this might be best understood as the series’s prototype: its style is distinct from the pieces thereafter as Werder uses text of his own but inflects it with a quotation from Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamaka-Kārikā*. The body of the text concludes with Werder’s title and signature in his usual manner, after which the text seems to annotate itself. An epilogical quote from Deleuze and Félix Guattari and an extension and citation of the quote from Nāgārjuna follow on a new page. With this afterword, Werder encrypts a key of sorts for this series of pieces. If this afterword appears to *follow* the text, it is evident that it is of the utmost significance *in 2008'* and the series it inaugurates. It is as if text and afterword indicate that the sense of these texts lies elsewhere than the score ‘proper’. *2008'* compels its reader to look outside the text because it provides sense to the text at or across its border.



The writing of Francis Ponge, the so-called poet of things, figures frequently within Werder's found sentences; various [year<sup>n</sup>] pieces contain quotations of his work (see 2009<sup>2</sup>, 2009<sup>4</sup>, 2009<sup>5</sup>, 2010<sup>2</sup>, and 2012<sup>3</sup>). As we will see, Ponge and Werder share concerns for things and language. In *Signéponge/ Signsponge*, Derrida notes that the question of whether Ponge really writes of the thing has often been asked – if he 'return[s] to the thing itself' or if, 'on the contrary', he 'project[s] human meanings ... onto things'. He feels that this question circulates endlessly and to little avail because it does not grasp the status of the thing. The thing is not an object of human encounter; nor is it simply the thing in-itself. Before the former, the thing is 'the other, the entirely other which dictates or *writes* the law' of the encounter (12; emphasis added). The thing is the thing inasmuch as it both submits to givenness – it can be an other which is given – and does not do so. The thing really is other than the thing it becomes, the thing that takes its place. Derrida asks if signifying oneself 'in the insignificant (outside meaning and concept)' – indicating or standing in for oneself, however minimally, as the thing does for itself and for the thing – 'isn't the same thing as signing' in the mode of signing one's proper name (40). Yet, every signature, 'as act, splits *immediately* into event and legend' and thus is impossible 'as soon as it feels its own possibility': it is 'already' a stolen signature, 'of a dead man', even if one signs one's 'own name' (108). The thing, then, appears as an other and signs this appearance only on the basis that this signature and the thing that signs are *and* are not equivalent to the thing. The thing can only sign so long as it is other than itself. It inscribes itself in a 'system of classification', 'repetition', and 'placement in abyss' which are only '*as if* of itself' (100; emphasis added). 'The sign sponges the signature', then: in becoming the sign of itself, the sponge (on one hand, an arbitrary example of a thing; on the other, a particular thing of which Ponge writes) has the possibility of signing as sponge – of being sponge – to the extent that it expunges the possibility of true signature (100). Sponge – the thing, the sign, and the thing become sign of itself – signs as itself and as something other. The thing, then, appears and does not appear; it appears as what it is and is not: this is the writing of the sovereign law (or ~~law~~) of the thing.

Werder is attendant to this discourse of the thing. His found words series consists of lists of words of which 'the linguistic origin is not always clear' (Werder 'The Experimental Yearbook'). These, in 2009<sup>[1]</sup> at least, discernibly circulate around ecology – around plants in particular. 2009<sup>1</sup> ('*dost / rue / araucaria / ore / lewfü*') can be parsed on this basis: *dost* (the German '*echter Dost*') refers to *origanum vulgare*, or common oregano; *rue* (*ruta graveolens*) is another plant used as a culinary herb; *araucaria* is the genus to which the monkey puzzle tree (*araucaria araucana*) belongs; *ore*, probably more familiarly, is the mineral deposit from which metals are extracted – ultimately, both etymologically and physically, it is derived from (the) earth; and *lewfü* is a Mapudungun word that translates into English as

river.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, the text of 2009<sup>3</sup> (*‘lucertole / minérale / mora’*) may refer to the suborder *lacertilia* (in Italian, *lucertole*; in English, lizards); minerals (presumably, *minérale* is French); and *mora* might be *mora de Castilla – rubus glaucus*, a species of blackberry, also called Andean raspberry – or a genus of large trees native to South America. Plants are a manifest reference, then, but it is the structure by which they sign that seems most significant. These lists are presented consistently in italics – there is no roman text in relation to which this articulates significance or emphasis. Of course, this might be nothing more than a point of style, but Werder does not set text in italics in this manner elsewhere – quotations in the other [year<sup>n</sup>] pieces are set in roman, as are the more conventional instructions for the *stücke* [year<sup>n</sup>] from 2003–4. Werder only adopts this style in found words pieces, so it is significant. 2008<sup>2</sup> is another such score that is consistently italicised. It is also a bilingual score, in German and English. One imagines that for those who prefer to read in English, the text is typically read, *‘birches / a butterfly / swifts / bats / a fox’*. Certainly, Montgomery reproduces Werder’s similarly styled 2008<sup>6</sup> in this manner: *‘spider / air / eucalyptus / wasp / petals / rain’* (99). The text or texts of 2008<sup>2</sup>, however, sit scarcely spaced apart with no clear margin between – the two interweave:

*birken birches  
ein schmetterling a butterfly  
mausersegler swifts  
fledermäuse bats  
ein fuchs a fox*

And 2008<sup>6</sup> actually reads as follows:

*spinne spider  
luft air  
eukalyptus eucalyptus  
wespe wasp  
blütenblätter petals  
regen rain*

Italics are often used to indicate borrowed or foreign language terms, of course, but here it is as if neither language is native. Nor does either have the graphic or rhythmic priority of beginning the line at the left margin. In fact, these languages cross paths, respond to the call of the other, and (quite literally) interweave without a proper border. Neither language is the proper language of the text, the composer, the reader, *or the thing*. One encounters

16. Mapudungun is a language of the Mapuche, spoken principally in what is now Chile. Colonially, it was referred to as Araucanian, which shares its derivation with the genus mentioned above. ‘Mapudungun’ is itself derived from *mapu* (land) and *dungun* (speech).

a sequence of disturbed branches, of bird songs, of animal cries, which are *never in one's own tongue*. While other found words pieces are not presented as bilingual texts, they are unmoored from any particular language: they are fragmentarily composed of single words that are apparently derived from different languages yet lack the context of an utterance in the language to which they apparently belong; each word belongs to no (sensical) larger syntactical unit. They have no proper language. They are the language of what lies beneath the human – earth, the stone, the plant, the animal – and, therefore, has no access to language. The economy of this ‘of’ – this language *of* – would have to be founded on all that has been said of counterfeit money, then. No thing signs as what it is, purely and simply, and there is nothing to accredit the value of the sign. Signifiers, seeds: they float on the wind.

#### SIGNING THE MEADOW

Of Werder's found sentences, I am particularly interested in 2009<sup>2</sup>, which comprises two quotations, the first from Badiou and the second from Ponge. The first quotes *Le Nombre et les Nombres* and its English translation, *Number and Numbers*:

ce qui « commence » n'est pas le 1 comme signe opaque de l' « unité », mais le zéro comme suture de toute langue à l'être de la situation dont elle est la langue

that which ‘begins’ is not the 1 as opaque sign of ‘unity’, but zero as the suture of all language to the being of the situation of which it is the language

Although Mackay's translation is cited, this is slightly different than the equivalent text that appears in various copies of *Number and Numbers* to which I have referred. In these, the passage reads, ‘[w]hat “begins” is not the 1 as opaque sign of “unity”, but zero as the suture of all language to the being of the situation whose language it is’ (51). The two are not so different that there is an obvious disparity in meaning, and it is possible that this text has been changed in reprinting. If it is a copy error, it is a trivial one. Even still, it is not trivial that *there is* a difference. It is significant that these translations circulate as if they were one and the same, because it indicates that this apparently quotational art may be other than it seems or presents itself to be. It could be engaged, for example, in the covert production of derivatives. Quotation, which always at least *risks* misquotation, is subject to the perhaps of the counterfeit because between the writing of meaning, exchanges of context, the infelicity of translation (specifically and in general), the self-othering of the text's reiteration, and the possibilities of error or even deceit, what is passed as quotation never has a securable, self-identical value. In personal correspondence, Werder indicates no intention to pass one thing

as another. Even still, this second signature is no less corruptible than the first. One does not know for sure that he does not cover his tracks or even revel in deceit with a knowing wink: although he reports that he does not recall or have access to the precise source of the translation he used, upon looking at a copy of *Number and Numbers*, he ‘wonder[s]’ what the indication in the colophon that the text was “Reprinted” wants to say actually’. Is this not precisely the question his work seems to provoke here?

The second quotation in *2009*<sup>2</sup> is from Ponge’s proème (a neologistic portmanteau of *prose* and *poème*) *La Fabrique du Pré*. This workbook or diary is a proem (i.e., a preface) to the proème ‘Le Pré’, the writing of which it chronicles. As with all Ponge quotations in the [year<sup>n</sup>] series, Werder only provides the French: ‘le pré, aussi, est *une façon d’être*’. Lee Fahnestock’s translation, *The Making of the Pré* (with its corresponding proème, ‘The Pré’), gives this sentence as ‘[t]he *pré* is, as well, a *manner of being*’ (45). She leaves *pré* untranslated as its evocation is not only of the meadow (as it translates into English) but of the prefix – the prefix of prefixes, in fact – *pré-*, the homophonous *prêt* (prepared), *près* (near or close), the *prai-* of *prairie*, the near-homophonous *proche* (near or close), *paré* (adorned), *préparé* (prepare), ... . This significance, she feels, ‘makes any translation in English inadequate’ (‘Translator’s Introduction’ 9). Werder does give his own English translation elsewhere, in ‘The Field’: ‘The field, as well, is a way of being’. This text was prepared for an event called Field Fest, however, so the decisions to translate it and to do it so may well be fairly pragmatic. Certainly, per Fahnestock’s account, it risks another kind of misquotation. The meadow, the field, the *pré* – what is the meadow, then? This is the question I understand *2009*<sup>2</sup> to pose. Zali Gurevitch’s ‘What Is a Field?’ asks this after Ponge too, and, clearly, it motivates Melia and Montgomery’s contributions to *Writing the Field*. Here, though, the question already seems to be other than itself, as it is immediately substituted by others: what is the *pré*? Has Ponge prepared a *pré* for Werder? If so, what is it? Ultimately, we will see that it is not at all simple to identify this meadow, field, or *pré* because the *pré* refers outside of itself abyssally. Returning to economic metaphors, both thing and sign are given on credit without accreditation.

#### UN TRAIT GRAS

Fahnestock’s case for leaving *pré* untranslated is compelling – certain homophones prevail in English too, but the particular polysemia and quasi-polysemia of *pré* is in total untranslatable. But what then is the *pré* to which Ponge refers and which Werder quotes in *2009*<sup>2</sup>? Fahnestock’s translation guides us gently to one possible understanding: the verb and the adverb switch places – ‘*le pré, aussi, est ...*’ becomes ‘the *pré* is, as well ...’ rather than ‘the *pré*, as well, is ...’. This change is not strictly necessary to render the sentence in English language syntax; it indicates how we are to understand a sentence that has various possibilities:

- Besides whatever else it is, the *prés* is a being.
- The *prés* is *another* manner of being – it, too, is a being or kind of being.
- Besides the meadow that it is, the *prés* is also a manner (way) of being: being-before, -near, -towards, -in preparation for, -adorned, ... .
- The *prés* is caught in the exchange of these possible meanings such that being-*prés*, as we will see, is always *also* something other than it is. If this is what the *prés* is, then it is necessarily other than itself – something before, close to, or in preparation for the *prés*.

In rotating the copula and the adverb, Fahnestock indicates that we are to understand the first of these possibilities, I think – that whatever else it might be taken as, the *prés* is also a being. This agrees with the way Ponge continues: ‘Une façon d’être, c’est à dire un caractère, un individu’ – ‘[a] manner of being, that is to say a personality, an individual’ (44, 45). As Fahnestock indicates, this meaning could be inferred to be primary. She makes sense of the *prés* by enclosing the field of meaning, then. Werder does too, though his translation of *façon* as ‘way’ rather than ‘manner’ obscures this reference to the ontic being that the *prés* is. This is not to say that one is correct, however. Ponge hedges against any enclosure of the *prés*: The diarised entries of *The Making of the Prés* indicate a five-day gap between the text Werder quotes and its clarification or, rather, what only *seems* to be a clarification, because while Ponge’s text charts his investigation of the *prés*, it is in truth also an observation of the growth and transformation of the *prés*. It is not clear, then, that he wanders in a *prés* that is the same on 22 October 1960 and five days later. He returns to a *prés* that he has prepared for himself, but this *prés* was prepared to become other. In other words, this is not a return to the same, purely and simply. His *prés* is, in a sense, foreign to form. Indeed, he (via Fahnestock) returns to the *prés* as a *façon d’être* in ‘The Prés’, where it has *become* a way of being:

Since we are concerned here more with a way of being  
 Than with a platter served up before our eyes,  
 Speech is more suitable than paint  
 Which would never do. (225)

This at least suggests that the *prés*’s manner of being is indeterminate, but Ponge also suggests here that the *prés* cannot be adequately represented: it is somehow beyond the capacity of the static image or presentation as such. Language is more suitable than paint because it self-consciously involves a taking place which indicates the other with the same: the *prés* is towards the *prés*, is close to it, prepares it and prepares for it, and adorns it. Thus, he suggests the *prés* is a mode or procedure of being rather than a being – a way of *signing*, one might say.

‘The *Pré*’, the proème of which *The Making of the Pré* is the proem, proème, and *pré* – the before, the environment, and the manner of being – ends with a line under which Ponge signs and which fennel and purslane ‘tomorrow will grow above’ (231). By convention, Ponge’s signature does not belong to the proème: Derrida writes that ‘in order to sign, one has to stop one’s text’ (*Signéponge/Signsponge* 32).<sup>17</sup> Ponge, it appears, disagrees. He addresses the typographer: ‘Place here, I beg you, the final stroke. // Then beneath the line, without the slightest space, couch my name’ (‘The *Pré*’ 231). He *prepares* this grave conclusion by sowing F and P, which will grow into fennel and purslane above. Ponge shares his initials with fennel and purslane (*fenouil* and *prêle*, another near homophone of *pré*), of course, but these letterforms also somewhat resemble these plants: much as the stems and fronds of fennel dissect, the stem of the F divides into bars, inclined, as if through phototropism or flaccidity, to the right; purslane’s upright stem and oval leaves are evoked by the stem and counter of the P; the descenders of *f* and *p* root in the earth. If ‘The *Pré*’ does not *contain* ‘Francis Ponge’, it is nonetheless prepared for his name to grow into. In fact, it awaits this – the proème he signs is ‘done with’ only ‘[p]rematurely’ (230). It awaits the rebirth of F and P in a *pré* above the bold line – the ‘*trait gras*’ – below which they are sown (*Making* 224).<sup>18</sup> That line of grass may sign the conclusion of ‘The *Pré*’, then, but it is not where it concludes. As a *pré*, it is a *pré* of the *pré*: the before of the *pré* which awaits the coming of the *pré*. It is also the making of *prés* in what comes *before* ‘The *Pré*’. In the handwritten copy of the passage Werder quotes, Ponge underlines *une façon d’être*. In the typeset translation, Fahnestock italicises ‘manner of being’, taking this to be an equivalent expression of emphasis, but what this typesetting ignores is that, in Ponge’s own hand, *The Making of the Pré* is replete with underlining, which is to say replete with *prés* that precede, prepare for, and are prepared by the line beneath which Ponge’s ashes/seeds are scattered and above which the *pré* will grow – the line that prepares the *pré* and paradoxically prepares the *prés* that prepare it.<sup>19</sup> After Ponge and the *pré* sign, *prés* emerge throughout *The Making of the Pré*, but they were also already there. *Pré* precedes *pré* and becomes *pré*. For all that Ponge says paint ‘would never do’, this is an image of a meadow, a vegetal bed that will be adorned with flowers. Yet, it is not so much ‘a platter served up before our eyes’ as the becoming image of becoming *pré*, which is a manner of being of the *pré*.

Fff pPp ff F ppPp fff Ffff pPp FpF pFpFf pPPp

17. Werder quotes this in and as 2013<sup>4</sup>.

18. Fahnestock does not include this typographical annotation in her translation, but it is present in the facsimile of the handwritten text and in the new French edition of *La Fabrique du Pré* edited by Andrea Guiducci.

19. Guiducci’s edition reproduces this styling: ‘Le pré, aussi, est une façon d’être’ (48).

Ponge's text *is* stopped, though, so some accounting of the *pré* must be possible. What is in a *pré* or, if such an exchange is legitimate, meadow? Ponge writes that the *pré* is 'a species slightly more consistent [i.e., thicker – more substantial] than a liquid, mixture of the kingdoms, of the three kingdoms, mineral, animal, and vegetal' (57). There is an extensive ecology of the *pré*: plants (fennel, purslane, ...), animals (the *pré* is, for example, 'crossed in flight' by 'insects and occasionally by birds', much as it is '[f]lown over' – or flown over – by the acute accent of its *é*), fungi, micro-organisms (yeasts, bacteria, viruses – on epidermises, hair, feathers, fur, in the microbiota of the 'living' and the 'dead', and carried in the air), earth ('which is already by, in, itself, a complex of remains of the three kingdoms'), stones, detritus, dust, ... (43, 59). These pass in and out of the *pré* without respect for its borders and with and for the *pré* without validation. The *pré* exhibits something akin to the corruption of *oikos* (eco- – household) that Marder reads in the becoming-dust of the (living) body which is 'bereft of interiority'; 'all skin, an exteriority folded upon itself', epidermis becomes dust becomes epidermis ... (*Dust* ch. 3 'the generation of dust'). The *pré* too is without interiority – without *oikos*, home, property, or properness – because there is no *pré* that is not caught up in an economy in which *pré* is the preparation of what – possibly *pré* – comes after. Where Ponge writes, '[f]rom (since) rock to (until) water', the *pré* 'pumps, inhales and exhales, and flourishes', he says not only that the *pré* is situated geographically between rock and water but also that the *pré* was in preparation since it *was* rock rather than *pré* and it will prepare the *pré* again when it *becomes* water rather than *pré* (*Making* 24). Whatever is before or after the *pré*, then, prepares a *pré*. So, it is the *pré* of the *pré*, but this is also what the *pré* is. There is no 'proper' of *pré*, then, no unified or unifiable reference, because it is outside of itself. Before the *pré* is accountable, it is prepared.

Thus, we come to Badiou: 'that which "begins" is not the 1 as opaque sign of "unity", but zero as suture of all language to the being of the situation of which it is the language'. He writes this when appraising Giuseppe Peano's mathematical system, which, while clearly 'strong in its effects', uses undefined signs sufficiently liberally to leave it 'at the mercy of meaning'. Despite its mathematical significance, it lacks formal rigour and so remains 'poor in thought' (*Number* 49–50). Peano's axioms stipulate the irreducible meanings of N (number – specifically, positive integer), 1 (unity, being-one),  $a + 1$  (the successor of  $a$ ), and = (equality). For our purposes here, it is the first two of these that are significant. Peano's first axiom states  $1 \in \mathbb{N}$ , or 1 is a number (what is unified is a number). While this is subsequently revised such that  $0 \in \mathbb{N}$ ,<sup>20</sup> Badiou still feels that Peano overlooks the significance of

20. N then names nonnegative integers (0, 1, 2, 3, ...) rather than positive integers (1, 2, 3, ...). We should note in passing that natural numbers is a disputed term inasmuch as it may apply to either set.

the ‘revolutionary statement “zero is a number”’ because the grounding premise of unity leaves the significance of zero un- or underthought (50). It is against this ground that Badiou writes in the text Werder quotes. For Badiou and his ontology, of course, the count is grounded not upon unity but on the void (i.e., nothing – zero), which indicates the originary not-being-one of every one, and through which every one is sutured to being. That is, it indicates that being-one is putative. There is something before (*pré*) the *pré*, then – something before the *pré* is counted as *pré*. In affirming a worldly significance of number which demands to be thought, Badiou proffers that ‘[w]hat counts – in the sense of what is valued – is that which is counted’. Indeed, ‘everything that can be numbered must be valued’ (2). Valuation is always accredited by a count, then, but this count is not itself accredited: ‘no one’, he writes, ‘can present themselves as an individual without stating in what way they count, for whom or for what they are really counted’ – that is, one *offers* one’s value oneself (3). A counted one has a value – at least, it has the appearance of a value – but uncountability, the perhaps, and the perhaps of the counterfeit each haunt this value. If the *pré* of the *pré* is anterior to the count (i.e., if it comes before what is counted as *pré*), how does one count the *pré*? How could one do so without it being absolutely obvious that something – some *pré* – precedes this counted unity? A certain non-one of the *pré* appears, in fact, in *The Making of the Pré*, in a *pré* that flourishes above Ponge’s underlining. Perhaps only by the fortune of an under- or overzealous hand, Ponge writes, ‘[l]e *pré*, aussi, est une façon d’être’ (*Making* 44). The *pré* escapes the one, and the one overflows the *pré*.

The *pré* is not strictly foreign to economy, however. *Pré* is close to *prêt* (prepared), and the preparedness of the *pré* is a ‘loan of Nature to man and beast (a willing loan made by Nature)’ (41). Ponge suggests here that the *pré* is given *on credit*. He goes on, though, to say that ‘our nature’ – both ‘what we are’ (our manner of being) and ‘what is offered to us for (by) our planet’ (what is given as and by nature, nature as it is given, as it gives itself, or what it gives in place of itself) – ‘proposes (procures), offers the *prés*’ (III; italics replaced with underlining). This transaction is more obscure than Ponge may appear to suggest. What, ultimately, is counted for nature, Nature, or our nature? And do these natures have any unity? That is, what is the thing that proposes and procures the *prés*, the thing with which a contract is formed, the thing that gives on credit, or whose procurement is taken? One sees an economy in motion here: from proposal to procurement to offer; from givenness to grasping the thing to the possibility of taking the thing. This is what nature – whatever that is – does to the *pré*. It does not just do it to the *pré*, though: ‘our nature has prepared us – (for) – a *pré*’ (205). Our nature is a *pré* (and a precondition) which gives us the *pré* – it gives us the possibility of encountering the *pré* – but it also gives us *to* the *pré*, to its unaccredited count and to the being-*pré* of the *pré*. This is not a straightforward extension of credit because we still are not sure what, precisely, the *pré*



is – the *prés* that is our nature, that we take, and to which we are perhaps given. Ponge claims that ‘[t]here is a vast difference between *le prés*, *les prés*, *la prée*, *la prairie*’: ‘The *prés*’ – plural of *prés* – ‘are contrary to the woods and the fields’ – they are nothing but the meadows; ‘[t]he *prée*’, an archaic, regional variant of the word *prés*, ‘is the *prés* in flower’ – it is adorned, no longer prepared but rather flourishing; and ‘[t]he *prairie*, a gathering of prairie plants’ (47). The *prés*, apparently, is none of these. It is rather ‘the field of decision’, the site of combat or dispute (one could also say, of event, the ordeal of the undecidable, *Walten*, *Ereignis*, sovereignty, the gift, ... [47]). Ponge illustrates this with a stick-figure duel:

*Le Duel*

1. | × |
2. | × |
3. — |

In translation and in the Guiducci edition, the upright figure remains in situ, but in Ponge’s hand, it seems to retreat from the scene (132, 133; 93). The *prés* is the field of decision many times over, therefore: does one challenge? Does one fight or flee? The duel having been decided, the dispute settled decisively, does one flee the field? One always risks having no chance to exit the field of decision when one puts one’s life at stake, certainly, but if decision remains trapped in the ordeal of the undecidable, as I have suggested it must, can one *ever* leave this *prés*? The *prés* is the field in which the undecidable *prés* is decided – in which the *prés* and its value are calculated and professed. Before this decision, the *prés* has no consistency; its ‘vegetal tissue is the most united (though the most divided), the most *covering* (though the thinnest), the most simple (though the most varied), the most modest, the finest’ (71). The decision, the impossible assignment of determinate value, is necessary for the *prés* to be *prés*. ‘Everything is a question of scale’, Ponge writes, which is to say, of *measure* (71). This value, however, is always subject to the possibility of counterfeiting. The possibility of the *prés*, like the possibility of the sovereign, is in the extent to which it is *not*: there is no final, legal, or truthful value of the *prés*, of what it passes for, or how it circulates. Thus, no decision can exorcise the zero through which the *prés* is sutured to being or to its ‘own’ being. This disordered identity is what is at stake in the logics of the counterfeit and sovereignty. The *prés*’s acute accent ‘is the closest possible to the dot on the i’, the tittle which, along with the cross of the t, purports to validate, much like the signature which comes after a text is fully stopped (41). If this dot validates what occurs with the I, it is this I of which the very truth is in question – in question with something that is not the i but the ‘closest possible’ to its signature. Nature is *payé en nature*, as Ponge cites from the Littré dictionary he favours – paid (back) in kind, though in what kind – in giving what – one can, perhaps, only begin to say.



It seems to me that *2009*<sup>2</sup> is an art of the taking place of *pré*, then – of preparation, quotation, and citation, written and real. Nonetheless, as the *pré* is always other than it is given to be and counted for, this is necessarily an art of credit without accreditation. Barrett finds Werder's quotational scores to represent a 'critical position with respect to musical authorship', even that he 'subversive[ly]' implies that he 'stumbles across' the text of another author and a piece is thereby 'formed in its entirety' (58). Is my *pré* Werder's, then, and is Werder's *pré* Ponge's? Perhaps not, but the *pré* is prepared to take the place of an other *pré*. Ultimately, stated baldly, *the pré is nothing but the unaccredited taking place of an unaccreditable thing*. Barrett contends that these quotational texts may contemplate their 'expressive potential' as 'discursive musical work[s]' yet it is not clear that they are able ultimately to 'actually say anything at all' (even if they can at least 'paradoxically' enunciate this [57]). Conversely, the question *2009*<sup>2</sup> provokes for me is not so much what music can express as what can be expressed or express itself as music and how. It is not clear to me, for example, that Werder's texts are *parergonal* and given to disappear in performance as Barrett suggests. Inasmuch as the foregoing analyses participate in an exchange of sense to give these works to sense – even insisting thematically upon the constitutive traversal of borders, as music does after Nancy – these pass for and as the aural actualisation of these works. If conventional sonic musical actualisation has a structural function here, it may be nothing more than underwriting this writing of the sense of music. Because music is subject to the logic of the counterfeit, its value and sense are thus unsecured as they are secured. The import of the logic of counterfeiting I have elaborated is that whatever is given – in fact, *whatever there is* – is conditioned by a perhaps of the promise. Montgomery argues that rather than 'conjuring' nature, Werder's scores testify to 'the world's unavailability'. They 'only present a trace of that world', and music becomes a means of 'rendering' its 'flux' (99). Yet, what the absolutisation of sovereignty provides is a means to think this unavailability – and the thing with it – as available via the counterfeit sense of sense. I think, then, that *2009*<sup>2</sup> is or passes for – it is much the same thing – a music of the meadow, an art of plants, not only because it represents a meadow but because its *pré* is both deep-rooted and, after Marder, an 'expression without an inner core, without depth' (Marder qtd. in Gibson 26). It is all (leaf-)face and root, all head and tail, but a face with nothing behind it and a rooting outside, beneath, beyond the *pré*.

## CONCLUSION

### Impossible, through and through

#### IMPOSSIBILITY: TRACE ONTOLOGY AND THE SENSE OF MUSIC

Let us return, then, to the questions with which we began:

1. Is there a significant ontology of the impossible?
2. If so, what is its bearing upon the sense of music?

I think – and I have sought to show – that a significant ontology of the impossible is indeed feasible. In fact, for me, impossibility is an ontological concern of both the exceptional – thought here under the aegis of the event – and being in general – thought here through the absolute register of sovereignty. The implications of impossibility are manifest in and across various schemata of the event: in one way or another, possibility is always possibly insufficient to *what happens*. The event, then, is a real occurrence of the impossible that corrupts the world of possibility. I do not think this underwrites the thinkability of a World of immortal justice, however. This is corrupted from the outset by injustice and mortality (as the Worlds of life and thought are by death and a certain nonmeaning). It is with this in mind that I elaborate sovereignty – a quasi-deifying political concept, recall – as absolute dismemberment: the decapitation of subjectivity and the fracturing of the absolute into self-othering place-taking. Sovereignty provides a means to think the inherence of impossible possibility in the absolute because it permits a certain access to the world beyond thought that Meillassoux calls the Kingdom of the dead. This allows for – and amounts to – a minimal ontology of the impossible in which beings are and are not themselves and being is and is not *in-itself*. Indeed, because the ipseity of thought and the absolute alike are defaced by the ‘meaningless’ signification of ontological place-taking, thinking this particular imbrication of givenness and the absolute amounts to a contradictory (anti)correlationism.

Impossibility, of course, guides and thematises the musical readings that elaborate this ontological discourse. I have attended to pieces I take to defy proper sense – to be inconsistent and to refuse characterisation (or adequate characterisation, at least) as sonic experiences. *Silent Prayer* is an unwritten nonwork, so its analysis and articulation grapple with the expression of something inexpressible (i.e., nothing). *Speculative Solution* is a novel form of absolute music only to the extent that it is *really* arbitrary, so its meaning is sought in meaninglessness – its absolute exchangeability. And Werder's pieces resonate in senses other than the sonic in ways that take the place of the sonic – in other words, they demonstrate that the sense of music is always *possibly* counterfeit. These works all entail a certain non-sense and a certain bracketing of sound. Nonetheless, they do give themselves to sense. This, in fact, I take to be a minimal definition of musical realisation, on which basis this thesis offers not only accounts but also *performances* of music. It does so in various senses: it produces a parasitic companion piece, it offers a place-taking analysis as a place-taking arbitrary object, it draws and crosses typographic borders, ... – ultimately, it rehearses music in thought. Sceptical readers may well contend that such procedures of reading amount to something other than music strictly speaking – thought about music, thought that treats music at its periphery, as if it were concrete poetry, a thought experiment, or a set of problems of thought, rather than the music it was written to be – but what the ontologisation of impossibility enjoins us to think is that these senses of music have *taken place*: they have taken place as and beyond a possibility of music – the logic of the event – and they have taken place *as if they were* a sense of music – the logic of the counterfeit. These musical propositions, then, *express* the music that they write and that underwrites them in the circulation of an economy of sense that music does and does not have. Music resounds in place of sound with the impossible.





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APPENDIX (PREVIOUS PUBLICATION): ‘THE SILENCE OF THE WORLD’

This short article was published in a special edition of *Malice* (vol. 10, 2020, *Derrida 2020 : frontières, bords, limites / Borders, Edges, Limits*) which served in lieu of a planned conference of the same name. Correspondingly, the text is written as a script for a conference paper. It contains and represents work-in-progress for chapters two and six of this thesis and includes some material on Badiou’s ontology from chapter one in condensed form. Here, I have preserved the text as published, albeit with some typographical and bibliographical corrections.

<https://cielam.univ-amu.fr/malice/derrida-2020-frontieres-bords-limites-borders-edges-limits>



What we require is silence; but what silence requires is that I go on talking.

(John Cage, *Lecture on Nothing*, 1959)

The manner in which I am beginning is not that which I had envisioned, though it will seem apposite upon reflection. At the time of writing, in the wake of the police-murder of George Floyd, we are in the midst of a political situation in which the ongoing imperilment of the lives and rights of black people is once-more contested in full view of an attentive world. That yet-another such killing demands the intervention of widespread protest to hold the justice system to account testifies to state endorsement of this excessive apparatus, and demonstrates the latter’s concomitant reinvention as a machination of totalising power. The violence that silence inflicts upon the persecuted occupies a central position in this discourse. The particular orientation of this essay might therefore seem at once timely yet also at odds with the spirit of the moment, as the violent potential of silence also directs this text; however, where the aforementioned case is concerned with complicity in an egregious excess of state over citizen, my treatment considers silence as a significant absence which – through being unrepresented – indicates the non-totality of world or state. There is therefore another violence of silence, one which is in fact a necessary figure for political and artistic invention as it affirms the threat of rupture which no order can foreclose.

SILENCE

Silence has, in some sense, been rich with content since the composer John Cage’s notable preoccupation therewith. Famously, his interest was inflamed by the experience of hearing the operation of his own body in an anechoic chamber. He writes:

There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot. ... I entered [an anechoic chamber] at Harvard University several years ago and heard two sounds, one high and one low. When I described them to the engineer in charge, he informed me that the high one was my nervous system in operation, the low one my blood in circulation. Until I die there will be sounds. And they will continue following my death. (8)

The apparent impossibility of silence was then artistically formalised in the 'silent' piece *4'33"*, which presented the decoupling of musical content from both its determinacy – conformity to a prescribed and structured set of materials – and intentionality – enactment by a suitably orientated subject. The score directs the performer to sit tacet, yet those listening do not encounter silence. Rather, they become attentive to whatever sounds occur in the vicinity at the time, though these may have passed unnoticed otherwise. What is presented as silence is contaminated by sound, suggesting that one can understand the former only in correlation with the latter, rather than as its proper opposite. Meanwhile, the vulgar sounding-world displaces and interrupts that of structured composition, demonstrating the untenability of their opposition. What was thought external to the work, then, was in fact that upon which it immanently depended. Now, this all seems straightforward enough in relation to Cage's writing, and of course it also conforms quite readily to the sense of familiar deconstructive readings: *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*. Indeed, that silence can be understood to frame sonorous musical content has seen it coupled elsewhere with *parergonality*. Richard Littlefield's 'The Silence of the Frames', for example, evaluates the framing silences around musical works as well as their registral limits (the highest and lowest notes used, as well as the capacity of human hearing) on this basis, while G. Douglas Barrett proposes that *4'33"* 'may be considered the anti-autonomous artwork par excellence' on account of its characteristically permeable border (459). However, these trajectories are not my present concern. Rather, where Cage thought silence principally as the unattainable absence of sound, I'll progress here towards an understanding of silence as a suture of the unrepresented to presentation. Correspondingly, I will treat points of the philosophies of Jean-Luc Nancy (world and sense), Jacques Derrida (counterfeiting), and Alain Badiou (the void) in turn, elaborating a discourse on-and-of counterfeit sense before proposing an indicative co-extension of silence with the void.

#### SENSE/WORLD

We turn first, then, to the question of world. Let's note, preliminarily, that Heidegger's use of world transforms across his writing, and while it

variously connotes the conceptual history of world, *kosmos*, *mundus*; beings and humanity's relation to them; the world as mundane environment (and so on), it's ultimately its signification of human civilisation as a regime of sense-making (opposed to earth or nature) and humanity's power to form it which is our concern here. In 'The Origin of the Work of Art', Heidegger writes:

[W]hat is this item, a world? ... On the path we must here follow, the nature of world can only be indicated. Even this indication is confined to warding off that which might initially distort our view into the essence of things.

World is not a mere collection of the things – countable and uncountable, known and unknown – that are present at hand. Neither is world a merely imaginary framework added by our representation to the sum of things that are present. *World worlds*, and is more fully in being than all those tangible and perceptible things in the midst of which we take ourselves to be at home. ... By the opening of a world, all things gain their lingering and hastening, their distance and proximity, their breadth and their limits. In worlding there gathers that spaciousness from out of which the protective grace of the gods is gifted or is refused. Even the doom of the absence of the god is a way in which world worlds. (22–3)

A world, then, does not merely collect its parts into an encyclopaedia, nor does it supplement them after the fact as a retroactive structure of representation. Rather, Heidegger's world is what structures and permits the relation of parts to one another such that they come to exist as they are, to meaningfully be and to be meaningful. Indeed, he continues: 'World is never an object that stands before us and can be looked at. World is that always-nonobjectual to which we are subject as long as the paths of birth and death, blessing and curse, keep us transported into being' (23). So, a world is not a determinate object to be encountered but an enveloping environment of being, a total frame of signification in which we as living human beings make sense; to make sense is to be in a world. When Nancy suggests then that 'there is no longer any sense of the world', he refers to the disruption of the world as vouchsafe for determinate meaning (*Sense 4*). This disruption is radical inasmuch as this crisis is not only insurmountable in fact incomprehensible:

We know ... that it is *the end of the world*, and there is nothing illusory ... about this knowledge. Those who strive to denounce the supposed illusion of the thought of an 'end' are correct, as opposed to those who present the 'end' as a cataclysm or as the

apocalypse of an annihilation. Such thought is still entirely caught up in the regime of a signifying sense ... . But the same adversaries of the thought of the [cataclysmic] 'end' are incorrect in that they do not see that the words with which one designates that which is coming to an end (history, philosophy, politics, art, world...) are ... entirely determined within a regime of *sense* that is coming full circle and completing itself before our (thereby blinded) eyes. (4–5)

Thought of the end of the world as apocalyptic remains trapped within the system of signification and is thus incoherent, as the end is itself signified as apocalypse. Renouncing this signifier of the end is insufficient, however, for so long as the signification of and within the world is preserved intact the regime of signification remains secure. Nancy suggests therefore that 'this cannot mean that we are confronted merely with the end of a certain "conception" of the world ... . It means, rather that there is no longer any assignable signification of "world", or that the "world" is subtracting itself, bit by bit, from the entire regime of signification available to us' (4–5). Crucially, no transcendence beyond the limits of the world may grant sense to it. Nothing precedes world to confer meaning (i.e. a metaphysical god), nor can there be any promise of future reconciliation. Each would confer sense beyond the world and thus, as sense is precisely signification within the world, immediately lapse into world once more. Indeed, Nancy notes that 'if one understands by world a 'totality of signifyingness or significance', no doubt there is no philosophy that has thought a beyond of the world. The appearance of such a thought and of the contradiction it entails comes from the Christian sense of world as that which precisely lacks all sense or has its sense beyond itself' (54).

While sense and world, then, structure one another, the absence of 'a proper and present signified, the signifier of the proper and present as such', precludes the strict coherence of either; of legitimate sense, or of consistent world (3). Sense is itself subject to this un-grounding of sense; it has 'no unity of sense, no original matrix of sense, not even a univocal etymological derivation' (76). Sense, then, refers variously to meaning, approximation, sensuous experience, our bodily senses, and so on. Significantly though, after the eradication of sense it also refers to sense as remainder, or to a sense after sense. Where for Heidegger inanimate matter is without world, for Nancy bodies (animate and inanimate) form this matrix of sense. He writes that:

[A]ll bodies, each outside the others, make up the inorganic body of sense. The stone does not 'have' any sense. But sense touches the stone: it even collides with it, and this is what we are doing here.

In a sense – but what sense – sense is touching. The being-  
here, side by side, of all these beings-there (beings-thrown,  
beings-sent, beings-abandoned to the there). (63)

Touching, then, describes the contingent relations of contingent objects as what gives or makes sense. In the wake of the abandonment or failure of sense, sense remains in the guise of the trace of material reality taken up in the movement of *différance*. It is here that another sense of world emerges, ‘in the very opening of the abandonment of sense, as the opening of the world’ (3).

Now, Nancy frequently emphasises bodily sense in articulating this deconstructive materialism. In *Listening*, for example, he argues that, as and for sense, music must resound, act upon the listener as an incursion upon the body but, more significantly, upon itself in combination, in anticipation, in retention. This temporal structure is music’s distinguishing character, which philosophy might imitate: ‘Whereas painting, dance, or cinema always retain in a certain present – even if it is fleeting – the movement and opening that form their soul (their sense, their truth), music, by contrast, never stops exposing the present to the imminence of a deferred presence, one that is more ‘to come’ [*à venir*] than any ‘future’ [*avenir*].’ (66). Music remains infinitely open to the coming of alterity at cost of its own true sense as sovereign; it can only be given to sense through the insufficiency of sense. Now, musical silence in the sense I have first alluded to conforms to this temporal structure, of course, but would silence thought in a more radical sense? As non-sound silence would act upon no body; it would not give itself to be sensed; it would transmit nothing; it would protract, retain, and resound with nothing; it would have no sense: for this would be precisely that which lacks sense. Silence must therefore be non-sonic yet bound to the sense of sound; void of content, yet it must persist temporally in spite of its absence, as trace of nothing. If, then, silence is not to be relinquished as unspeakable, it must meaningfully present itself, but present itself as nothing.

#### COUNTERFEIT SENSE

The sense of the above will become clear in correspondence with Derrida’s reading of Baudelaire’s short story, ‘Counterfeit Money’, the narrative of which runs so: after leaving a tobacconist’s, the narrator and his friend encounter a beggar. Both give money, though the friend’s offering is considerably larger. This prompts the narrator to voice his admiration of his friend – ‘[y]ou are right; next to the pleasure of feeling surprise, there is none greater than to cause a surprise’. The friend then reveals that the coin he gave was counterfeit. The narrator ponders whether good fortune or bad might befall the beggar upon giving the counterfeit coin, before the friend surprises the narrator by repeating his own statement back to him – ‘[y]es, you are right; there is no sweeter pleasure than to surprise a man by giving him more than

he hopes for'. The titular reference of 'Counterfeit Money' might seem immediately apparent, yet Derrida's account demonstrates that it in fact has many possible references.

1. 'Counterfeit Money' refers to the counterfeit coin – to counterfeit money as an object; counterfeit money, though, is legitimately an object, for what would a false object be?
2. In giving itself as real money although it is not titrated or vouchsafed, counterfeit money is a counterfeit sign. In signifying successfully, though, it would surely in fact be legitimate. What, indeed, would a false sign be?

'Counterfeit Money' refers to the fictionality of

3. the story which Baudelaire tells, or
4. which the (supposedly) fictional narrator tells, or
5. to the (supposedly) fictional narrator.

The borders of what is included in the title and in the story are at issue:

6. The title 'Counterfeit Money' might itself be the story, which the narrative that follows immediately counterfeits.
7. 'Counterfeit Money' might be the narrator's announcement of a story of counterfeit money which the story presented to the reader may then counterfeit.
8. 'Counterfeit Money' refers to the conceit of literature, which presents fiction as if it were non-fictional.
9. In pronouncing this, or even in presenting as non-fictional presentation of fiction something non-fictional which legitimately happened, 'Counterfeit Money' is counterfeit literature, for it gives itself as literature while violating its terms.

The legitimacy of Baudelaire himself is similarly in question:

10. Baudelaire as the writer of the work might be fictional and thus a counterfeit author.
11. Or, his signature on the work might be counterfeit.
12. The Baudelaire who signs the work, if indeed he does, will in any case not be identical with the Baudelaire of any other encounter, each of which might thus stand as a counterfeit of the other.

Baudelaire's dedication of *Paris Spleen*, the collection in which 'Counterfeit Money' appears, to Arsène Houssaye might be the counterfeit:

13. in presenting as outside of the work when it is internal to it;



14. or in presenting as internal to it when it is not.
15. In feigning reference or producing ambiguity and so not meaning clearly what it says, the meaning of the dedication is not as it presents itself to be, and so is counterfeit.
16. It announces, for example, that it is given to Houssaye, yet he acts as a prosthesis for (and so counterfeit of) all others who it is given to, or for giving in general.
17. We cannot be assured that both Baudelaire and Houssaye are not the characters of a work of fiction – neither is vouchsafed or titrated – though they are presented as non-fictional.
18. The narrative presented as ‘Counterfeit Money’ might then counterfeit the above, as the two give the reader more than we expect.

Any number of aspects of the narrative (or of what is presented as if it were the narrative), meanwhile, might be counterfeit:

19. That the two friends proceed from the tobacconist’s, even, is indicative, as tobacco is imbibed after its annihilation; its consumption involves a symbolic displacement in which cinder counterfeits object.
20. The beggar is a counterfeit character, as he is not (merely) what he seems; he represents both the good fortune that something occurs and that we therefore have a story to recount, and
21. the bad fortune that the friends are metaphorically placed on trial or in competition with one another as it is demanded that they give generously.
22. The friend might lie about the counterfeit coin; the gesture of giving the counterfeit is counterfeit,
23. as is the purported event of story.
24. The friend’s admission may be counterfeit as a gesture to gift victory and the sense of generosity to his friend.
25. Deriving the satisfaction of giving the greater donation (whether as coin or handing over victory) is, however, a calculated expenditure, and so a counterfeit gift.
26. The friend’s admission of giving a counterfeit coin is counterfeit for it is of unsecured value; he might as readily be confessing his guilt as relishing having derived the maximum gain at minimal cost.
27. Similarly, he may have given the beggar something for which he need feel no gratitude, but he equally may have forced the beggar into his debt at no cost to himself.
28. Meanwhile, what appears to be charity is counterfeit, for the tolerance of beggars only in certain areas institutionalises them there; to pass through is to be called upon for a toll of alms – ultimately, it is taxation.
29. The gift itself, properly speaking, should be an eventual rupture of economy; it must be beyond any horizon of expectation, it can demand or take nothing in return, provoke no countergift, take no satisfaction for the giver, bear

no possibility of burden, it cannot be a calculated expenditure of excess and so must be beyond reason. It must be subtracted from economy and iterability, yet these contaminating conditions would also be essential to the impossible-possibility of giving, which is thus itself counterfeit. '[O]nly an hypothesis of counterfeit money would make the gift possible. ... [Counterfeit money is] the chance for the gift itself. The chance for the event' (Derrida 157–8).

30. ...

Beyond the above, let's not forget that Derrida's own analysis throughout is also counterfeit (as would this reproduction be), as his meaning is feigned, presents something which it doesn't say, isn't ultimately vouchsafed or secured by anything – the performative dimension of the text depends upon this. Given this abyssal potential of meaning, the lack of any ultimate titration to determine value, the title 'Counterfeit Money' is itself counterfeit.

The title says, in effect: 'since I say so many things at once, since I appear to title this even as I title that at the same time, since I feign reference and since, insofar as it is fictive, my reference is not an authentic, legitimate reference, well then I, as title ... am counterfeit money'. (Derrida 86–7)

What Derrida indicates here, then, is that a counterfeit worthy of the name – not merely a recognisable imitation, but something which presents itself convincingly as something other – is indistinguishable from the thing which it counterfeits. The counterfeit comes to act in place of the counterfeited, and in so doing it erases the border between counterfeit/counterfeited. The identity of the counterfeited was never fixed, coherent, or sovereign, but depended in fact on an economy of counterfeiting (read also: of annihilated sense) to grant it value. This relation is in fact necessary for economy in general, whose exchange relation substitutes objects which are incommensurate with one another while proffering their calculable value, not least via the familiar prosthesis of money. 'No one ever gives true money, that is, money whose effects one assumes to be calculable', but 'as long as money passes for (real) money, it is simply not different from the money that, perhaps, it counterfeits' (157, 153).

Let's return, then, to silence. How does silence depend upon this economy of counterfeiting? Recall that I've suggested that silence must be void of content, yet it must nonetheless be presented – for silence to submit to sense, it depends upon a contaminating suture of the unrepresented to presentation. Silence is at once this intelligible something which may be apprehended, but also the empty presentation of nothing as a mark of anteriority to sense. It's according to an economy of counterfeiting in which something is given as, taken as, and serves as something other – and so a

counterfeit sense, a retroaction of sense and non-sense onto sense, and so the sense of counterfeiting – such that a border of identity between counterfeit/counterfeited is meaningfully annulled, that we might understand this nothing as indicated by and retroacted onto intelligible silence, but also that silence-as-nothing can be given to sense. Silence can be thought on the basis of this contaminating suture as an intelligible mark of the unintelligible, as an indication of the unrepresented. This does not associate a specific content to, sense for, or sense of, this ‘other’ silence, but proposes it as an immanent indication of the untotalisability of the world; of its capacity to be transcended and to become other than it is. On this basis, I propose that it might be understood as meaningfully analogous to the void as the always-unrepresented phantom which sutures a world to being in Badiou’s philosophy, though without the specifically ontological connotations which the latter maintains.

#### THE SILENCE OF THE WORLD/THE SENSE OF THE VOID

A full treatment of Badiou’s philosophical system would be too expansive for the purpose of elaborating and clarifying my proposition here; for now, we’ll content ourselves with attending to those points of Badiou’s philosophy which are most pertinent, namely the ontological and eventual implications of the void.

Badiou decisively rejects the Parmenidean ontological unity of Being, stating that ‘the one is not’ (*Being* 1). Following Georg Cantor’s theory of transfinite numbers, then, infinity is de-totalised from the One-all, registering instead the existence of an endless sequence of infinities of escalating cardinality. Having rejected the one, the regime of presentation is multiplicity, which an operation – counting as one – presents as putative unities. Even still, this minimal operation of structuration must always be in effect so that being is not relinquished to some originary One. Badiou describes his ontology, therefore, as the discourse of the ‘presentation of presentation’, of the structuration of pure multiplicity into consistent (i.e. countable) multiples (27). It is only via retroaction that inconsistent (i.e. uncountable; unstructured) multiplicity is indicated as what is prior to the count-as-one, as pure presentation. It must be maintained, though, that ‘there is no structure of being’ (26), that being qua being is, strictly speaking, neither one nor multiple because these are each already under the structuring law of the count; it is necessary, therefore, that ‘the “first” presented multiplicity without concept has to be a multiple of nothing, because if it was a multiple of something, that something would then be in the position of the one. And it is necessary, thereafter, that the axiomatic rule solely authorize compositions on the basis of this multiple-of-nothing’ (57–8). This ontology, then, is a theory of the void, of the composition of consistent multiples on the basis of this nothing.

Let's be clear that I propose no such ontological function of silence; the void as this grounding-nothing is idiosyncratic to Badiou's ontology. The affiliation I have in mind is rather in the register of the void's belonging to situations or worlds (understanding these simply as contexts will suffice here) as 'phantom remainder – of the multiple not originally being in the form of the one' (53). It is the 'non-one of any count-as-one' which is ultimately 'unpresented' in every situation as its suture to being (55). As such, the void acts as an indication of the contingency of the composition of any given world, a suture which holds its possibility of transcendence and which cannot be severed. In order to affirm the consistency (and therefore unity; calculability; totalisability) of the situation while excluding the inconsistency of the void (which will not submit to this unity), the count-as-one is doubled in a metastructure ('the state of the situation', emphasising its parallel to the political state) which effectively counts the count of a given situation or world: 'the resource of the state alone permits the outright affirmation that, in situations, the one is' (98). Although outside ontology proper unity prevails within worlds, then, the suture of world to being via the void is the indication of the ontological primacy of multiplicity over the One and thus the untotalisability of any given world such that its potential for (evental) transcendence persistently haunts it, a possibility which the state cannot proscribe. Events are points of radical rupture, excesses of undecidable relation to the worlds which they meaningfully alter, be it politically, artistically, scientifically, etc. For now, it should suffice to note that the conditions for an event necessitate an errantly self-belonging 'site' registering evanescently maximally within a world and 'invoking "by force" ... an entirely new transcendental evaluation', a re-ordering of the world (Badiou, *Logics* 366). The maximal consequence of the event brings forth an in-existent – something said to be at the edge of the void – into existence. Now, silence is not to be coupled here with the event; the exceptionality and profound consequences of events prohibit such an equation. Silence may nonetheless be understood in meaningful rapport with the void as immanent mark of anteriority; as a world's suture to senseless anteriority and so its capacity to be transgressed and transcended, even radically. Badiou suggests that 'because it carries out a transitory cancellation of the gap between being and being-there, a site is the instantaneous revelation of the void that haunts multiplicities' (369). Silence's suture – of sensible to senseless, presentation to the unpresented – might be another such point of confrontation with the annulment of border, a haunting of – threat to – violence upon – consistent and totalising order; an incalculable (non-)mark of in-totality which therefore cannot be effaced.

(John Cage, *Lecture on Nothing*, 1959)

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