

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Adam Marshall Drury for the degree of Master of Arts in English presented on September 8, 2009.

Title: Asynthesis & Act: The Evental Sublime in Badiou, Byron, and Barker

Abstract approved:

Evan Gottlieb

Asynthesis & Act is a significant intervention into the discourse of the sublime.

Through a deep investigation of the critical metaphysics of Immanuel Kant, the first chapter of this thesis puts forth the claim that the sublime is a radical experience that occasions a possibility for the individual to commit a purely ethical and potentially revolutionary act. I do so by drawing detailed connections between the aesthetic, experiential, and cognitive dimensions of the sublime and Alain Badiou's philosophy of the Truth-Event. By demonstrating that the sublime is immanent in Badiou's philosophy, I claim that the sublime comes to be an aesthetic marker for authentically ethical actions and thinking; what I call the 'evental sublime'. The second chapter of the thesis explores these claims about the sublime in a literary context, through a reading of George Gordon Lord Byron's verse-drama *Manfred*. The third chapter of the thesis is an ecstatic engagement with the drama and theatre of Howard Barker. I argue that Barker's Art of Theatre is the crucible for my theory of the sublime. The epilogue of the thesis provides a demonstration of Barker's evental sublime in a reading of his 2005 play, *The Fence in Its Thousandth Year*.

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Asynthesis & Act: The Evental Sublime in Badiou, Byron, and Barker

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Adam Marshall Drury, Author

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I dedicate this thesis to her who endured my ordeal with me.

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I do these things

Oh how I persist I am at least persistent.

And I ask

Does anybody want them?

The answer comes back

Nobody at all

So I go on.

- Howard Barker, *The Forty*

“And if the love destroys me I don’t care”

- Eff, *Dead Hands*

ASYNTHESIS & ACT: THE EVENTAL SUBLIME IN BADIOU, BYRON,
AND BARKER

INTRODUCTION

I came to the sublime ignorant of almost every classic text on it, only the most cursory exposure to Kantian metaphysics, and a vague understanding of about half of Slavoj Žižek's *Sublime Object of Ideology*, and for the longest time I couldn't justify my enthusiasm for the idea at all. I could not find any but the most instinctive motives for pursuing the sublime: 'I had to...' 'I needed to...'. So intellect in motion seemed sufficient cause. Pain and pleasure, terror and beauty - these dyads of the sublime echoed in the back of my mind from the moment I'd encountered them, and their insistent persistence colored even the most disparate of my critical interests in literature and culture. It was in reading a book of his dramatic theory, rather than one of his plays, that I first encountered Howard Barker (not long after encountering the sublime), and I immediately found myself energized by the velocity and urgency of his writing. Here was an artist who without once mentioning the word 'sublime' was calling for a theatrical aesthetic that insisted on the necessity of pain and celebrated the beauty and ecstasy of suffering. And the heretical intensity of his arguments, the mischievousness toward his enemies! - here was a contemporary theorist who wrote with the same polemical irreverence that characterized the manifestos of the early twentieth century avant-gardists, whom I had also recently discovered and had immediately embraced, for they articulated the revolutionary capacity of art in terms that seemed to me both precious and necessary. I was drawn to radicality. And so the sublime, which I instantly began to associate with radicalism and with nought but a terminological connection to Barker, became for me a vibrant and singular source of intellectual and scholarly inspiration. And if (as I do believe) this purely haphazard confluence of ideas was the event of my academic career, then this project is the result of an ongoing devotion, a fidelity to that event.

I

Of all the possible places to begin a discussion on the sublime, it may be propitious to begin with the sublime's relationship to *impossibility*. As early as Kant, the experience of the sublime meant the mind's striving after what necessarily remained out of reach to it: the impossible intuition of infinity, of reality in all its overwhelming plenitude, in its absolute fullness, which Kant called the noumenal. Today, the 'impossibility' of this encounter remains a key dimension of sublimity, though *what* we encounter is the exact opposite. Rather than the impossible intuition of an infinite fullness, what we endure in the sublime is the painful, traumatic, horrifying encounter with the Void, with the abyss of the Real that intrudes into the texture of our reality, utterly shattering its (symbolic) coordinates. Today, the sublime no longer names an experience of how the finite, phenomenal quality of our reality bears witness to the existence of some fully constituted, complete reality 'out there', inaccessible to us; instead, the experience of the sublime bears witness to how the very consistency of our reality is constituted on a fundamental lack, a primordial void of radical inconsistency that emerges in all its terrifying negativity when reality begins to dissolve. In other words, we are no longer dealing with the notion of our fantasy space, the symbolic texture of representation and meaning as a kind of veil masking the 'real' reality behind it, but instead with the notion that when representation breaks down, when the symbolic fantasy space dissolves, reality *itself* disintegrates. And it is totally correct to notice here not only the aesthetic implications in this fundamental shift in thinking about the sublime, but the political and ethical implications of it, as well. In his *Aesthetic Theory*, Theodore Adorno provides a terrifically concise summary of the sublime's historical descent into negativity when he writes, "Radical negativity, as bare and nonillusory as the illusion once promised by the sublime, has become its legacy."¹

The subheading ‘Kantian dissemblance and the cry of the sublime’, in Chapter 1 of this project, closely interrogates this ‘illusion once promised by the sublime’. Indeed, it is the overcoming of this illusion which marks the moment when the sublime becomes an unfathomably powerful idea, and one that opens up the space for the emergence of new ways of thinking and acting in the world; as significant for aesthetics as for ethics, the sublime, I argue, becomes the *intersection* between ethics and aesthetics - a short-circuit, as it were, connecting the autonomy of art to the freedom and spontaneity of our actions. In the survey of the literature presented here, I focus on the discourses that have contributed to the overturning of what had once seemed to be the bare and nonillusory promise of the sublime, which was for Kant the notion that sublime experience, though a marker of the finitude of our experience, was also a testament to the mind’s ability to *think* the existence of a suprasensible Idea (infinity), and an unconditional moral Law (the categorical imperative) that dwell within us yet remain forever out of reach to our human comprehension. As I claim in the first chapter, however, what the sublime truly reveals is the absolute illusion of this moral Law: we only *choose* to obey it, which means of course that we can also choose *not to obey*. It is this choice, to *refuse the illusion*, that constitutes a radically ethical (and potentially revolutionary) act.

Of course, the field of discourse on the sublime is astoundingly vast, and so it is inevitable that in the scope of this project I will have passed over some thinkers’ interventions, namely those of the existentialists and of existential phenomenology. Yet their shadows remain in this project, if only because the contemporary notions of the sublime I engage with are both responses to and departures from the crucial contributions made by Nietzsche, Husserle, Sartre, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger (whom I do address in this introduction for his important ‘ontologization’ of Kant’s epistemological metaphysics).

Considering the dynamic and wide range of ideas on the sublime, it may be surprising that the first chapter of this project pursues the sublime through a relatively narrow philosophical and theoretical aperture. When I initially began this project, I had hoped to adopt a sort of transpositional methodology, which would attempt to demonstrate the richness of the relays between ostensibly incompatible philosophies and theories by arguing that the dynamics of the sublime were generic to each of them, uniting them at a deep conceptual and cognitive level. I pursued this tack for a long time, but found myself mired in the antinomies that emerged, even as I insisted that such were the signs of the tremendous versatility of the sublime, which refused prescription and presented itself as incapable of being harnessed toward a singular orientation. In this regard, Peter de Bolla's twin theses - that (1) "there is a natural tendency for the discourse *on* the sublime to produce the conditions necessary for the construction of the discourse *of* the sublime, a discourse which produces from within itself sublime experience," and (2) "that by being self-reflexively aware, this discourse "produces the objects it sets out to control, determine, legislate, and so on"² - were for me highly influential. In arguing for a redefinition of the notion of psychology represented in the sublime, de Bolla, along with Derrida, Thomas Weiskel, and Neil Hertz, followed Samuel Holt Monk's observation that the progression from Edmund Burke to Immanuel Kant saw the crucial shift in the sublime from an implicit statement about the object perceived to an implicit statement about the nature of the perceiving mind, as Frances Ferguson mentions.³

It was the inflection of psychology into my studies that led me to pursue the relays between the sublime and psychoanalytic theory - Freud's theory of sublimation, for example. Eventually, Freud gave way to Lacan, a consequence of extensive research into Žižek's claims about the Kantian sublime, and the first chapter (as well as the project as a whole) draws some exciting conclusions about the role of Lacan's concepts of the Real, *objet petit a*, and

jouissance in the experience of the sublime. But it is the answer to the question, ‘why Alain Badiou?’, that occasions an overview of the discourse on the sublime that led me to his philosophy of the truth-event. For Badiou only rarely mentions the sublime, and it certainly does not figure heavily in any of the texts from the immense corpus of his work. Hence the significance of the intervention of this project; I seek prove that the sublime is a central, necessary, and generally immanent notion for Badiou’s radically ethical philosophy of truth.

In the first instance, the eighteenth century discourse on the sublime belongs essentially to the ‘debate’ between Burke’s empirical psychology and Kant’s formal idealism. In this regard, their sublimes could not be more different, though both remain strictly oriented toward epistemology. The sublime, then, for both Burke and Kant concerned the question of ‘what it is’ to represent, where the problem of representation unfolds into a series of epistemological dilemmas involving the relationship between objects and subjects. So the eighteenth-century debate between Burke and Kant is directed, at least initially, to the fundamentally ethical concern of ‘what is knowable’. Frances Ferguson’s *Solitude and the Sublime* convincingly shows how our ability to know the objects we perceive as well as the nature of our perceiving self becomes the quintessential problem of Romantic aesthetics. Interestingly, Ferguson is able to demonstrate how Burke’s empiricist aesthetic prefigures postmodern and deconstructive theories of language.

Burke’s empiricist model, however, encounters an impasse as he attempts to unlock the nature of the sublime object ‘out there’ through a psychology of individual affective/aesthetic response. Thus the most basic feature that distinguishes Burke’s analysis of sense perception from Kant’s formalist account is that, for Burke, the ‘mental image’ produced by the act of representing an object ultimately acquires the same objective status as the thing it represents. In other words, if affect constitutes the (aesthetic) object - as Burke claims - and

if representation revolves around affective experience, then any representation (a memory, for example) that would provoke an affective response is as eligible for 'object-status' as something out there in the world. And because Burke can provide no method or model that would make possible the distinction between image-object and thing-object, "the accumulation of previous responses to objects of prior experience continually threatens to make present experience virtually illegible."⁴ This problem becomes particularly vexed in the case of the sublime, for the vastness, power, and obscurity of the object totally blasts the possibility for a consistent affective response among perceiving individuals. As a consequence, it is the sublime object that ultimately undermines Burke's empiricist aesthetic, for our ability to *know* anything about the objects we perceive becomes an impossibility in the face of it. In perhaps simpler terms, the problem is that Burke's system of representation, which treats mental images equally as objects (in that they both induce affective experience and occasion representation), always already forecloses the possibility of expressing the 'real' object.

Kant overcomes Burke's deadlock by shifting the focus of his aesthetic from the object to the *formal* constitution of the perceiving mind, in short, the *subject*. I explore this key aspect of Kant's *aesthetic* metaphysics in detail in the first chapter. This difference, between a theory of aesthetics based on empirical psychology on the one hand and one developed alongside a philosophy of formal idealism on the other, recurs with a twist in the contemporary (postmodern) debates between a *deconstructive* materialism housed in theories of language and a *dialectical* materialism situated in (but also developed out of) psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity. It is my contestation that deconstruction ends up rehearsing the same deadlock that stalemates Burke's empiricism, which for me is an indication of the need to transpose aesthetics from the domain of epistemology into that of ontology. I develop

this claim in the first chapter, as I illuminate how, in Kant's formal account of aesthetics, what appear as epistemological concerns flow from a more fundamental incongruity on the order of Being.

It was Heidegger who, with his philosophy of *Dasein*, first accomplished the ontologization of Kant's metaphysics. In a scrupulous reading of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, Heidegger notices that Kant discovers, but retreats from, the power of the faculty of the imagination, which mediates between intuition and understanding in the production of knowledge.⁵ Kant's first *Critique* famously asked the question, 'what can we know?'; yet while the imagination is central in Kant's effort to arrive at a coherent epistemology that would allow us to claim, against Hume's skepticism, that we *can* know (phenomenal) objects outside of ourselves, the imagination also injects a highly subjective element into this process, radically threatening the objective-validity that is (for Kant) the condition of all knowledge. For Heidegger, who seizes upon the subjective dimension of the faculty of the imagination, the very possibility of understanding and knowledge occurring at all is a result of the subject's sense of being-in-the-world, or *Dasein*, as the fundamental feature of her self-consciousness. This self-consciousness, in turn, is sustained by the triad of apperception (the primordial, originary moment of unity that constitutes consciousness), the imagination, and time - hence *Dasein*'s essentially *temporal* character. The importance of Heidegger's assertion of the ontological root of Kant's epistemology is discussed further in the next chapter, as I carefully unpack Kant's notion of originary apperception and the activity of the imagination in the experience of the sublime.

In any case, there are two crucial elements to distill from Heidegger's engagement with Kant. The first is Kant's anxious suppression of the power of the imagination, which in the *Critique of Judgment*'s aesthetic deductions threatens to undo the coherence of an

objectively valid epistemology, and thus Kant's entire metaphysical project, by revealing that not all we experience is 'purposive' in the sense of the production of knowledge. The second is the assertion that our existence is fundamentally temporal, which resonates with contemporary ideas about sublime experience (most notably Jean-François Lyotard's) as a disruption or disturbance of our sense of time, our sense of being-there, in the world.

Kant's treatment of the faculty of imagination, from Heidegger onward, becomes the principal target of the critiques levied at his metaphysics. One especially influential criticism is Gilles Deleuze's, which challenges the tidy verticality of Kant's hierarchical faculties⁶ on the basis that the imagination, in the experience of the sublime, trumps the faculty of reason, which (otherwise) holds the ultimate position of authority in Kant's system. Simply, Deleuze detects a discourse of power circulating through Kant's formalization of human consciousness. In *Kant's Critical Metaphysics*, Deleuze undertakes the task of cataloguing the relative standing of accord or discord between the faculties, in terms of their legislative authority in each of the three critiques. His conclusion is that "only understanding legislates in the speculative interest of reason," while reason functions as universal lawgiver both in its delegation of authority to the understanding (in *Critique of Pure Reason*) and the pursuit of its own interests (in the *Critique of Practical Reason*).⁷ The *Critique of Judgment*, where we encounter the sublime, challenges such neat verticality by exposing the actual heterogeneity of the faculties and the complexity of their power relations, especially when they 'war' with each other (as occurs in the sublime). Or, in the words of Deleuze, which echo familiar descriptions of sublime experience, the *Critique of Judgment* represents "a disorder of all the senses."⁸ This 'disorder' is the main focus of my work in the first chapter's subheading, 'The subtractive power of the imagination'.

Jean-François Lyotard, building on the work of Deleuze, effects a linguistic turn of Kant by translating the faculties into linguistic ‘phrase genres’, whose incommensurability ensures their conflict and gives rise to a differend.⁹ Equipped with this linguistic methodology, Lyotard is able to argue that reflective/aesthetic judgments, rather than being a paradoxical exception to Kant’s system, are in fact the truer articulations of the processes of thinking and knowing Kant attempts to deduce via the aegis of reason. The sublime, as a dispute between the phrases ‘imagination’ and ‘reason’, gives rise to a differend which not only undermines the possibility of objectively valid knowledge (as I mention above) but also punctures reason’s unequivocal authority. As Clayton Crockett explains, “Lyotard disallows the role of reason to play both judge and litigant, arguing that if reason allows itself to be a part of the dispute, then it cannot appeal to itself as a higher authority to press its claim.”¹⁰ Since it is the faculty of reason that legislates according to the categorical imperative of the suprasensible Idea, the fact that reason finds its authority compromised by the imagination in the experience of the sublime indicates that the transcendental ‘guarantee’ of and unconditional moral Law may indeed be an illusion. This returns us to the claim put forth by Adorno, discussed above.

Finally then, it is Lyotard’s linguistic ontology that allows us to make the leap to Alain Badiou’s philosophy. However, it is only through Lyotard’s discussion of the sublime that one can, in my view, make this conjunction to Badiou possible, for Badiou stands in staunch opposition to Lyotard, condemning him (along with Wittgenstein and Nietzsche) for their anti-philosophical sophistry. Badiou’s critique is summed up by Peter Hallward:

According to Lyotard’s language based-ontology, what *is* is simply the heterogeneous variety of ‘phrases’; ‘what happens’ and ‘what there is’ are phrases, ‘event’ phrases whose intrinsic incommensurability exceeds all generic qualification (all subsumption

within one genre of discourse). Philosophy's only specific task is then [according to Lyotard] to guard the intrinsic incommensurability of phrases against the hegemony of any particular genre of phrasing.¹¹

We can see Lyotard's philosophy at work in his treatment of Kant, as he identifies the hegemonic role of reason in Kant's critical metaphysics. But this is exactly what Badiou objects to, that is, "Lyotard's recourse to the judicial register (judgment, differend, tort) and his reference to an ultimately inarticulable 'sentiment' or 'passibility' as principal defense against evil."¹² Nevertheless, as Hallward points out, Badiou has difficulty in answering Lyotard's countercharge of "a radical 'decisionism' without recourse to an explicitly unsayable limit of his own, a limit he calls the unnameable."¹³ For Badiou, the unnameable is the point of an inexorable antagonism that forever prevents the total closure of a symbolic network, or the absolute hegemony of a given knowledge system. A familiar example might be Lacan's claim that 'there is no sexual relationship'; the unnameable is the point of the un-closable aporia of the disjunction of the sexual positions. But the unnameable is also responsible for the possibility of newness and invention, of there emerging on the horizon of our experience something that we had, until that point, thought to be impossible. Badiou calls this emergence 'Event': the eruption of something so unassimilable and unrecognizable that it demands a new way of being in the world. It is, then, the unnameable that forever keeps open the possibility of an Event, of something *that happens* to us and compels us to make a radical ethical *decision*, to decide a new way of thinking and acting in the world.

Since Lyotard's influential essay "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde", the 'unnameable' has also become common coinage for the experience of the sublime. And it was Heidegger who first described the 'event' (*ein Ereignis*) as something that disarms thought, as something that dismantles consciousness, deposes consciousness, something that

consciousness cannot formulate.¹⁴ Lyotard's essay thus brings together the notion of sublime experience (as that which disarms consciousness and thought), the essence of the unnameable, and Kantian aesthetics in his argument that avant-garde art produces the "shock" that is, *par excellence*, the evidence of something *happening*.¹⁵ It was Lyotard's assertion of the sublime as an experience of an event that led me to Alain Badiou, and his philosophy of the Event - and we have seen how, despite strong disagreement, there is the thread of the decision and of the unnameable that connects Lyotard to Badiou. Thus the central thrust of this project is to advance the claim that the sublime aesthetic, when deployed in radically innovative and revolutionary art, has the power to occasion an event, in *Badiou's* sense of the Event. And it is because this experience is fundamentally *psychological* that I turn to French theory and psychoanalysis.

Chapter I of this project is the creation of my own *evental* theory of the sublime, and brings together three dominant philosophical trajectories: (1) Kant's metaphysics and his analytic of the sublime in the *Critique of Judgment*; (2) Slavoj Žižek's dialectical materialism, which is of course highly inflected by his fidelity to Lacanian psychoanalysis; and (3) Alain Badiou's ontological philosophy of the Event. Section II of this introduction introduces some of the key concepts of Badiou's philosophy as it answers the question of why I turn to theatre, and specifically to Howard Barker's Art of Theatre, as the art form whose aesthetic is most perfectly suited to my evental theory of the sublime.

II

Why Theatre?

I've had an interest in the relationship between philosophy, theory, and drama for as long as I've had serious academic exposure to each of them. In fact, their emergence on my (at that

time) purely haphazard scholarly horizon coincided, which may have had something to do with what I perceived then (and am ever more convinced of now) to be their spontaneous affinity. The question that perpetually nags philosophy and (especially) theory is of course the simple and hysteric one: what are we to *do*? It seems increasingly untenable for philosophy to maintain an abstracted and ultimately indifferent relationship to concrete, situational existence, even when a certain ahistoricity (and occasionally an atemporality) are invoked to sustain philosophy's eternal criterium of a 'purity' of thought. There are, of course, many thinkers who do acknowledge philosophy's and theory's ethical orientation and even its ethical responsibilities. But no *active* thinker (to my mind) embraces more completely philosophy's ethical obligations than Alain Badiou. For while others are wonderfully eager to demonstrate how their philosophy or theory can be *translated* into a practical discourse, few have designed a philosophy *of* ethics more rigorously committed to the intervention in specific, concrete historical situations than Badiou's. Badiou's philosophy is *itself* a handbook for ethical action, rather than a philosophy that can simply be 'converted' into instructions on how to act (often at the expense of reduction, oversimplification, or the need for a practical discourse to 'smooth over' its philosophy's antagonisms, contradictions, and ambivalences).

What may strike the initiate to Badiou's work as paradoxical, however, is that his philosophy - which asserts that *a truth* is always the truth *of* a particular situation - is based on a mathematical and set-based ontology that maintains the radical univocity of being; for Badiou, "infinite alterity is simply what there *is*," a "pure, indifferent multiplicity" which defines being as such, prior to its presentation in a situation.¹⁶ Because of his philosophy's ontological foundations, Badiou is able to claim that while a truth always belongs to its specific situation, that truth is always what is *generic* to the situation - i.e., that which evades

the situation's criteria of discernment (and the state-of-the-situation's criteria of differentiation). It is because of its generic character that truth requires (and cannot be said to exist without) a/its subject, because "only a subject is capable of the 'indiscernment' that being itself indicates as its real," only a subject can make a decision that creates a path through the impasse of ontology (its inability to account for the *excess* of alterity and multiplicity that evades its ordering operations).¹⁷ It is the *event* - the irruption of pure indifferent multiplicity into the situation - that 'links' Badiou's ontology to his philosophy of truth. Subject and truth *both* share the same evental foundation. Hence the unique ethical immediacy of Badiou's project: truth hinges radically on its subject, on an individual human being who *invents* a new way of being and acting in the situation by reading it according to the event.

I am drawn to drama and to theatre precisely because they are art forms that *invent life*. The play text, the stage, and the performance are each a means of experimenting with the invention of life, and are thus immanently involved with philosophy and ethics, perhaps none more so than Badiou's (in ways I hope to make clear over the next few pages). Yet *the theatre*, in our particular moment, has been devoured (perhaps more than any other autonomous art form) by an extremely reactionary sociopolitical climate, in which inventive politics have been abandoned in favor of economic micro-management and the biopolitical administration of 'universal human rights'. Most threatening to theatre art, however, may be the (near) total domination of social coordination by the global market, which has succeeded in turning most theatres into venues explicitly designed to commodify (collective) experience - e.g., the obvious fact that all internationally successful plays and the vast majority of those praised by the critical and journalistic establishments are either musicals or satires. The problem with those genres and with a market-coordinated theatre in general is that it *reduces*

theatre art so drastically that it annihilates the theatre's capacity for invention, let alone its autonomy as art; where once theatre invented life, now it seems only to *reproduce* life (and in sclerotic competition with other forms of media, television, cinema, etc).

It has been one of the great (and serendipitous) fortunes of my scholarly career to have found Howard Barker so early in my study of theatre and drama. My encounter with his Art of Theatre has certainly been a kind of event, and even as a novice of dramatical theory and theatre practice I could detect that Barker's theatre was unique and precious for its militant commitment to developing a theatre whose inventiveness and daring defied all convention and everything that led to the reduction of theatre art. My own fidelity to Barker's theatre has been the cornerstone of my theoretical interests, and this project is a product of my absolute belief that if there is an art form alive today that is the crucible for Badiou's philosophy of truth, it is Howard Barker's Art of Theatre. And this is, as we shall see, precisely because of the central and immanent importance of *the sublime* to Badiou's philosophy and Barker's Art of Theatre.

But before turning to the question, 'why Barker?', I ought to return to the more general question, 'why theatre?' Besides the philosopher himself, remarkably few critics or practitioners of theatre have explored the possibilities of building a performance ethics and/or a theatrical aesthetics atop Badiou's philosophy of truth, or even discussed the strong relays between it and theatre art. One commentator, however, has explored these possibilities explicitly. Amanda Stuart Fisher, an applied theatre practitioner at the Central School of Speech and Drama in London, has written about developing an 'ethics of practice' based on Badiou's philosophy and, specifically, his idea of the subject's fidelity to the truth-event.¹⁸ Fisher responds to James Thompson's concerns (in *Applied Theatre: bewilderment and beyond*¹⁹) about the "ethical positioning of the practitioner who sets out to *facilitate* an

applied theatre project.”²⁰ Seizing the ethical power of Badiou’s philosophy - its notion that an individual’s encounter with the emergence of a truth in an event “forces us towards an ethical confrontation or *choice*” that compels us to decide a new way of being - Fisher argues that applied theatre projects can work to elicit what Badiou calls *convocation*. Convocation is a moment of great (and perhaps terrifying) magnitude, in which we are confronted with an essentially ethical decision “insofar as the moment of *recognition* of the emerging [truth-event] ‘compels the subject to invent a new way of being and acting in the situation.’”²¹

However, there are several problems with an applied theatre approach to the objective of convocation. Fisher identifies what is perhaps the primary problem when she questions the ethical positioning of the practitioner; the practitioner can only ever be an outsider to the situation in which she intervenes with the *application* of theatre. Badiou’s criteria for truth is its being *particular* to its situation, which obviously refuses in advance both the claim to a universal (definition of) truth or goodness as well as the retreat to the vacuum of a culturally relativist ethics (like ‘political correctness’ or other forms of identity politics). The positioning of the practitioner is thus problematic in two ways. First, as an outsider to the situation, on what grounds can the practitioner endorse the situation’s convocation to a truth-event, and further, how can she claim to have disclosed the truth of a situation to which she does not belong (without being guilty of an arrogant presumption)?²² And second, how would it be possible for the practitioner to “guarantee fidelity to the truth of the situation, whilst not shaping [his\her] actions by [his\her] own normatively inscribed morality and performed sense of what is ‘good’?”²³ In an attempt to resolve these dilemmas, Fisher turns to Badiou’s key concept of *disinterested interest* as that which can secure what he calls “the experience of ethical consistency.”

We can see that ethical consistency manifests itself as *disinterested interest*. I am altogether present there, linking my component elements via that *excess beyond myself* induced by the passing through me of a truth. But as a result, I am also suspended, broken, annulled; disinterested. For I cannot, within the fidelity to fidelity that defines ethical consistency, take an interest in myself, and thus pursue my own interests.²⁴

But after citing the three major obstacles in the way of such disinterested interest - the fact that applied theatre projects (like all theatre) are funded by stakeholders with a set of beliefs and a moral agenda that determine the type and nature of the work funded; that the very form of applied theatre necessarily defines the community or group based on its expectations of communal interests and concerns; and that the practitioner (as explained above) does not enter the situation without at least some inherited beliefs and expectations that she projects onto the situation - Fisher admits that “to some degree it is therefore impossible to come to applied theatre work in the state of *disinterested interest*.”²⁵

Fisher’s pragmatic solution is consequently one in which I have great doubt, for she falls back on the insufficient argument that the practitioner “might need to set aside [his \her] values, at least temporarily, in order to proactively bring forth and acknowledge the ‘truths’ of the community in which we are working,”²⁶ without at all explaining how this ‘setting aside’ is to come about (an impossibility in my opinion, for the simple reason that the very form of applied theatre is itself an expression of value - i.e., ‘this community has something to gain from our intervention in it’). Despite the difficulty in explaining how applied theatre might maintain ethical consistency, I do strongly agree with Fisher’s call for the need to disrupt the expectations, beliefs, and preconceptions of the practitioner. Furthermore, her appeal to Badiou’s claim that convocation requires an *experience* and that

truth therefore cannot be merely *communicated*,²⁷ as she argues for applied theatre's obligation to engage in a "*process of critique*" which invents new experiences and new truths (rather than debate the old ones) in order to "draw out the emerging truths of the community," is right in line with the need for theatre to subtract itself from the domain of mere opinion and prior knowledge.

Yet when it comes to actually *facilitating* such a 'process of critique', Fisher is once again up against a significant problem, and one that she clearly recognizes places the practitioner in a 'double bind', "caught between a responsibility to the community's immediate experience and a refusal to accept any 'non-genuine' truths."²⁸ This problem surfaces, of course, when the practitioner realizes that the truth of a situation does not belong only to the 'client group' but emerges precisely at the point of antagonism and contestation inherent to the client group's relation to the community (or situation) as a whole. And again, Fisher's solution is for me seriously insufficient, for I do not see how her call for the practitioner to become "involved in an *excavation* of the truth" by way of becoming "a provocateur" toward the client group can possibly maintain ethical consistency; and this is *especially* the case when Fisher suggests that the goal(s) of applied theatre should be (first) to *become* an 'event', (second) to facilitate convocation to this event, and (ultimately) to enable both participants and facilitators to be compelled "and indeed interpellated by the *same* ethical demand."²⁹ In calling for such attitudes and practices, Fisher seems to forget the crucial point she touched upon earlier, where she cites Badiou's argument that truth cannot be communicated; what she seems to overlook is that convocation to a truth is necessarily *individual*, it must be an *individual* encounter. So when Fisher celebrates the possibility for an applied theatre project to "bring the community to a clearer and more defined understanding of its own situational context," in order to

“illuminate and affirm the truths that are necessary for community cohesion,” she fails to take into account that it can never be the *community* that comes to a truth. Only specific individuals *within* the community can ‘convocate’ to a truth, and as a consequence community ‘cohesion’ would be radically disrupted, because fidelity to a truth would necessitate an equally radical *redefinition* of that community. As such, it is impossible for facilitators *and* participants (or either of them alone) to be ‘interpellated by the *same* ethical demand’ - that demand is necessarily and essentially *different* for each individual who encounters the truth-event.

I find it telling that even though Fisher clearly identifies and acknowledges the problematic ethics of applied theatre, and correctly claims that a Badiouan ethics (of applied theatre) is in a position to resolve those problems, she cannot explain how an applied theatre project would actually *enact* a Badiouan ethics without resorting to language and practices that are ethically *inconsistent*. It is also strange that although Fisher cites Slavoj Žižek’s forward to Peter Hallward’s landmark translation and exposition of Badiou’s oeuvre, she does not address at all Badiou’s *own* writing on theatre art that appears in that text (which I will address shortly).³⁰ But it is perhaps less Fisher’s incomplete discussion of Badiou’s philosophy and its relation to theatre and more *the form of applied theatre itself* that provokes the contradictions Fisher has difficulty navigating beyond. On one level, it is absolutely crucial to recognize that the truth of a given situation is (at least) as *indiscernible* to the ‘client group’ as it is to the facilitator/practitioner; *both* read the situation according to the criteria of discernment and differentiation available to them. Therefore, it is not only the facilitator/practitioner who must work to ‘set aside’ his\her expectations and presumptions; the individual members of the ‘client group’ must also work to displace their own values and ways of reading their situation, because it is precisely those codes that effect the

indiscernibility of that situation's truth. As I explore in detail in chapter three, Howard Barker's *Art of Theatre* deploys an (essentially sublime) aesthetic that succeeds in radically disrupting individual audience members' expectations, and forces them to invent *new* ways of engaging with what they see and hear, in order to 'clear the space' for a possible convocation to a truth-event.

On a second level, due to the fact that applied theatre projects *intervene* in a situation from its outside - because the applied theatre *goes to* a group of people and *creates* them as an audience, and an audience that becomes the *object* of moral or political indoctrination - it is simply incapable of maintaining the disinterested interest of ethical consistency. The only solution to this bind is that the theatre must not *solicit*; its audience must *come to it*. out of a deep need for what they cannot find anywhere else, for what theatre art alone can provide:

The possibility of the audience feeling itself at liberty to respond individually to what it witnesses - its liberation from the shackles of meaning - can be properly cultivated only in a theatre which is not one.

Our task is to make theatre a necessity. This can be achieved only when what it provides ceases to be entertainment on the one hand, or moral or political instruction on the other. In the Theatre of Catastrophe its powers of reconciliation or resolution are abolished in favour of a passionate assertion of human complexity which cannot be distorted by ideology or shaped by the goodwill of humanist collectivity.³¹

Howard Barker everywhere maintains the importance of a *new* audience who *appears for* his theatre; he does not ever seek out or target a group or audience - something applied theatre must, by definition, *always* do.

So while I am compelled to claim that it may be impossible for *applied* theatre to base its practice on a Badiouan ethics without becoming entangled in some serious contradictions, I nevertheless agree (with Fisher) that Badiou's philosophy has tremendously significant (and exciting) implications for theatre art generally. As Hallward explains, Badiou holds that the production of truth operates in four fields or dimensions: "science, art, politics, and love."³² Badiou calls the operation of truth in these four fields 'generic procedures' or the 'conditions of philosophy' - the terms are synonymous.³³ In the chapter on the generic procedure of art and poetry, Hallward discusses Badiou's attitude toward theatre under the subheading, 'Generic Humanity: Theatre and Cinema:'

Like poetry, theater in general, theater as a genre, is an occasion or at least an opportunity to think an artistic truth: "Theater, inasmuch as it thinks, is not a matter of culture, but of art. People don't come to the theatre to be cultivated. They are not cabbages.... They come to be struck. Struck by theatre ideas. They leave not cultivated but stunned, tired, and thoughtful" (PM 119). [...] Theatre is nothing other than a machine for the actual production of generic ideas³⁴

Furthermore, Badiou explains that the true theatre makes of each performance, "every actor's gesture, a generic vacillation in which differences with no basis might be risked.³⁵ Thus the audience, or more precisely, the individual spectator is called to "decide whether to expose himself to this void, and share the infinite [truth] procedure[;] he is called, not to pleasure..., but to thought."³⁶ As performed, moreover, theatre is the most eventful of arts, for "no other art captures in this way the intensity of what happens."³⁷

Why Barker?

Chapter 3 of this project seeks to illuminate and demonstrate the uncanny similarity between Badiou's ideas on theatre and Howard Barker's theoretical and philosophical arguments for

his Art of Theatre. And this is not simply a correlation; there is a deep connection between Badiou and Barker not only at the level of their notions of theatre but between their metaphysics and ethics, especially, (and so much so that at certain points they verge on being nearly identical to one another's). But at this point, I need only point out, with reference to the Barker quote cited above, how his Art of Theatre creates and maintains ethical consistency precisely by presenting itself uniquely to each individual who encounters it, and by refusing absolutely the idea that theatre is a vehicle for collectivity and a forum for disseminating one's politics, beliefs, or values (no matter how self-reflexively critical they may be). And if, as Badiou claims, true theatre is one "whose audience must represent humanity in its very inconsistency, its infinite variety - [because] the more it is united (socially, nationally)..., the less it supports, in time, the eternity and universality of an idea,"³⁸ then Barker's theatre is true precisely because its task "is not to produce cohesion or the myth of solidarity but to *return the individual to himself*."³⁹ Thus both Badiou and Barker agree that "the only audience worth the name is generic, and audience of chance."⁴⁰

Barker's theatre is valuable not only for its affinity to Badiou's philosophy, but for its radical inventiveness as well, which positions his Art of Theatre completely outside the bounds of anything previously accepted as 'theatre'. Barker designs an aesthetics founded on his own philosophical discourse, which is itself extraordinarily singular and innovative. But for all its metaphysical speculation, Barker's theory/philosophy of theatre is also extremely precise (and mischievously polemical) in its repudiation of 'the theatre' - its lauded enslavement to market reflexes, its critically celebrated reduction to the mere reproduction of life, and its sclerotic commitment to collectivity, unanimity, and social amelioration. Here again we encounter Barker in strong symmetry to Badiou. Badiou insists that "a truth sets its own conditions (more rigorous than those of correspondence, coherence, or confirmation),"

and is “effectively self-verifying;”⁴¹ Barker’s theoretical and philosophical texts - the main subjects of my work in the third chapter - effectively sets the conditions of his theatre, while his own review of the performances and productions of his plays are verifications of the truth of that discourse and of its aesthetic elaboration in the performance. Or, putting it another way, Barker’s plays (textually and in production) are self-verifications of the truth of their dramatist’s Art of Theatre. In any case, chapter 3 explores this component of Barker’s drama in detail, as well.

As I have suggested here, and what I hope this entire project will overwhelmingly demonstrate, the experience of the sublime is essential and central both to Badiou’s philosophy of truth and to the *aesthetics* of Barker’s true Art of Theatre. Baz Kershaw, in his *The Radical in Performance* - a text that makes the case for the power of radicality in a vast array of performance paradigms - argues that it is the experience of performative excess “that ushers in the potential of the radical in performance”.⁴² This excess, he continues, is the power of performance to evade representation, which can induce an affective response that Kershaw describes in a way similar to how one might experience the sublime: “the moment [in the play] when my body tensed towards action transcended representation in a phenomenological response.”⁴³ This ‘tensing’ may be similar to Barker’s emphasis on the need for the audience to experience his plays in a state of anxiety, where “the sense of witnessing *too much*, of being *out of control* is essential,”⁴⁴ “an anxiety of such intensity that it [is] shared by both performer and audience and which eliminate[s] the superficial relations which characterize entertainment on the one hand and enlightenment on the other.”⁴⁵ In chapter 1, I demonstrate the importance of excess - Barker also writes a good bit on the need for ‘plethora’ in theatre⁴⁶ - and anxiety in the experience of the sublime. Later in his book, Kershaw touches upon this sublime component of Barker’s theatre:

Barker's theoretical writings echo over and over again with please for a totally radical disruption of audience reception that will shock it into a new kind of consciousness. At times, this reads like a re-run of Artaud, with its constant emphasis on pain and suffering, its desire for agonisingly sublime release.⁴⁷

The truth-event, too, compels an individual to choose a new kind of consciousness, a 'new way of being and acting,' a decision that is necessarily accompanied by feelings of pain and suffering (as I explore throughout this project), which is yet another sign of the *need* for a sublime aesthetic in true theatre art.

At least one other critic has dealt explicitly with the sublime aesthetic of Barker's theatre. Karoline Gritzner, a major academic exponent of Barker's theatre, has written an essay that draws out some promising preliminary connections between several contemporary notions of the sublime (in addition to Kant's classic text, the *Critique of Judgment*).⁴⁸ Yet while I agree largely with Gritzner's thesis - that "Howard Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe (a theatre that 'prefers darkness, if only to separate the audience from itself, and oblige the *individual* to confront the pain on stage in isolation' [*Arguments* 147]) puts forth a discourse of subjectivity which can be termed 'sublime' due to its emphasis on indeterminacy, contradiction and (aesthetic) autonomy⁴⁹ - I take significant issue with some of the relays she establishes between Barker's aesthetic and the cited discourses on the sublime. Though I should like to say that I agree with a great many of her points as well - i.e., her connection of the sublime to Lacan's notion of *jouissance*, her claim that the sublime is evoked in both the linguistic and physical dimensions of Barker's plays, her emphasis on the sublime as an experience which is radically transformative, and the central importance of the imagination in the transformation of an individual's identity/subjectivity, as well as its power to allow a person to 'step outside' the constraints of mundane experience and the regimen of his/her

(critical) expectations. I explore each of these aspects more rigorously, and take them deeper over the course of the following chapters.

Yet I find it problematic that Gritzner feels that ‘the sublime’ is merely a ‘term’ that can be applied to Barker’s theatre. It is crucial that Barker’s theatre be fundamentally *of the sublime*, rather than merely correspond with its paradigms. Otherwise, my points of contention with Gritzner always occur where I find her essay to be a bit too loose and uncritical in its terminology, and its eagerness to tap so many different (and conflicting!) notions of the sublime potentially weakens her case, for there is a good bit of material on the sublime that masquerades as being perfectly in tune with Barker’s aesthetics and theory, but upon deeper investigation would be revealed to be decidedly unacceptable to Barker’s theatre. The most notable of these instances is when Gritzner cites Kant’s famous description of the ‘satisfaction of sublime feeling’ as “a pleasure mixed with pain, a pleasure that comes from pain.”⁵⁰ Now while Barker everywhere celebrates and endorses the *ecstasy* that comes attached to pain or comes from suffering, this *ecstasy* is absolutely *not* what Kant is talking about when he describes a ‘pleasure’ that comes from pain; *that* ‘pleasure’ is the result of the individual’s *escape* from sublime experience back into the status quo - exactly what Barker’s theatre repudiates and refuses. Another example might be how Gritzner seems to locate the sublime only in instances of fragmentation, dissolution, and indeterminacy (which occur on all levels of theatrical presentation). And while it is certainly correct that the sublime has every bit to do with “overwhelming feelings of not-knowing” provoked by the breakdown in the field of representation, it is also that which is capable of subtracting consciousness from the infinite proliferation of a deconstructive materiality - i.e., the ‘need’, as the field of representation is indeterminate and fragmented, to decide between sign and referent, performative and constative - that would trap the individual in the domain

of knowledge (even as one's *knowing* is frustrated) rather than oriented toward the possible emergence of a truth. To put it another way, the sublime is the experience which persists *beyond* the breakdown of the symbolic texture (fantasy); the sublime is the encounter with the hard and traumatic real of *jouissance* that reveals itself in sublime experience. The effects of fragmentation are 'merely' what occasions this encounter, even if they are also its consequences; the experience of fragmentation and indeterminacy is a *property* of a certain 'stage' in the sublime experience, and is not itself sublime. The incompatibility here is that deconstruction maintains that there is *nothing* 'beyond' the endlessly shifting and overdetermined network of signifiers, and is as such entirely *epistemological*. Deconstruction (and certainly postmodernism) thus has great difficulty admitting the *ontological*, and could therefore never accept Badiou's philosophy of truth, which is built on a void-based and axiomatic ontology.⁵¹

But again, I should not like to suggest that Gritzner's work here does not excavate a great deal of highly significant strands of Barker's theatre in relation to important and influential (aesthetic, political, philosophical, linguistic) attitudes towards the sublime. For me, the most perspicacious of her observations is that "the animating and dramatic energy of the Barkerian sublime is named *desire*."⁵² She writes, "in Barker's work erotic desire not only contributes to the experience of the (tragic) self's alienation from its social and moral Other, it also confronts the individual with the extreme heights and depths of their consciousness."⁵³ These extreme heights and depths are synonymous with Barker's understanding of *ecstasy*, as that which is inextricably bound up with the proximity to death, and it is "the sublime's evocation of death which also becomes an unfathomable source of intense pleasure [*jouissance*, ecstasy] or beauty."⁵⁴ (Though again, it is crucial to differentiate Barkerian 'beauty' from Kant's 'aesthetic beauty' - they are radically incommensurable.) The

importance of the proximity to (and even the encounter with) death figures prominently in my own theory of the sublime, as I develop it across the first two chapters. Yet whilst it is clear how crucial and indispensable desire (as the drive toward ecstasy and death) is to the Barkerian sublime, it has been one of the greater challenges of my work to unlock what role Barker's notion of desire and ecstasy might have in Badiou's theory of convocation and fidelity to the truth-event, especially considering Badiou's repeated emphasis on the ethical consistency of disinterested interest.

Indeed - and to conclude my answer to the question, 'why Barker?' - it may be that Barker's *Art of Theatre* has something to contribute to Badiou's philosophy, by challenging his notion of disinterested interest with the possibility that desire may not be incompatible with 'the fidelity to fidelity' that characterizes the subject's commitment to a truth. For so long as they are "energized by glimpses of an authentic life that can only be gained from exaggerated actions in extreme situations"⁵⁵ that free them from the ideological prescriptions of a morally 'truthful' life, and at risk of a death they openly invite, Barker's tragic protagonists can certainly not be said to be 'pursuing their own interests', insofar as Badiou means an interest in self-preservation, stability, and inclusion. In any event, chapter 3 and its epilogue wrestle with this possibility extensively, and arrive (I hope) at some compelling and unprecedented conclusions regarding the connection of desire to the production of truth in the field of theatre art. Connections that run, as will become clear, through the heart of the sublime.

III

To conclude this introduction, then, I offer a brief summary of the following chapters.

Chapter I, "Asynthesis and Act", begins with the question: 'which subject of the sublime'.

Here, I deploy subject in the dual sense of the word, as both an individual belonging to a cause and also subject as an area of study. Indeed, it is the question of the subject as individual that necessitates the adjustment of the aperture of this project's study. In this section, I provide a highly detailed account of Badiou's philosophical and ontological edifice, and begin aligning his theory with, initially, the Kantian sublime.

The next section, "Kantian Dissemblance and the Cry of the Sublime" begins by unpacking Kant's metaphysics as well as his understanding of aesthetic experience, both the analytic of the beautiful and the analytic of the sublime. To do so, I carefully dissemble his formal notion of human cognition and self-consciousness, focusing specifically on the central concept of transcendental apperception. In this section, I begin my argument that there is more going on in the sublime than Kant is able or willing to admit, and that when he reaches his 'Analytic of the Sublime', he alights upon a particularly radical power of the faculty of imagination that threatens to undo his entire critical metaphysics.

Next, in the section titled "The Subtractive Power of the Imagination", I turn my attention entirely to the dynamics of the faculty of the imagination, with particular attention to its behavior in aesthetic circumstances. I argue that the imagination possesses a radically 'subtractive' power in the experience of the sublime, a claim which allows me to more thoroughly and significantly connect sublime experience to Badiou's notion of the Truth-Event. "Severings: *Agalma* at the Void" accomplishes the next step in this connection, and introduces key Lacanian concepts into my theory of the sublime. Here, I also explain the revolutionary capacity of sublime experience, as well as the radical challenges that experience presents to the individual.

My final section of this chapter, "Decision & Act: The Subject of the Sublime", draws out the connection between Badiou's concept of the subject and subjectivation, and what I

call ‘the subject of the sublime’. I thus answer the question posed at the opening of the chapter about what kind of subject we get in the sublime, and the status of this subject’s relation to Badiou’s truth-event. To end, I make the claim that the sublime is both central and immanent in Badiou’s philosophy, and that the subject of the sublime is the fullest expression of what Badiou has in mind when he describes the subject’s fidelity to truth.

Chapter 2, “Hingework”, expands on the theory of the first chapter by elaborating and further substantiating its claims. It also introduces some key Lacanian concepts to this theory, namely, the role of desire and *objet a*. My work with Lord Byron’s *Manfred* presents the verse-drama as a model for the what happens to the individual *after* the eruption of an event, while the eponymous protagonist Manfred serves as a model for my notion of the subject of the sublime. Importantly, this chapter indicates the promising new avenues into the critical discussion of dramatic literature opened up by my theory of an evental sublime.

Specifically, the section titled “It’s All in a Name” connects Badiou’s concepts of the subject and of the process of subjectivation to the protagonist Manfred, and begins my detailed reading of the drama. I also show how Byron adopts a crucial strategy of subtraction - a strategy only detectable through my theoretical lens - which allows him to ‘stage’ the sequence of the truth-event and develop Manfred as its subject. The next section, “Two Byrons: an unwieldy excess”, picks up from the previous section and demonstrates how *Manfred* presents an engagement and repudiation of Kantian metaphysics, specifically its moral philosophy, by invoking the dynamics of the sublime. This section also characterizes the artistically revolutionary dimension of Byron’s *Manfred* by throwing his poetics into sharp contrast with his contemporary and rival, William Wordsworth. I argue that Byron’s implicit engagement with a Wordsworthian Romanticism is integral to his development of Manfred as a subject of the sublime. The second half of the chapter presents my complete

reading of *Manfred*, arguing that what the verse-drama presents is the dramatization of a subtractive imagination negotiating, in the form of an artwork that bears the aesthetic markers of sublime experience, an encounter with its Real.

Chapter 3, “Event, the Sublime, and Howard Barker’s Art of Theatre”, begins with the hypothesis that Howard Barker’s singular form of tragic theatre is built upon an aesthetic that is perfectly in line with my theory of an evental sublime. The chapter is an ecstatic engagement with every component of Barker’s Art of Theatre. I begin with an extensive tour through the corpus of Barker’s philosophical and theoretical texts, pointing out the tremendous affinity between his theory and Badiou’s philosophy. In those texts, Barker catalogues the elements of his theatrical aesthetic in detail, and I connect each - the theatre venue, the audience, the actor, the performance, the scenography, the production work - with the theory of the sublime I develop in the preceding chapters (while also introducing a thesis on the Longinian sublime). The previous section of this introduction provides more detailed descriptions of my engagement with the Barkerian sublime.

The epilogue to this project is a reading of Barker’s play *The Fence in Its Thousandth Year* (2005). I discuss the play in a way that seizes the dynamic potentiality of my discourse of the sublime by demonstrating how this discourse ‘opens up’ a host of energetic and deeply investigative (though always speculative) critical ‘routes’ through Barker’s theatre, suitable to explorations of the production ‘whole’ (text, actor, audience, scenography, as they converge in the performance event) as well as to directly textual engagements. In this regard, I have no singular thesis or hypothesis in mind, but rather wander through the text more or less haphazardly, encountering scenes and exchanges, movements and voicings that seem to invite excavation with the theoretical tools at my disposal. Paradoxically, this may have the effect of proving even more strongly the evental vitality of Barker’s sublime aesthetic,

locating the Art of Theatre squarely in what Badiou would call a truth procedure, on the order of the *générique* of Art.

NOTES

¹ Adorno, T.W., G. Adorno, et al. *Aesthetic Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. (284)

² de Bolla, Peter. *The Discourse of the Sublime: History, Aesthetics, and the Subject*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989. (12 mine)

³ in *Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the aesthetics of individuation*. New York: Routledge, 1992. (16)

⁴ Ibid. (2)

⁵ cf. *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, (95-110)

⁶ Which proceeds, from bottom to top, intuition, imagination, understanding, reason.

⁷ Deleuze, Gilles. *Kant's Critical Philosophy: the Doctrine of the Faculties*. New York: University of Minnesota Press, 1985. (10)

⁸ Ibid. (xi)

⁹ cf. Lyotard, Jean-François. *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994.

¹⁰ Crockett, Clayton. *A Theology of the Sublime*. New York: Routledge, 2001. (48)

¹¹ Hallward, Peter. *Badiou: a subject to truth*. New York: University of Minnesota Press, 2003. (17)

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ cf. Lyotard. "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde", *Postmodernism: a reader*. Docherty, Thomas, ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993. (245)

¹⁵ Ibid. (252)

¹⁶ Hallward in *Badiou: a subject to truth* (137).

¹⁷ Ibid. (130) Badiou relies entirely here on the 'Cohen-revolution' in mathematics, which was the first moment when 'being' and 'truth' were found to be compatible, because mathematics can describe the being of truth - i.e., its be-ing situated in the very space opened up by the impasse of ontology, which is identical to the 'place' of the subject - even if a truth is irreducible to its being. [Here, Hallward translates Badiou's *L'être et l'événement*, 391, in *Badiou: a subject* 130; also cf. 323-348]

¹⁸ Fisher, Amanda Stuart. "Developing an ethics of practice in applied theatre: Badiou and fidelity to the truth of the event", *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 10:2, 247-252. 2005.

- ¹⁹ Thompson, J. *Applied theatre: bewilderment and beyond*. Peter Land, Bern. 2003.
- ²⁰ Fisher, (247).
- ²¹ Ibid. 249. Fisher quotes Badiou's *Ethics: an essay on the understanding of evil*. London, Verso. 2002.
- ²² Following my own deduction, it seems too that an outsider to the situation would not be able to *discern* the truth of an event in any case, simply because she does not belong to the situation and therefore *its* truth logically *cannot be* hers - unless, of course, she were to interpellate herself into that situation, but this seems rather unlikely.
- ²³ Fisher, (249).
- ²⁴ Badiou, *Ethics: an essay on the understanding of evil*. (48-50)
- ²⁵ Fisher, (250).
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Badiou, *Ethics* (51) "Communication is suited only to opinions," and "opinions are representations without truth, the anarchic debris of circulating knowledge"
- ²⁸ Fisher, (251).
- ²⁹ Ibid. (252).
- ³⁰ Hallward, Peter. *op. cit.*
- ³¹ Barker, Howard. *Arguments for a Theatre*, 3rd ed. Manchester, Manchester University Press. 1997. (82)
- ³² Badiou, *L'être e³ l'événement*, p. 23, trans. Hallward in *Badiou: a subject to truth*, (181).
- ³³ Ibid. in Hallward
- ³⁴ Hallward, (205). Hallward quotes and translates Badiou's *Petit manuel d'inesthétique*.
- ³⁵ Badiou, *Rhapsodie pour le théâtre*, p. 91. trans. in Hallward (205)
- ³⁶ Ibid. in Badiou, p. 92. trans. Hallward (205).
- ³⁷ Ibid. in Badiou, p. 23. trans. Hallward (206).
- ³⁸ Badiou, *Petit manuel d'inesthétique*, p. 116. trans. Hallward (154).
- ³⁹ Barker, *Arguments for a Theatre*, (23).
- ⁴⁰ Badiou, *Petit manuel d'inesthétique* p. 116. trans. Hallward (154).
- ⁴¹ Hallward, (154).
- ⁴² Kershaw, Baz. *The Radical in Performance: between Brecht and Baudrillard*. London: Routledge, 1999. (66)
- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ Barker, *Arguments for a Theatre*, (147).
- ⁴⁵ Howard Barker/Eduardo Houth. *A Style and Its Origins*. Oberon Books, London. 2007. (30)
- ⁴⁶ cf. *Arguments for a Theatre* 139-140, as just one particularly poetic example.

⁴⁷ Kershaw, (208).

⁴⁸ Gritzner, Karoline. "Towards an Aesthetic of the Sublime in Howard Barker's Theatre," in *Theatre of Catastrophe: new essays on Howard Barker*. ed. Gritzner & Rabey. Oberon Books, London. 2006. (83-94)

⁴⁹ Ibid. (84)

⁵⁰ Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment* (31)

⁵¹ As a personal note, this incompatibility has been a great stumbling block in my engagement with the discourse of the sublime. For a long while, I was wholly convinced by the deconstructive (and, by extension, postmodern) conception of the sublime. It was, probably unsurprisingly, Barker's theatre that eventually revealed the antinomies between the notion of the sublime I was working toward and the deconstructive doxa I was relying on to get me there. As a result of my subsequent turn toward the Badiouan and Lacanian side of things, I ended up leaving deconstruction's ideas about the sublime (almost) entirely behind. I do however, discuss why, in more detail, in the first chapter.

⁵² Gritzner, (90).

⁵³ Ibid. (89)

⁵⁴ Ibid. (88)

⁵⁵ Ibid.

CHAPTER 1: ASYNTHESIS & ACT

An irrevocable step forward has been made through the critique of earlier concepts of the subject, which is thoroughly based on the notion that truth is neither a qualification of knowledge nor an intuition of the intelligible. One must come to conceive of truth as making a hole in knowledge.

- Alain Badiou¹

Which Subject of the Sublime?

When it comes to the deployment of epigraphs one typically does so in order to begin with an element of the mysterious: one chooses a cryptic passage, an esoteric fragment, a witty aphorism, but often says nothing of it; the epigraph, it seems, is meant to ‘speak for itself’, accumulating resonances - for the reader who notices - as the discussion proceeds. Had I adopted this commonplace, my epigraph would be reduced simply to its last line; and what a wonderful mystery it would have been. And yet I have included the preceding sentence in order to reveal what this epigraph truly is: an interruption. Not a sly, as yet empty ‘in’ to this chapter, but a highly precise thesis, and one whose gravitas we had better address immediately, for it will have determined the fate of an idea that *this* project proposes is, if *truth* is what we’re after, immanently necessary.

If the sublime is an idea that has always involved a question of ‘the subject’, what becomes of that idea when, in the aftermath of Alain Badiou’s claim that we have made ‘an irrevocable step forward’, we are no longer dealing with the same concept of the subject that Kant had in mind when, in 1790, he published what is still considered the defining text on the category of the sublime? The epigraph above is excerpted from an essay published three years after Badiou’s *L’Etre et l’Événement* (*Being & Event*), and its title alone signals the overcoming of what seemed to be the final obstacle in the way of his concept of the subject: in terms ubiquitous in his work, *the subject is the finite configuration of an infinite truth*. Subject

and truth, in Badiou's system, are one and the same except for this single distinguishing feature: constrained by his finitude, the subject is subordinate to truth, which is infinite. To sustain this definition, Badiou must eliminate from subjectivity all that keeps it (even partially) on the side of knowledge. Objects are both the material for and the product of knowledge; or, Being is the set of positive objects accessible to knowledge. Thus, 'a finally objectless subject' is the phrase which marks the final severing of subject from knowledge, such that he and the truth he serves 'make a hole in knowledge'. A hole left by the subtraction of subject and truth from knowledge, but also a hole bored into it by nothing other than what Badiou calls Event.

Thus we have arrived at a soft sketch of the relationship between Being and Event. Being, in Badiou's system, is the *always total* domain of knowledge, of the ontologically positive symbolic texture of meaning - of a network of signifiers whose meaning is guaranteed by reference to a Master-Signifier. This totality should not be thought of with the usual equivocation (i.e. 'total') familiar to those versed in the basic theses of structural linguistics; *from the perspective of Being*, knowledge and its correlative symbolic network *are* total. Event, then, is simply the absolute negation of being; it is "that which is not being as being".² Badiou uses the term 'situation' to designate the localized organization(s) of Being - i.e. the 'situation' of democracy, the 'situation' of theatre, etc.; the objective/normal organization of a situation is the 'state' of that situation (i.e. the 'state' of the theatre situation in the UK). What, then, is a truth's relationship to a situation?

To answer, it is important to remember that Event appears as heterogenous to Being only because Being's re-presentation of itself appears total: every element in a situation is counted as 'one' (i.e., re-presented) within the state of the situation. Yet if we allow the possibility of a truth, do we not also allow that not everything is ontological? Against such

dualism, Badiou maintains “a radical ontological univocity,”³ whereby “in any case the truth itself *is* only a multiplicity, but an *exceptional* multiplicity, a multiplicity put together in an exceptional way”.⁴ In other words, “what a truth composes is indeed the truth of a situation, but its composition requires something more than the situation itself can provide”.⁵ This ‘something more’ is provided by the Event. From within the state of the situation, such events are considered impossible; they are instead “purely haphazard, and cannot be inferred from the situation” (*EE* 215). If Being represents the positive ontological order of continuity and inevitability, Event is a radical interruption of that order, an incision indifferent to preserving (that) order as such, and is thus the mark of an absolute beginning, a total break with the known. Or, in the language of set-theory ontology, an event reveals “the inadmissible empty point in which nothing is presented” (*EE* 227) and thus indicates the uncountable zero of a new (as yet to *be*.) order.⁶ Thus, to encounter an event is to encounter the *void* (‘inadmissible empty point’) of a situation pure and simple.

That an event reveals the truth of a situation is key, because it indicates that despite the inability to (ac)count (for) it in the terms of the situation - for “everything begins in confusion and obscurity”⁷ - an event is not a divine intervention from some ‘beyond’, but is itself attached to the void of a situation, to its inherent inconsistency and excess (i.e. what is usually gestured at when we equivocate ‘total’, with reference to a symbolic order). This *attachment* is typically designated by Badiou and his commentators as ‘Truth-Event’. It is imperative to recognize the absolute radicality of the Truth-Event: it is not founded on its opposition to Being or to a given situation; it is instead *unfounded*, and is thus a violation of any seemingly normal or natural taxonomies. As a violent break from such structures, the Truth-Event is simply indifferent to any attempt at legislation or judgment. As we shall see, the only move that sustains the revealing of truth in a Truth-Event is a subject’s wager on its

existence, upon which the truth wholly depends. Now we have come full-circle: as subject is the finite configuration of an infinite truth, both subject and truth emerge together in what is called the Truth-Event “as qualitatively distinct from the opposing categories of knowledge and the object.”⁸

The Event, however, and to borrow a fortunate turn of phrase, is only the beginning; it is another matter - that of the *generic procedure*, specifically - that makes of the Truth-Event also a ‘Subject-Event’. So for now, I leave off discussing Badiou’s concept of the subject and the process of subjectivization, which begins with the emergence of the subject as she declares the existence of an event and continues via fidelity to that declaration, in order that I might return to the question posed at the opening of this chapter: what relationship might there be between Badiou’s subject of a truth-event and the Kantian subject who experiences the sublime?

Thinking of the sublime as a kind of Event, of course, has been the impetus behind an array of theoretical and philosophical discourses over a diverse range of fields - in art, for example, one thinks of Jean-François Lyotard’s influential “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde”; in politics, we can look as far back as Edmund Burke’s “Reflections on the Revolution in France”, or more recently, at the vast body of scholarship that has linked the dynamics of the sublime to various human catastrophes from Auschwitz onwards. What most of these investigations share is an emphasis on what could be called the ‘epiphenomena’ of the sublime, that is, the terms associated with our affective responses to traumatic (sublime) experiences: shock, horror, awe, terror, pain, torture, etc., (and it is worth noting that the other ‘part’ of sublime experience, pain’s resolution into pleasure, has seen a decline in attention over the past few decades). In my view, such epiphenomena are significant, but only as markers or flags which signal that the individual is undergoing some sort of crisis;

they do not, that is, indicate anything about the nature of the crisis, except that it is inducing certain physiological and psychological responses in a person. Here, an unexpected lesson from Burke will relate nicely: “People are not liable to be mistaken in their feelings, but they are very frequently wrong in the names they give them, and in their reasonings about them.”⁹ So while a person’s feelings may help categorize an experience as ‘sublime’, or while an experience of the sublime may be thought to involve a cluster of such feelings, we will simply have to look beyond mere affect if we are to discover anything about the nature of the sublime as such.

Bearing Burke’s lesson in mind means I must rephrase my initial question with added precision, and I do so by splitting it into two interrelated but not necessarily dependent concerns. First, given a set of epiphenomena typically associated with (an experience of) the sublime, is it possible to assign such a set, or specific elements within that set, to an individual’s experience of an event, *in Badiou’s radical notion of the Event?* There is no doubt that a person’s encounter with the void of his/her situation should provoke some form of modification in mind and body, and intuitively it seems that these modifications must surely be ‘negative’ emotions. Badiou does indicate that certain attributes belong to the subject of a Truth-Event, including anguish, superego, justice, courage, and confidence.¹⁰ But these terms are shifty, aside from their corresponding to different stages of the truth-procedure, and are not necessarily affective states or responses. Furthermore, Badiou’s subject-attributes are typically assigned to post-evental forms of subjectivity, rather than to evental subjectivity or to the individual experience of a Truth-Event prior to its declaration as such. So, we could just as viably invert the previous question: given a set of epiphenomena associated with a Truth-Event, is it possible to include such a set in the set of epiphenomena associated with the sublime?

The second question involves the nature of the sublime as such, and is more abstract-theoretical. Simply, can such an encounter as Badiou's Event even be called 'sublime', considering that in Kant's 1790 *Critique of Judgment* the category of the sublime, initially the most fatal threat to Kant's epistemology and his categorical imperative, comes to represent the ultimate proof that *all* experience can be objectively knowable and morally instructive? In this regard, Badiou and Kant remain strictly opposed: where the former constructs an ontology that allows for newness and the emergence of truth and subjectivity without object and opposed to all knowledge and structure, the latter designs a critical-metaphysics wherein knowledge and morality are ensured by making subject impossible without object. However, in order to force the sublime into conformity with his categorical imperative, Kant is obliged to commit more than a little violence against the whole of his critical project. In short, the sublime threatens both Kant's Pure and Practical Reason with dissolution. And while it is certainly a testament to Kant's genius that he is able to convert radical threat into ultimate affirmation, we must identify and interrogate such conversion for what it is: *repression*. Indeed, Kant's dealing with the shock of the sublime has been the most persistent target of the criticism levied against his metaphysics. This in itself is promising, if only for the fact that it indicates there is something 'more' going on with the sublime than Kant was able or willing to admit.

In the following pages, I will have the occasion to explore some of the most significant criticisms of Kant's treatment of the sublime, and am doing so in an attempt to recuperate the sublime from its Kantian sclerosis. If the sublime has any future within Badiou's truth-system, it must first be severed, or rather, seen as capable of severing *itself* from its enchainment to a Kantian system which places it, ultimately, in the mere *service des biens* of the domain of Being.

Kantian Dissemblance and the Cry of the Sublime

At its most basic level, Kant's 'Transcendental Turn' can be defined by the following two features: the privileging of epistemology over ontology, and the development of a critical philosophy whose fundamental thesis is the constituent relationship between subject and object. What sustains both of these features is Kant's infamous barring of human thought from the realm of what he called the noumena, of 'Things-in-themselves'. Instead, human thought and experience are limited to the realm of phenomena, where 'Things-as-they-appear' are the only objects of which we can have any experience or thought whatsoever. Simply, all we can *objectively* know is delimited only by the limit of all we can experience (perceive, intuit). Thus epistemology reigns over ontology, since the question of what we can know cannot be asked of substantial (noumenal) reality, of being-as-being, and subject and object constitute one another insofar as subjective experience is seen to open onto an independent, objective world of Things as they 'really' appear (phenomenally).

But what makes this constituent relationship between subject and object capable of allowing the subject to make objectively valid judgments? To answer this question, Kant devises a system of a priori cognitive faculties whose two 'poles', intuition and understanding, "can make objectively valid judgments only in *connection* with each other."¹¹ For Kant, thought needs an object - without one, there simply can be no thought.¹² Our intuition, then, is the faculty which makes us passive recipients of the swarm of sensory data gathered by our senses as they interact with objects 'out there', as they appear to us. As yet, however, this data is merely chaotic, unorganized stuff - what Kant calls the 'manifold'. Thus intuition depends on the pure concepts of the understanding, which mold the chaotic manifold into a synthetic unity called an 'object'. More specifically, the a priori concepts or

categories of the understanding - *logical relations* like time, space, causality, and limitation - legislate to (literally, 'provide the laws for') another 'mediating' faculty called the imagination, and it is this faculty that actually performs the organizing of the sensory manifold via the production of images in accordance with the concepts of the understanding. When this accord is achieved, the object which heretofore was only a barrage of intuited content becomes unified into a coherent object (e.g. a tree) upon which our reason can make objectively valid judgments (that tree is a fir, and so on).

It is here that Badiou's critique of Kant intervenes. Besides the fundamental and obvious difference that Badiou finds thought perfectly capable of occurring without an object (or else how could truth be thought?), he takes issue with Kant's dissemblance regarding the connection/relation between sensory intuition and conceptual understanding - a symptom, as it were, of subordinating ontology to epistemology. Within the architectonic whole of our cognitive faculties, it would seem that the a priori categories "foreground logical relations as the primordial foundation of thought[;] Badiou argues that such relation presupposes the more fundamental unity of 'the faculty of relating' itself."¹³ Kant calls this faculty of relating originary or transcendental apperception, and it is responsible for the fundamental unity of self-consciousness. The details of Badiou's critique of Kant's transcendental apperception, though, become more consequential - for my purposes - against the backdrop of Slavoj Žižek's analysis of the same. Therefore, over the next few paragraphs I transpose the Žižeko-Hegelian critique of Kant's transcendental apperception atop Badiou's.

For Žižek, Kantian self-consciousness is sustained by the paradoxical relationship between the subject's two 'I's. On the one hand, there is the 'I' of empirical self-experience (the way I experience my *phenomenal* self, say, when I brush my teeth), and on the other hand,

there is the 'I' of transcendental apperception (correlative to the act of saying "I think..." with a necessary continuation, "...that I have a cavity"). The 'gap' separating these two 'I's corresponds to my *noumenal* self. That is, the same rules that hold for the objects 'out there' also hold for myself: I am a thinking-thing, I can say 'I think...', "only insofar as I am inaccessible to myself qua noumenal Thing which thinks."¹⁴ The important feature in this relationship between the two 'I's is the unique *ontological* status of the I of apperception: neither an object of inner experience nor of intuition - i.e. neither a phenomenal object, nor a noumenal Thing - the I of transcendental apperception occupies precisely the *void* of the barred and forever inaccessible Thing in me which thinks.¹⁵ The unity of self-consciousness Kant calls 'subject' is predicated on this void, and thus the I of apperception becomes simply another name for the transcendental subject which is neither a noumenal Thing which thinks nor the phenomenal appearing of that Thing. Žižek's critique of Kantian transcendental apperception is, consequently, as follows: while Kant fully assumes the consequences of his foreclosure of the noumenal by forever barring the transcendental subject's access to the Thing-in-him-which-thinks, he nevertheless - according to Žižek - treats the (non-noumenal, non-phenomenal) subject of transcendental apperception *as if* it were a noumenon when in relation to phenomenal existence.

Unfortunately for Kant, treating the I of apperception as the noumenal thinking-Thing works in all possible scenarios save one: when the phenomena intuited are the manifold appearance of the Thing that thinks. That is, the transcendental subject/I of apperception cannot be identified with the noumenal Thing, for this would amount to the impossible scenario of the Thing-which-thinks appearing to itself; or, "the agency which perceives something as an appearance [the transcendental subject of apperception] cannot itself be an appearance [of the noumenal Thing that thinks]."¹⁶ In other words, the case of

the subject of apperception stands as both a *necessary and impossible* exception to the rule that all Being is split between its substantial foundation (noumena, Things) and the manifold of its appearance (phenomena, objects). The status of the transcendental subject is thus precisely *void*, an empty form of thought (“I think...”) without empirical content or noumenal support.

How, then, is the subject of apperception - the empty *form* of thought that cannot know the *being* of thought - to achieve that originary synthetic unity of self-consciousness that makes possible the structuring operation (the perceptual unification of objects) which organizes all knowledge? According to Žižek, Kant must posit a correlate to the transcendental subject: the transcendental object as “the completely indeterminate thought of *something* in general = X.”¹⁷ As a “metonymical placeholder of objectivity *in whole*”, the transcendental object “gives a body to the gap which forever separates the universal formal-transcendental frame of ‘empty’ categories from the finite scope of our actual experience”; it thus guarantees that those categories “will refer to all possible future objects of experience” because it “marks the point at which the general form of every possible object reverts to the empty representation of the ‘object in general’.”¹⁸ Here we find that the composition of the transcendental object is simply the inverse of the form of the I of apperception: where the latter is an empty form bereft of any empirical content, the former is *both* form and content. Despite this fact - that the transcendental object is both form and content - its *ontological* status is exactly the same as the transcendental subject, that is, non-noumenal, or *void*.¹⁹ Thus, the unity of self-consciousness Kant calls subject, the unity of transcendental apperception responsible for the organization of all objectively knowable reality, depends on the *correlation* between an originary transcendental subject and an originary transcendental object, whose statuses are precisely *void*.

Here, a return to Badiou's take on things reveals the consequences of (and can hopefully simplify) these exceptional Kantian gestures. Thus far, I have used Žižek's problematizing analysis to describe the first feature of Kant's metaphysics, the constituent/correlative relationship between subject and object, as it plays the foundational role of the a priori, synthetic unity of self-consciousness, of "I think" prior to any representation. Now, with the help of Hallward's excellent exposition of Badiou's opposition to Kant, I rehearse the dynamics of this originary apperception in terms familiar from the opening section of this chapter. Originary apperception, remember, marks the 'first' instance when the subject molds the intuited manifold of presentation into the unified presentation of a single object; it is what ensures the coherence of the phenomenal presentation/appearance of whatever noumenal Thing by which our intuition is passively affected. As such, transcendental apperception corresponds to Badiou's concept of the 'structure' of a situation, as "that which presents x and y , or counts them as elements."²⁰ Putting it another way, Kant's apperception and Badiou's 'situation' *are both founded on what remains strictly unrepresentable*, or void: on the one hand, the empty forms of subject and object are unrepresentable and it is against this backdrop that noumenal 'reality' can appear or present itself phenomenally (to a perceiving subject) at all; on the other, a situation is structured by the 'counting' of all the elements belonging to it, and this structure is in turn defined by all the elements not presented or 'counted' in the situation.

Presentation founded on the unrepresentable is thus the positive condition of a void-based ontology like Badiou's. In Kant's system, however, where all that can be objectively knowable must first pass through the subject's perception, the looming shadow of the void (or more precisely, the correlation of the two voids, subjective and objective) - as that which cannot be presented or perceived, yet makes presentation and perception possible - must be

eliminated. A system that privileges epistemology has difficulty allowing the organization of knowledge to be grounded at all on the void. So while the correlation of the subjective and objective voids in what Kant calls apperception results in the production of a coherent (i.e. objectively valid) empirical object - or if you prefer Badiou's terminology, it is the 'structure' of the situation that object-ifies the elements presented in the situation - we cannot yet say we have any verifiable knowledge of the object (or the situation).

So what does Kant do? As we know, he restricts the domain of knowledge to the realm of appearances (phenomena), such that *the empirical object becomes the sole basis upon which our reason can exercise judgment*. . But what is lost in this restriction is nothing other than the possibility for the emergence of a truth that would *be* anything to the subject. Within the Kantian universe, Events, radical irruptions of the unrepresentable void of a given situation, may very well happen, but they could only be, quite literally, *nothing to us*.²¹

And yet the idea that an event would be nothing to us is rather perplexing, for Kant maintains that the unification of an object depends precisely on the movement of thought from manifold (objectless) perception to the perception of a single presented object in the synthetic act of thinking Kant calls apperception. Kant writes, "in the synthetic original unity of apperception, I am conscious of myself, not as I appear to myself, nor as I am in myself, but only that I am."²² That is, the pure, empty form of thought (contained in "I think...") "coincides with being, which lacks any formal determination-of-thought"²³ - or, with being as 'thoughtless' void. "I think...", while it coincides with the fact that "I am", nevertheless tells me absolutely nothing *about what I am*. Consequently, the unity of apperception cannot say anything about *what an object is*, either, only *that an object is*. For thought to say anything about *what an object is*, then, requires the application of conceptual categories to intuited experience (as we have seen). These categories, again, are

logical *relations* that “correspond to the metastructure or re-presentation of what is thus presented, its distribution in parts of the situation”²⁴ - what Badiou calls the ‘state’ of the situation. Thus, and to rephrase a conclusion already reached, the whole of the knowable Kantian universe is effectively founded *not* on the correlation of two voids *but on the concept of the object as that which is only for relation (re-presentation)*:

The structures presented by ordinary apperception [unified objects] are simply what the metastructural “relation of the phenomenally diverse requires” if it is to work properly, that is, if it is to operate in keeping with the apparent certainties of Euclidian mathematics and Newtonian physics.²⁵

Simply, that which is *presented* is nothing for Kant’s epistemology until it is *represented* in the linking of intuition with understanding as an object related to other objects. Or, in Badiouan parlance, the state of a situation becomes knowable (verifiable) when its elements are re-presented in relation to one another. Thus what Badiou calls Being is nothing other than the (positive, knowable) product of this act of relating or representing.

It is easy to see why Badiou stands at such complete odds with Kant. Kant’s philosophy can ensure the rational and objective coherence of heterogeneous Being only at a radical cost: we can be free, spontaneous, autonomous (i.e. transcendental) individuals *only if* the space of our cognitive activity is limited to the domain of the phenomenally existent, to what we can *perceive* only. It can be only perception and the synthesis of intuition with understanding that mark the horizon of reality. That which can be represented is simply all that is of any consequence to the Kantian subject. By making this restriction, we not only lose the properly foundational role of the void as such²⁶; we also lose the possibility for a subject to emerge alongside a Truth-Event. Events can indeed happen, but such an

encounter with the void of a situation is simply *of no purpose* to the Kantian subject of transcendental apperception.

What, then, has all of this business with transcendental apperception to do with the sublime? To answer this question, I take as my starting point the crucial role of the imagination, as I mention only briefly above, in the synthesis between intuition and understanding. As I've described, after the original synthetic unity of self-consciousness in apperception Kant splits cognition into two parts: a passive intuition and an active understanding. After this split, Kant 'bridges the gap' with the faculty of imagination, such that the synthesis that represents an object according to the understanding's relational categories proceeds as follows: (1) a synthesis of the *apprehension* of ideas, as modifications of the mind in intuition; (2) a synthesis of the *reproduction* of ideas in imagination; and (3) a synthesis of their *recognition* in the concept.²⁷ As it occupies the central role of synthetic activity, Kant claims that "synthesis in general" is the "mere result of the power of the imagination."²⁸ In other words, it is the power of the imagination to fuse manifold intuitions and conceptual categories in the production of objectively valid knowledge.

Yet we encounter a radically different exercise of the imagination's power in the case of the sublime, for the sublime demonstrates that the imagination is itself capable of an apprehension that does not result in any kind of synthesis at all, but instead works *against* the synthetic operation it is (pre)supposed to guarantee. In short, the power of the imagination in the subject's experience of the sublime indicates that *relation* - that feature which characterizes all knowledge - *is an illusion* precisely because, despite Kant's drastic restriction of knowledge to the realm of appearances, *not all that appears can be represented*. *This* is the 'Cry of the Sublime' whose echo betrays the site of Kant's dissemblance, the locus

where the universality of Kant's transcendental metaphysics inevitably breaks down, as nothing other than *the Kantian subject himself*, the subject of a transcendental apperception.

The Subtractive Power of the Imagination

As discussed in the previous section, an essential facet of Badiou's critique of Kant involves the way in which the latter treats re-presentation - the categorical relations that organize objects in relation to one another based on the synthesis between intuition and understanding, etc. - as the primary operation of thought (because thought, so it goes, needs the perception of a unified object, and so on). The *properly* primary operation of thought, Badiou argues, is actually what Kant broaches when he describes transcendental apperception (as the presentation of a unified subject and a unified object = x in the transcendental unity of self-consciousness). In turn, this unity is founded on the correlation of two voids (subjective and objective). So the composition of any properly *ontological* situation, in bare terminology, is (1) (unpresented) void; (2) (presented) structure; and (3) (re-presented) metastructure or 'state'. Recalling the outline of Badiou's ontology from the opening of this chapter, we know that the *truth* of any situation is the \neg void on which it is founded (and the Truth-Event is thus the irruption of that void into the situation). By contrast - and this is another way to approach Badiou's critique - the composition of Kant's radically *epistemological* situation totally precludes the unpresented void, arrives at the presented structure by way of the utmost abstraction (apperception as necessary *and* impossible logical construction), and therefore considers the re-presented metastructure as the only 'true' (verifiable) domain of being. The consequence, as I have also discussed, is the impossibility for a Truth-Event to be anything for an individual.

As is probably obvious enough, such an epistemological situation like Kant's is the absolute target of an ontological philosophy like Badiou's: "The central idea of my ontology is the idea that what the state seeks to foreclose through the power of its count is the void of the situation, and the event that in each case reveals it."²⁹ Such is the essential function of the metastructural state: because the structure of a situation cannot *order* the elements it counts/presents, because this structuring-counting is not *itself* structured in any discernible way, "there is always the risk that the void could somehow emerge, as the collapse or absence of structure, through the very operation that structures a situation."³⁰ What the 'state' of a situation performs, then, is essentially a 'count of the count'; it is what classifies and orders the parts of the situation *in excess of its elements* while at the same time this *excess* functions as a kind of 'safeguard' against the void. Thus one way to conceive of a truth-procedure is as the work of *subtracting* the structure of a situation from its state, of *subtracting presentation from re-presentation*. The aim of such subtraction would, it follows, be to suspend the domination of the state, of the dominating excess of re-presentation over presentation.

It is my contention that the power of the imagination in the case of the sublime is capable of such a subtraction.

I have said that the imagination exercises a radically different power in the case of the sublime than it does in all other instances of perception. What, upon closer examination, qualifies this difference? To answer this question requires a dismantling of several of Kant's most challenging (and ambivalent) theorems. For the sake of brevity and coherence, I will not attempt to atomize each theorem fully; rather, my strategy will be to sketch their operations rather than detail what makes them possible. I begin with some preliminary 'grouping'. The "Analytic of the Sublime" and the "Analytic of the Beautiful" both appear in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* under the category of Aesthetic Judgment. Aesthetic judgments

consist of an interesting inversion of Kant's 'normal' procedure of judgment, which is arrived at via the Transcendental Deduction of the Faculties at the heart of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Whereas the judgment that results in the 'objective validity' of any particular perception is called 'determinative judgment', aesthetic judgment is called 'reflective judgment' and proceeds in the 'opposite' direction of determinative judgment. Furthermore, aesthetic/reflective judgments are considered by Kant to be *subjective* (whereas determinative judgments are *objective*). In sum, what I will call Kant's *aesthetic situation* is characterized most basically by (1) its subjectiveness, and (2) its employment of reflective judgment.

Determinative judgment is the form of judgment that this chapter has (I hope by now) made familiar. The mind perceives an object 'out there' in the form of a sensory manifold, and the imagination does the work of molding the manifold in such a way that it can be subsumed under ('recognized' by) a concept of the understanding. In this way, the imagination can be said to 'serve' the understanding, for the latter determines precisely *how* the imagination will synthesize a manifold by 'telling' it to do so in accordance with a set of *rules* (the *relational* categories Badiou so vehemently critiques). The legislation of these rules ensures the manifold will be packaged by the imagination in such a way that it will fit under a concept. A simple way, then, to distinguish between determinative judgment and reflective judgment is by noting that whereas the first involves the *application* of a concept, the second proceeds by way of the *acquisition* of a concept.³¹ Dieter Henrich, in an essay that analyzes Kant's explanation of aesthetic judgment, isolates two significant problems with the inverted, acquisitional procedure of reflective judgment:

[In the first place,] a usage of the power of judgment that moves from intuitions toward the *categories* cannot be conceived of precisely because the categories originate prior to and independently of all intuitions.

In the second place, imagination is responsible for the formation of perceptions. And since the origination of the aesthetic attitude is located by Kant in close proximity to the perceptual process, one has reason to suspect that it is somehow entangled with the process through which *we originally become aware of objects in general* [i.e. apperception].³²

These complications are promising, however, if one is interested in attributing a subtractive power to the imagination, for the unique aesthetic situation seems to point to an operation of the faculties that takes place *astride* presentation and re-presentation. Encouragingly, Kant's solution to these two problems - a recourse to the theorem of a 'free, harmonious play' between imagination and understanding - seems to support such a notion.

We find the employment of 'free, harmonious play' in the case of an aesthetic judgment of taste, or Beauty. Interestingly, Henrich observes that "Kant substantiates his contention that the play of the faculties takes place at the very beginning of the process of conceptualization by remarking that the aesthetic attitude arises 'before we attend to the comparison of an object with others' (AA XX, 224)."³³ Because of this, Kant is confronted with a difficult problem. If reflective judgment necessitates the acquisition of a concept, and if the aesthetic situation (which is based on reflective judgment) is generally lacking an a priori concept and thus needs an *empirical* concept³⁴, how could such a concept even be *acquired* if the aesthetic situation arises *before* the very activity that makes the formation of empirical concepts possible (i.e., the comparison of an object with others)? The status of relation (conceived as identical to Badiou's re-presentation) as the primary activity of thought, for Kant, is already looking rather unstable. Henrich further notes that Kant

describes the (aesthetic) situation of harmonious play with reference to the imagination as ‘free’ in its operations and also with reference to the understanding ‘in its lawfulness’.³⁵ The emblem of this lawfulness I have already mentioned: it is the *rules* (categories) which the understanding and its a priori concepts legislate to the imagination such that it performs a synthesis in accordance with a concept. One wonders precisely how the understanding is to carry out its lawfulness, however, when the aesthetic situation clearly precludes the *application* of a category. It certainly appears as though the foundational role of *relation* - which Kant famously assigns to the noumenal realm as a universal Law (whose singular role is to maintain the objective coherence of reality), and which the understanding’s rules and ‘lawfulness’ are supposed to uphold - has been seriously compromised by the purely *subjective* process of reflective judgment.

Against this backdrop, it is possible to obtain a demonstration of the imagination’s subtractive power even in the case of a judgment of taste. A judgment of beauty, as an element of the aesthetic situation, is reflective, and this again necessitates recourse to ‘harmonious play’. Having qualified the understanding’s lawfulness as a component of this ‘play’, I turn now to the imagination’s ‘freedom’. Ordinarily, the imagination is not at all free, as we have seen: it is bound to synthesize an intuited manifold according to understanding’s rules, and does so in a variety of ways (that need not detain us here). By contrast, the imagination is free when it can perform its ordinary synthetic operations without reference to intuition *or* dependence on the understanding, that is, “in a way both natural to itself and adaptable to many different functions”:

Thus if the activity of imagination develops freely, it will pass through manifolds in various ways and produce traces of forms without aiming at particular forms and without stopping when they have been attained.³⁶

In order, then, to account for the *harmonious* intersection of freedom with lawfulness - for it seems such an intersection would be anything but harmonious - Kant tellingly resorts to a term he develops explicitly for the aesthetic situation and the theorem of harmonious play: [*Darstellung*] - traditionally translated as *presentation*.. The terminological connection between *Darstellung* and Badiou's concept of 'presentation' may be worth investigating, as well.

Working backward, now: Kant describes the occasion for the feeling of Beauty as the "harmony of the form of the object with the *possibility* of the thing itself according to a prior concept of the thing that contains the basis of that form."³⁷ *Possibility* is the term that seizes upon *Darstellung* as the understanding's contribution to the aesthetic situation. Ordinarily, the understanding would present (*Darstellen*..) a concept to the imagination, which would then be bound to synthesize accordingly. But recalling that the aesthetic situation is so because it lacks such concepts, all that can be expected is the *possibility* that the understanding would present a concept that would harmonize with a form produced by the imagination. As such, the presence of this possibility is what occasions the 'play'. Simply put, the faculties have their cake and eat it, too: the imagination gets to operate freely in a way natural to itself, the understanding gets to operate in its lawfulness, and neither cares a whit whether or not the forms synthesized or the concepts presented correspond to the actual object in question. In this regard, 'reflective' judgment is to be taken quite literally as a continued reflection on/contemplation of the *beautiful* object in question, while the subjective component precludes its being grasped as an object of knowledge.

I have promised a demonstration of the subtractive power of the imagination in the judgment of the beautiful; and while I have given one, I am compelled to admit that it is a rather domesticated case of such power. Nevertheless, the implications of the dynamics of

reflective judgment and harmonious play are a crucial step in the right direction. For one, as Henrich notes, Kant asserts that the harmonious play is a *prerequisite* for the possibility of empirical knowledge.³⁸ This does not mean, of course, that the acquisition of knowledge first depends on an aesthetic experience, but it does mean that the faculties involved are not in themselves predestined to carry out the re-presentative operations responsible for the production of knowledge. Indeed, it seems as though the only faculty even predisposed to such re-presentation is the *understanding* (due to its lawfulness), which must, at least in the aesthetic situation, resort to presentation (*Darstellung*) in any case.

A second implication that is worth drawing out in detail here corresponds to a crucial element of Badiou's ontology. Very briefly, then, some definitions (and it will be helpful for the reader to refer back to endnote 7). Being-as-being, we know, is *pure inconsistent multiplicity* - this is simply what there *is*. Badiou relies on mathematical set theory precisely because it is the only thing which enables us to 'think' inconsistency in a coherent way: all we can access is consistency, but as each consistent thing can be presented only via a 'counting for one', we must of necessity presuppose that what has been 'counted' is pure inconsistent multiplicity.³⁹ "The point to remember from all of this," Hallward reminds us, "is that what Badiou calls a truth or a 'generic procedure' is precisely a way of approaching a situation in terms of strictly inconsistent be-ing"; yet I find Badiou's language more compelling: "a truth draws its support not from consistency, but from inconsistency. It is not a matter of formulating correct judgments, but of producing the murmur of the indiscernible."⁴⁰ Do we not hear precisely this murmur in the case of the Beautiful? Here, the understanding, despite effecting its lawfulness, is certainly unconcerned with formulating a *correct* judgment on the object under reflection; and the imagination in its freedom is not at all concerned with the discernibility of the forms it synthesizes. Furthermore, as the

Truth-Event is the irruption of inconsistency into the consistency of the situation, as it is an incision that violates a situation's normal mode of counting and *recognizing* its elements, access to it *can be only subjective* - inconsistency cannot indeed be grasped by perception and thus can never be an object (of knowledge). Likewise, the aesthetic situation involves a purely *subjective* procedure of judgment; but it is, of course, a judgment nonetheless. Thus we have finally encountered the limit of the subtractive power of the imagination in the judgment of taste, for despite all the promising indications, the structure of harmonious play is in the final analysis decidedly not a violation of the normal way of counting. Indeed, Kant tells us that "*Beauty is an object's form of purposiveness insofar as it is perceived in the object without the presentation of a purpose.*"⁴¹ And 'purpose', as is probably clear enough, is a term that can be legible to and operative in the 'state' of a situation only - even if the purpose is, in the case of the aesthetic situation, merely a semblance.

So although we have heard the the murmur of the indiscernible, however slight, in the work of the imagination, its involvement in a harmonious play with the understanding has shown that its freedom is not yet strong enough to break out of the constraints of Kant's epistemology. Therefore, in order to fully substantiate the assertion of a radically subtractive power, it looks as though the imagination will have to leave the understanding, and its play with it, behind.

Fortunately for my argument here, this is exactly what we get in the event of the sublime.

Perhaps a recap of the progress made thus far: with the demonstration of a semi-subtractive power of the imagination in the case of the Beautiful, we have taken a decisive step toward the void with one foot firmly planted in the 'prerequisite' domain of presentation; yet one foot still remains in the relational domain of re-presentation, caught in a purposively

purposeless play. The next task, accordingly, is the painful but necessary severing of that lagging limb. With the Beautiful, furthermore, we have seen that the imagination is *at least* an equal partner for the understanding, rather than its servant. The fundamental consequence of this equality is of course the threat it poses to the objectivity of *any* judgment.⁴² But it is crucial to be clear about one thing: Kant ends his entire Critique of Aesthetical Judgment with a section titled, “Of Beauty as the symbol of morality”; thus pleasure, ultimately, becomes an organizing principle of existence, a feeling that shores up the notion that goodness and morality result from the benevolent supervision of some a priori, transcendental thing beyond, which reassures us, even as the rational objectivity of our world is threatened, that the goodness of the moral Law is preserved. The sublime, it stands to reason, must be a violent refutation of this pleasing assurance; the promise is in *pain*.

What is it, then, that induces the feeling of pain so infamously associated with the experience of the sublime? In this regard, Kant tells us three things: (1) a beautiful object possess definite boundaries to its form, but the sublime “is to be found in a formless object, so far as in it or by occasion of it *boundlessness* is presented; (2) that “the sublime may appear...to violate purpose in respect of the judgment, to be unsuited to our presentative faculty, and as it were to do violence to the imagination”⁴³; and (3) that in the case of the sublime the imagination forgoes its free play with the understanding and enters into a *conflict* with reason:

Our imagination strives to progress toward infinity [because of the formlessness of the object], while our reason demands absolute totality as a real idea, and so the imagination, our power of estimating the magnitude of things in the world of sense, is inadequate to that idea.⁴⁴

I seek to substantiate my claim to the subtractive power of the imagination by targeting the imagination's conflict with reason.

In the first instance, how does imagination come to leave the understanding behind in the experience of the sublime, and why would it need to, considering the understanding has demonstrated its approval of the imagination's freedom via harmonious play? We have seen that the understanding is the faculty responsible for the production of objective categories and concepts, but that this objectivity is compromised in the aesthetic situation (to which the sublime belongs) due to its subjectiveness (i.e., the relative unimportance of the actual object compared to the *reflective* process of contemplating its possibly harmonious forms). Yet because Kant explains that the sublime is found in a *formless* object with no boundaries, there simply is *no possibility* for the understanding to present a concept that could harmonize with anything the imagination could apprehend. As such, there is absolutely nothing the understanding can do to keep the imagination's freedom in check; its 'lawfulness' becomes absolutely impotent upon the commencement of the imagination's infinite striving. This infinite striving is the consequence of the formlessness of the perceived object. The imagination, whose power is to synthesize what it apprehends in intuition *in total*, can therefore produce forms which only partially apprehend the intuited *form-less* manifold; hence apprehension proceeds toward infinity as a sequence of partial apprehensions. But because the understanding has been left behind, the imagination suddenly finds itself strapped with the understanding's duties. Again, the whole point of presenting concepts to the imagination is to make sure that what they apply to (or are acquired for) is a unified, bounded object that can be grasped in *one* intuition, or *comprehended*; and it is *comprehension* - or what we might legitimately call the 'count of the

count' - that indicates the objective validity of experience. But because the understanding is rendered ineffectual in the sublime,

imagination must perform two acts: apprehension (*apprehensio*), and comprehension (*comprehensio aesthetica*). Apprehension involves no problem, for it may progress to infinity. But comprehension becomes more and more difficult the farther apprehension progresses, and it soon reaches its maximum, namely, the aesthetically largest basic measure for an estimation of magnitude.⁴⁵

Comprehension may be a necessary act for Kant; but for one who seeks to subtract the imagination from its enchainment in Kant's epistemological system, comprehension is in every way expendable. Indeed, the imagination's demonstrated ability to progress to infinity such that it *presents unboundedness* places the faculty absolutely in the realm Kant so radically forbids, due to its vulnerability to the void.

Even more compelling is that the dynamics of the imagination as they operate in the sublime present no difficulty being translated into the language of Badiou's mathematized ontology. The 'estimation of magnitude', which the imagination's infinite apprehension and presentation of unboundedness takes to its maximum, is conceived in Kant's system quite literally as a *counting* by number (i.e., the *mathematical sublime*).⁴⁶ Recalling Badiou's assertion that the counting which produces the structure of a situation is not itself structured in any discernible way, do we not also find this to be the case with the imagination's infinite succession of apprehensions? Without the metastructure of comprehension, this infinite progression of apprehension is not itself structured in any discernible or (in Kant's language) 'purposeful' way, hence the *unboundedness* of the object. Furthermore, the point of the structure most vulnerable to an irruption of the void in an event is the site where a collapse or absence of structure could happen. And this is exactly the point occupied by the

imagination when it reaches its limit, “the aesthetically largest basic measure for an estimation of magnitude” - i.e., *sublime magnitude*, an *absolute* magnitude having no place on a scale of magnitude. By reaching its limit of sublime magnitude, the imagination occupies precisely the locus of the structure’s vulnerability. In other words, is not sublime magnitude the emblem of that “unstructurable something that haunts the situation”, that “uncountable, anarchic, threatening” something that can erupt into the situation itself?⁴⁷ And if, as Badiou claims, such breakdowns in law and order are possible from any unstructured point in a situation, and if there is always at least one such point, since the structuring operation is itself not structured, can we not assign that point to the imagination in the sublime? It, too, is the agency of the structuring operation (*apprehensio*) and as such, in its *freedom*, is not itself structured. The inevitable conclusion to be drawn from all this, then, is that *the imagination, as it operates in the sublime, is precisely that site through which the void could emerge.*

Thus we have arrived at the proof of the imagination’s radically subtractive power. I have demonstrated that the imagination, acting in a way natural to itself, and free from its synthesizing enchainment to understanding and comprehension generally, has the ability to subtract itself from any involvement in Kant’s epistemological relations. At the same time, I have demonstrated, in a way distinct from Badiou’s, the totally illusory status of categorical relations, and their objective concepts generally - even the very concept of ‘object’, as the foundation of thought. Yet despite all of this, one very serious obstacle remains, the final bastion of Kant’s epistemology: the faculty of reason, with which the imagination, having reaching its limit, enters into deadly conflict.

The imagination’s conflict with reason which marks the sublime takes place like so: the imagination apprehends without hinderance to infinity - it is able to *think* the infinite as a whole but can only approach this totality successively, apprehending it one intuition at a

time. Reason, however, is possessed of the Idea that the infinite must be thought “as given in its entirety”⁴⁸; as such, reason demands of the imagination what the understanding would normally be required to do, that is, *comprehend* infinity in *one* intuition.⁴⁹ Of course, the imagination is not equipped to handle such a task, and so it continues its apprehension, in a conflict with reason, to its maximum. It is at this maximum point - sublime magnitude as absolute magnitude - that the conflict turns critical (in the sense of a *crisis*), and the imagination is faced with two radically incommensurable (and irreducible) choices. I will return to this crisis in a moment, for it is reason’s demand that must be dealt with first.

For Kant, reason’s demand of the imagination in the sublime is unconditional, for the whole of his theoretical edifice rests upon the ultimate guarantee of consistency (a guarantee the sublimic imagination is blasting in every conceivable way). In the “Analytic of the Sublime”, Kant makes the imagination succumb to reason’s demand; the imagination, wounded and humiliated at its inability to meet the demand, shrinks back into itself, abandoning its subtractive infinite striving. Order resumes. And it is this resumption of order that Kant describes, in subsection 27 - “Of the quality of the satisfaction in our judgments upon the sublime” - as follows: “The feeling of our incapacity to attain to an idea *which is a law for us is RESPECT.*”⁵⁰ The language does not become less brutal toward the imagination over the next several pages of Kant’s text. Ultimately, Kant turns the greatest example of the power of the imagination, and the purest form of subtractive thought, into an exhibition of the faculty’s ‘limits’ and ‘inadequacy’⁵¹ (the scare-quotes are entirely mine, for we have seen that the imagination is *hardly* inadequate for failing to do what it is not designed to do). By forcing the imagination to acquiescence to reason’s demand, Kant plays up the triumph of the latter with a reference to that term we, as good Badiouans, have found to be highly problematic: “Thus that very violence which is done to the subject through the

imagination is judged as *purposive* in reference to the whole determination of the mind.”⁵² If we accept, with Kant, that the whole determination of our mind is oriented toward a purposive affirmation of some inaccessible yet irresistible categorical imperative, this makes perfect sense. But if we find, instead (and with Badiou) the *imagination* and its power for subtraction to be the essence of thought, the determination of our mind, than it is *reason's* demand that appears inadequate, limited, and wholly *irrational*.

The task that remains now is indeed to show reason's demand of the imagination to be entirely irrational - a final, desperate attempt at securing what the sublime so gravely (and promisingly) threatens: the integrity of an epistemological metaphysics. To do so, I return to the theorem that composes the very heart of transcendental apperception. Let us rehearse the terms of its composition. Kant locates the transcendental right on the edge of the crack between the noumenal and the phenomenal. The primordial unity of self-consciousness, which we might call the limit or horizon of all possible experience, is arrived at by Kant via the utmost abstraction; in other words, his notion that “in the synthetic original unity of apperception, I am conscious of myself, not as I appear to myself, nor as I am in myself, but only that I am,”⁵³ is a construction that *needs* to be presumed due to the inaccessibility of the noumenal self, the I or he or it (Thing) that thinks. Next, in order to account for the unification of phenomenal reality into objects upon which we can exercise judgment, Kant makes use of a correlation between two paradoxical entities, the transcendental subject = “I think...”, and the transcendental object = x as the metonymical placeholder for objectivity *in toto* (see above) - paradoxical because of the fact that, despite their apparently noumenal properties (i.e., they cannot be known in themselves), they are neither phenomenal nor noumenal but the void(s) of their lack. As such, and I discuss in detail above, though the correlation of these two voids is the prerequisite (for Kant) of all possible representation,⁵⁴

the entities (transcendental subject and object) cannot themselves be represented but only presupposed, that is, abstracted from the “thoughts which are [their] predicates.”⁵⁵

With the composition of apperception thus reviewed, there remains one glaring question: what has the faculty of imagination to do with transcendental apperception? For one, we have seen that the imagination is an indispensable faculty, for it is responsible for the ‘mediation’ or *relation* between concepts and intuitions. Therefore, it seems logical that there must be some kind of activity of the imagination present in the act of transcendental apperception - indeed, it may be the *only* activity present. Of the connection between the faculty of the imagination and apperception, Kant leaves several significant clues. The one which must strike one’s attention is a distinction made between a ‘reproductive’ imagination on the one hand and a ‘transcendental’ imagination on the other, where the latter is given the status of the *a priori*. More important than the specifics pertaining to this distinction is the use Kant makes of the transcendental, a priori imagination:

the *image* is a product of the empirical faculty of reproductive imagination; the *schema* of sensible concepts, such as figures in space, is a product and, as it were, a monogram, of pure *a priori* imagination, through which, and in accordance with which, images themselves *first become possible*.⁵⁶

Clayton Crockett, in a careful dismantling of Kant’s Transcendental Schematism, discerns (through a web of Kant’s shifting definitions) that the Schematism *is* the transcendental imagination, and that the *schema* it produces is “not a thing” but an “act or activity or procedure” that, “while allowing representation to occur, does not allow itself to be fully represented.”⁵⁷ The language here locates the transcendental imagination squarely within the act of self-consciousness called apperception: “they do share a structural similarity[;] the imagination mediates but also disrupts the relation of intuitions to concepts, [and] the

transcendental unity of apperception mediates between two selves, the empirical or phenomenal and the noumenal or moral, but ultimately it too disrupts their unity or identity.”⁵⁸ Crockett notes the epistemological instability created by the inability to represent the process of representation. I spare the reader the summary of over a dozen pages of a meticulous unpacking of the Schematism to deliver straightly the conclusion:

The process of representation, or the transcendental imagination, is both time-determining and also *subject determining*. According to Kant, “time is contained in every empirical representation of the manifold. Thus as application of the category to appearances [the Schematism] becomes possible by means of a transcendental determination of time” (A 139/B179). [As Heidegger has shown,] time and the ‘I think’ are the same, that is, the essence of the transcendental unity of apperception is temporality. [...] Given the intimate affinity of temporality and subjectivity in Kant’s philosophy, the transcendental imagination, which effects experience as a determination of time (when employed by the conceptual understanding), *is essentially the transcendental unity of apperception*.⁵⁹

What Crockett is touching on here, in other words, is that the faculty of the imagination is not only intimately tied into the unity of apperception that determines the subject, but that it is in the imagination’s power to ‘access’ this deep, foundational level of our self-consciousness. It has been worth going over this affinity in detail, for what I desire to contend is that what the imagination re/pro-gresses to in the experience of the sublime *is the primordial act of the determination of the subject*, that is, *since the sublimic imagination is contained within an actual human individual, the experience of the sublime subtracts that individual absolutely to the limit/horizon of its constitution as a subject, to the very edge of the Void upon which s/he is founded*.

Severings: *Agalma* at the Void

As the above analysis shows, the crucial element in the securing of Kant's epistemological state is that the imagination's process of representing must itself remain unrepresentable. As Žižek tell us, "the price to be paid for our access to reality" - and the texture of reality is always the product of the count-of-the-count, the *state* of the situation - "is that *something must remain unthought*."⁶⁰ The specific *aesthetic* situation, and its attendant process of reflective judgment, is the first blow to Kant's epistemology. In the sublime, we recall, we see the subtractive power of the imagination at its purest - that is, for itself and freed of the duty to re-present. This power allows the imagination to apprehend *to its maximum limit* - i.e., sublime magnitude - where the 'I think' of which it *is* bumps up against the limit of what must remain unthought (unapprehended): the very 'thing' that enables it to apprehend to infinity (literally) *in the first place* - the *transcendental object*.

At risk of redundancy, I describe the features of the transcendental object once more. Most recently, I have mentioned the paradoxical distinction Kant makes between the transcendental object and the *Ding an sich* (the noumenal thing-in-itself); they are of the same nature, yet whereas the Thing-in-itself is what it is independent and irrespective of my perception (i.e., noumenal), the transcendental object is the "underlying, unknown ground of appearance, i.e., of what we perceive as an object of experience."⁶¹ As such, the transcendental object is the metonymical, "sensuously unfulfilled" placeholder of objectivity *in whole* - it is the shadow thought projects in front of itself of the forever lost noumenal object/Thing - and thus it protects the categorical imperative by guaranteeing that the categories will refer to all possible objects of experience.⁶² But the agency responsible for referring those categories to intuitions, the understanding, is absent in the sublime.

Consequently (and here the reader is invited to refer back to endnote 21), if the imagination were to apprehend that which makes its apprehension to infinity possible, then the transcendental object would be given to the mind, *thought*, as it is in itself, and the distinction between noumena and phenomena upon which Kant's whole philosophy depends would fall away in an absolutely *catastrophic* way.

Now, finally, we are in a position to disclose the absolute irrationality of reason's demand. In an experience of a sublime object, the transcendental imagination subtracts the subject's consciousness to the precise point where the void can emerge and be encountered: the structure of transcendental apperception. Encountering the formless sublime object, the imagination is confronted with a thing far beyond the scope of the unified objects it ordinarily synthesizes; in other (Badiouan) words, it encounters an object/experience which is so monstrous that it evades the count-of-the-count, and cannot therefore be subsumed under the defining term of the Kantian epistemological state or categorical imperative - it is not *purposive*. Nevertheless, the imagination does what it is built to do and apprehends the formless, colossal sublime object one synthesis at a time in a sequence that can proceed *ad infinitum*, which produces the feeling of the unboundedness of the object. Doing so, it necessarily makes use of the transcendental object as the placeholder for objectivity in total, that is, *as a whole*. Yet what reason demands of the imagination to comprehend is exactly that which the transcendental object *is*. In other words, *reason demands the comprehension of the infinite, boundless sublime magnitude in one intuition*, and the *only* way the imagination could deliver would be to *apprehend the transcendental object* - the very thing that must remain by definition *unthought* if the difference between noumena and phenomena is to remain intact.⁶³ Reason thus demands of the imagination *exactly what it must be unable to do if the whole of Kant's epistemology is to function accordingly!* And furthermore, this radically irrational

demand *works* only *if* the imagination complies, but there is nothing whatsoever (except Kant's idealism, the categorical imperative) that necessitates the imagination's compliance.

Thus one is compelled to agree with Žižek's own conclusions regarding the Kantian sublime.⁶⁴ Kant, as can be seen at the end of the "Critique of Aesthetical Judgment", conceives of 'Beauty as the symbol of morality'; so then what, asks Žižek, is the sublime a symbol of? Žižek begins to formulate a response to this question by discussing how the Beautiful and the Sublime are differently related to the field of ethics. My own conclusions have shown that the Beautiful corresponds to morality and the Good because the lawfulness of the understanding, as the representative of reason and legislator of its categorical imperative, is still effective despite the subtractive freedom of the imagination; *purposiveness* is preserved in the process of harmonious play. Žižek agrees when he writes, "Beauty is the symbol of the Good, i.e., of the moral Law as the pacifying agency which reigns in our egotism and renders possible harmonious social existence."⁶⁵ The sublime, however, shows up the ultimate impotence of the pacifying understanding as the imagination sheds its confinement within the structure of harmonious play. With nothing to uphold the moral Law, and with the imagination simply indifferent to producing any representation that would affirm it - how could it in any case, considering the dynamics of the sublime? - reason is forced to play its hand in the form of a demand whose irrationality and impossibility I previously attempted to demonstrate. Žižek, too, arrives at the same notion: "its [the Sublime's] very failure to symbolize (to represent symbolically) the suprasensible moral Law evokes its superego dimension."⁶⁶ For Žižek, such evocation is the essence of Kantian autonomy: we are transcendental, spontaneous subjects, freed from the constraints of our empirical, pathological nature, "precisely and only insofar as [our] feeling of self-esteem is

crushed down by the humiliating pressure of the moral Law.”⁶⁷ So what is the ethical status of the sublime conceived against this backdrop? Well, Žižek writes,

The problem with the sublime object (more precisely, the object which arouses in us the feeling of the sublime) is that it *fails* as a symbol; it evokes its Beyond by the very failure of its symbolic representation. So if Beauty is the symbol of the Good, the sublime evokes - what? There is only one answer possible: the nonpathological, ethical, suprasensible dimension, for sure, but *the suprasensible, the ethical stance, insofar as it eludes the domain of the Good* - in short: radical Evil, Evil as an ethical attitude.⁶⁸

The other conclusion to be drawn is even more radical than the first. Considering the imagination’s essential affinity with apperception, and its overproximity to that structure in the sublime, does the experience of the sublime not demonstrate with startling clarity the totally illusory status of the categorical imperative, the total fictitiousness of the foundational process of *relation*, and the concept of *object*, whose name is *purposiveness*? When Kant explains that reason intervenes in the sublime because “the transcendent (toward which the imagination is impelled in its apprehension of intuition) is for the imagination like an abyss in which it fears to lose itself,”⁶⁹ it is as though he fails to notice the truth of his own (rather interesting) parapraxis. For what the sublimic imagination indeed reveals is that *there is no Beyond, no positive substantial Thing (i.e., suprasensible Idea) behind the gauze of phenomena*. This emptiness is revealed in the symbolic breakdown that marks the sublime, and which reason attempts to fill out with its furious appeal to the Idea; but this is a hollow, ineffectual gesture, a gesture that, to his critics, ultimately undoes Kant’s entire project.

When Kant splits the universe into noumena and phenomena and restricts our conscious activity to the phenomenal, he conceives of the noumenal as a properly

epistemological problem: we cannot *know* how Things-in-themselves are structured, but we do know they affect us empirically, and in order to account for the possibility of this affection, Kant presupposes the unity of apperception and posits the transcendental object as a necessary correlative of it, as the *place* of objectivity-in-whole (the Thing-in-itself) insofar as *it is for us*. But as this *place* is a *place-holder*, a metonymic semblance and therefore strictly *void*, it achieves the illusion which Kant sustains to the very end: that the foreclosed noumenal domain of Things-in-themselves is a positive, substantial, totally fulfilled realm. What the sublime irrevocably shows, however, is that this noumenal Beyond - the place of our suprasensible Idea - is merely a mirage cast by the phenomenal itself.

To illustrate, imagine the sublime object - the object of absolute magnitude which carries the mind to the absolute limit of its possible experience - as *tangent* to the transcendental object (which also marks the limit of what we can perceive). Conceived of in this way - as tangent to the transcendental object - the *sublime object*, the object we experience as 'sublime', is *nothing but the mere positivization of the void [transcendental object] on the other 'side' of their shared limit*:

The sublime object is simultaneously the surface *Schein* or 'grimace,' a pure semblance devoid of any substantial support, *and* something 'more real than reality itself': in its very capacity of a pure semblance, it 'gives body' to a boundary which fixes the limits of (what we experience) as reality, i.e., it holds the place of, stands in for, what has to be excluded, foreclosed, if reality is to retain its consistency.⁷⁰

What Žižek describes here is identical to what I am motioning toward when I say the sublime object and the transcendental object are 'tangent' to one another, sharing a limit. The transcendental object, which we *cannot* experience, fixes the limit of what we experience as reality, while the sublime object, as that which is 'more real than reality itself', is what we

can perceive as the ultimate limit of our experience/perception. In both cases, the limit is one and the same, but conceived from different ‘perspectives’. In the experience of the sublime, then, the imagination punctures the exclusion or foreclosure of this boundary *precisely because in the experience of the sublime the subject comes to occupy the limit of what can be experienced as part of ‘reality’*. Moreover, the occupation of this boundary *necessitates* a confrontation with the void which is both *constitutive of the subject* (via the primordial act of apperception), and demonstrative of the primacy of this void that exists prior to any attempt at substantializing it.⁷¹ In short, the subject’s encounter with the void in the experience named Sublime is a fundamental proof of the Truth of Badiou’s ontology: a pure multiple inconsistent presentation, subtracted from any symbolic support, founded on the sole void.

But let us be very clear about the fact that this experience is *radical* in the fullest sense of the word; for what it achieves is nothing other than the absolute negation of the subject, a total symbolic death. In the experience of the sublime, the subject is subtracted from its support in the signifying chain and the symbolic texture of the state of the situation; the individual has become an ‘empty’ subject, the void of the ‘I think...’, or, the figure of a pure (transcendental) imagination and apperception prior to any integration into a symbolic network.

And so it is here, at last, that the Lacanian implications of the experience of the sublime can no longer be deferred. It is possible, I realize, that the reader may have begun asking himself what the point of this tremendously complex analysis of the sublime amounts to, if a thinker like Žižek has already arrived at the same conclusions. The entire goal of this chapter has been to render the Kantian idea of the experience of the Sublime eligible for consideration as an experience of a Truth-Event; or, more precisely, to *link* the experience of the sublime with the experience of the Truth-Event. As such, it has been important *not* to arrive at my

conclusions via the same route as Žižek, who arrives at his through an analysis of Kant which employs his famous Marx-Hegel-Lacan triumvirate. For those without their ear to the ground on the debates raging between psychoanalysis and philosophy, suffice it to say that Badiou's philosophy of Truth is hostile to psychoanalysis in general and Žižek's Hegelo-Lacanian psychoanalysis in particular.⁷² (Though in fairness to both parties, the difference between Badiou's and Žižek's positions apropos the Event are so pronounced due to the extraordinary *similarity* between them.) In the final section of this chapter, I have occasion to explore these disagreements on my way toward a configuration of a Subject of the Sublime.

For now, however, I wish to highlight the affinities so far obtained and to make some preliminary statements regarding the status of the sublime qua event. Considering that I have critiqued Kantian aesthetics and epistemology by a strict application of Badiou's ontology and philosophy only, it can be said that I have permitted nothing to infiltrate my analysis of the sublime that would disqualify it from Badiou's system. So while all Truth-Events may not be sublime in nature, we can say with relative certainty that all experiences of the sublime are Evental in nature. I hope to augment this certainty in the final section of this chapter. Also, since the conclusions I have reached regarding the Kantian sublime using a Badiouan methodology share remarkable similarities with those reached by Žižek using a Hegelo-Marxist-Lacanian methodology, it can be inferred that, at least in the case of the sublime, we have encountered a form of the Event where psychoanalysis and philosophy coincide - or, at minimum, do not necessarily conflict with each other.

Earlier on, I mentioned that the subject experiences a kind of *crisis* at the apex of its confrontation with reason in the sublime. And though we have thoroughly seen both the absolute inadequacy of reason's demand of the subject *and* that the wholeness it promises is a

total fake, that same demand does nevertheless provide the subject with a way 'out' of the predicament the sublime places him in. So a crisis it is. The subject of the transcendental imagination is faced with two incommensurable and irreducible choices: to submit to reason's demand, which, because it is impossible to meet, results in the neutering of the imagination and the subject and returns the subject to the comfortable security of a symbolic identity guaranteed by the moral Law; or to reject this demand and plunge headlong into the abyss of symbolic Death, the Lawless domain of subject qua void prior to its filling out with the act of identification that produces a 'me' alongside the 'I'. It is upon this *choice* that the subject of the sublime hinges.

Decision & Act: The Subject *of* the Sublime

At risk of betraying my affiliations at the outset, I take as a point of departure for this last section of the chapter a significantly problematic dimension of Badiou's concept of the Event, critiqued, of course, by Slavoj Žižek. However, this critique needs some setting up. So far, I have forwarded the argument that the *experience* called 'Sublime' is fundamentally identical to the *experience* of a Truth-Event, in that both involve, at bottom as it were, an encounter with the *void* of a given situation. The exact situation under question, of course, has been that of the Kantian determination of human self-consciousness and the processes whereby it comes to represent its experience in the terms of purposiveness and objective validity. Now obviously, it is the transcendental imagination that, as it rubs tangent to the very limit of phenomenal reality, first ruptures the consistency of that reality and then encounters its void - a void that no categorical imperative, no suprasensible Idea can fill out. The ultimate power of truth is its being generic to the situation and, ultimately, since truth is infinite, generic to the *human* situation generally. Therefore, the truth encountered in the

experience of the sublime - i.e., that our freedom and spontaneity as human creatures does not depend on the guarantee of a categorical imperative nor the unconditional thrust of the moral Law - is true all individuals. Yet while it would be foolish to imagine the imagination as some abstraction that encounters the sublime-event as it obviously 'belongs to' a human individual, the problematic of the exact status of the *subject* in this experience is still very much up for question.

Indeed, the problematic of the *subject* and *subjectivity* (or the *process of subjectivization*) is the essential locus of the antinomies between (Lacanian) psychoanalysis and (Badiouan) philosophy/ontology; and so it is no surprise that this is where Žižek and Badiou stand opposed. From the standpoint of the position I have advanced so far, although I am convinced the sublime can be called an event, I have yet to fully substantiate the status of the subject in this encounter. Remember that, for Badiou, subject and truth emerge together in an event (Truth-Event). From the standpoint of Being qua the state of the situation - the domain of positivity accessible to knowledge, symbolically structured with signs and referents whose meanings are fixed around a master-signifier, etc. - the event is *stricto sensu* inaccessible. Instead, the event appears as simply a finite interruption of the state of things, a local disturbance which can effectively be 'remedied' with the language and technology at the state's disposal. For example, 9/11 appeared to the state (of the situation) - i.e., the Bush administration or global free-market capitalism in general - as merely the local terrorism of a finite group of fundamentalists who can be positively identified and systematically eliminated. The properly evental take on 9/11, by contrast, is that the event of the World Trade Center's collapse revealed the repressed void/truth of our Western global capitalist hegemony, the vulnerability of any power that grows so colossal and vast, and the ultimate culpability of all who benefit from its exploitation.⁷³ The point is simply that an

event cannot be said to have happened at all if the *decision*, for it is not already there. And as the truth of a situation, its void, is by definition inhuman and asubjective, the *decision* can only be the work of a subject. Hence their emergence together, subject and truth, in an event, for there can be no event without a subject who declares it and, in the endless work of *fidelity* to that event, strives to discern the traces of the event in the situation which it undermines. The problem that comes along with such a decision - and here we are nearing the crux of Žižek's critique - is that the subject, like the event, only comes to *be* in the act of its decision.

There is, for Badiou, no subject *of* the event *prior* to the *decision*, only individuals (or subjects, in the ideological sense) of the state of the situation. And because the event is effectively invisible (that is, inaccessible) to those who belong to the state of the situation, the decision that marks the event operates as a *wager* in the strict sense of a radical risk taken. Let us take an elementary example, the falling in love of two persons. The falling in love itself, the event, is absolutely ineffable (and entirely insignificant to anyone save the two individuals involved). The event, falling in love, can be declared only by way of an ecstatic 'I love you!', which, once spoken, constitutes the individual as a 'subject of the event of falling in love'. This declaration thus marks the beginning of (one hopes) a lifelong *fidelity* to that event which involves discerning the traces of that love in the couple's situation - e.g., the 'park bench' where the event was declared, 'I love you!', becomes something entirely different for the couple than for anyone else in the state of the situation, who sees in the bench only a resting place for weary vagabonds, or a shitting-place for pigeons. This fidelity, which begins with the nomination of the Event ('I love you!'), unfolds into a series of denominations Badiou calls the 'subject language [*langue-sujet*].' This language is meaningless from the standpoint of being/the state, which can judge propositions only

according to their proper functioning and established meaning within a symbolic order. So 'the bench' as a signifier for the loving couple is meaningless or does not mean the same thing for anyone else. But, to continue with our example, how many times have we found ourselves out of love with the person to whom we have once said 'I love you!?' In such a sad case, it is not only that 'I no longer love you', but essentially that 'I never really loved you' - or worse, 'I believed I loved you, but it was not true; what I mistook for love was instead sexual passion or dependence on your presence,' and so on.

Hence the fundamental dimension of the *decision* is its status as a *wager*, as a radical risk with no ultimate guarantee.⁷⁴ As a wager, the decision harbors two, potentially dangerous consequences. In the first place, there can be no argument or debate or dialogue between the subject of an event and a subject of the state of the situation in which subject and event emerge. The latter will always find the subject-language of the former to be empty, meaningless gibberish, while the former will necessarily be indifferent to any proposition offered by the state, finding it to be a perverted denial that the event never really happened. So there is one significant problem: the wagered decision of a Truth-Event does not need any grounds (indeed, it must have *none*) and therefore cannot be refuted by any argument. This in itself would not be a problem were it not for the possibility that, as we have seen in the unfortunate instance of the couple who fall out of love, there is *always* the possibility that the Truth-Event could be a fake, a mere semblance of a Truth-Event that is nevertheless capable of seducing its subjects into a *faith* in its 'authenticity', a *faith* that cannot be challenged. The problem has begun to look very much like a dilemma, for there exists the possibility of a subject emerging as a subject of a truth-semblance, with there being no conceivable way to challenge or refute such a subject.

We have thus arrived at the thrust of Žižek's critique of Badiou's Truth-Event.

Citing the fact that Badiou uses Pauline Christianity as the example *par excellence* of fidelity to the Truth-Event (Christ's resurrection as the Event that signals the truth of a generic humanity, of a truth that applies to all regardless of sex, race, creed, etc.), Žižek is of course quick to observe, as the militantly atheist Badiou also would, that Paul's message is no longer operative for us, as the possibility of a resurrection is known to be impossible, reduced to a mere fable.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, for Badiou, despite the fact that the resurrection is of course not a possible event, Paul's formulation of fidelity to the Christian Truth-Event can be applied to every Truth-Event. Thus Žižek targets exactly what our example of the two lovers demonstrates, the problem of "how it was possible for the first and still most pertinent description of the operation of fidelity to a truth [Pauline Christianity] to occur apropos of a Truth-Event that was a mere semblance, not an effective Truth." Žižek goes on to claim the "deep Hegelian necessity" to this problem, "confirmed by the fact that the twentieth-century philosopher who provided the definitive description of an *authentic* political act (Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit*.) got seduced by a *fake* political act, that is, one which was not an effective Truth-Event (Nazism)."⁷⁶ The central problem with Badiou's notion of Truth-Event, then, is that there seems to be no way to ensure that a subject is not seduced by a fake, or, more radically, there seems to be no way at all to differentiate between an authentic Truth-Event and a fake:

What if what Badiou calls a Truth-Event is, at its most radical, a purely formal act of decision, not only not grounded in an effective Truth but ultimately *indifferent* to the precise status (effective or fabulous) of the Truth-Event to which it refers?⁷⁷

It is my aim to overcome this problem.

Immediately, a solution appears to present itself. Standing up for Badiou against this Žižekian critique is Bruno Bosteels, a major Badiou commentator, who refutes Žižek's critique on the grounds that it fails to fully take into account Badiou's *ontology* (focusing, instead, on his philosophy only).⁷⁸ So I turn, to start, to Badiou's ontology. Recall, Being-as-Being is simply pure inconsistent multiplicity, founded on the sole void; this is simply what there *is*. In the process of structuring and metastructuring the presentation of this inconsistent multiplicity, however, the void which is the truth of the situation develops the same ambiguity as the Lacanian Real. That is, the Real/Void is simultaneously *both* the 'hard kernel' that resists or avoids integration into the metastructured state/symbolic network of signifiers *and* the 'left over' of that metastructuring - think of the French *sans papiers* or Agamben's notion of *homo sacer*. Remember, too, that the Void/Truth/Real is not to be gotten at, but can only irrupt in a wholly contingent, unpredictable way, outside of the bounds of the state of Being though it cuts directly through it, subverting and undermining it. However, though the Event cannot be predicted or be made to happen at a subject's whim, *it is* possible to occupy the 'edge' of the void, or what Badiou calls the evental site - the point where breakdowns or absences of structure are most likely to occur, and thus the point where the event is likely to emerge (see above). The process whereby one comes to occupy the evental site is none other than that of *subtraction*. A subject can, as a part of a truth-procedure, engage in the difficult work of subtracting presentation from representation, and so thereby come to the edge of the evental site. In the same way it can also be said that the void *is* because it *is subtracted* from the metastructuring operations of the state as well as from presentation itself. We are already getting presentiments of what the solution to Badiou's apparent authenticity deadlock could be, considering the transcendental imagination's subtractive power. The ambiguity that pertains to the Real/Void is a necessary

(meta)structural element; it is what is required to maintain the consistency of the state of the situation/symbolic network over the inconsistency it (meta)structures. Thus it is via *subtraction* that the site of the presentation of *inconsistency* (the evental site) can be located.

How, then, does this help us determine the status, authentic or fabulous, of a Truth-Event? To sum up the exposition above, the void of a given situation consists of the inconsistent multiples the situation failed to fully structure and represent - i.e., the void of a given situation is its 'left-over'. But the void of a given situation is *also* merely a fragment of the *generic* Void constitutive of *all* situations, regardless of their structuring operations - i.e., the Void qua 'hard kernel' that forever resists symbolization. Therefore, it is logical to claim that, if in the event we encounter the void of the situation, we must necessarily be also encountering the Void as such, the *generic* truth common to all situations. Consequently, an *authentic* Truth-Event can be only one in which the void of the situation is really encountered. Yet although we have been able to define the criteria of an authentic Truth-Event theoretically, we must admit that it has not taken us very far out of the problem, for there remains the task of discerning precisely whether or not the 'void' we appear to be encountering in an event is in fact the void of the situation. Our hope for a way to make exactly this distinction is beginning to look every bit a chimera. Its lion's head, on the one hand, prevents us from any knowledge of the void as such; as a presentation of pure inconsistent multiplicity, there is simply no way for an individual to *discern* the void as void, to say whether in the event we've got hold of the real void or its mirage. Its serpent's tail, on the other hand, indicates that Badiou seems entirely correct when he insists that the *decision* that marks the event must follow the logic of the *wager*: as the emergence of the void is properly indiscernible, there is always a risk involved in its declaration as a Truth-Event, and further, this declaration itself is not up for debate.

It seems, consequently, that the status of the authenticity of the event is in every way *subjective*, and fundamentally concerns the question of the subject. Let us return to Žižek's critique of Badiou, this time to his emphasis on the different concepts of subject that belong to Badiou's system and Lacan's. To do so, I revisit a claim I have made some pages ago about the status of the subject in the experience of the sublime. I have said that it is possible for the subject to reject reason's demand, but that such a rejection would entail a radical negation of subjectivity that would catapult the individual into the terrifying domain 'between the two deaths'. Of course, this is a strictly Lacanian concept that posits two concepts of death: on the one hand, death as death, the end of the organism's life; on the other, death as symbolic death, a radical subtraction of an individual's consciousness from its support in a symbolic network, a catastrophic evacuation of all the individual takes to be 'him' (in the case of the sublime, the transcendent Idea and moral Law which sustain his conception of himself as a free and autonomous being, and so on). I arrived at this conclusion by way of showing how the work of the imagination in the experience of the sublime has the power to subtract the subject all the way to the point *tangent* to the void that constitutes him, the point we now know Badiou calls the 'evental site' (hence my assertion that the experience of the sublime is an evental experience). Occupying such a site, the subject is confronted with the crisis of either succumbing to reason or plunging into the void. Taking that plunge means subtracting one's self from the dialectical domain of the Law and its transgression⁷⁹ - i.e., the domain to which reason is desperate to keep the subject enchained; and what greater example is there of the complicity between the Law and its transgression than the Kantian sublime, where even the subject's violation of *the* Law, the categorical imperative, is converted into a morbid satisfaction, a feeling of *pleasure* at one's being castrated and humiliated by a raging superego? In short, the subject's rejection of this

questionable pleasure and the consequent plunge into the abyss is an *Act* which could only be experienced as a *catastrophe*.

The problem is that the individual who makes the plunge into the void is not recognized in Badiou's system as *subject*. As the void is by definition asubjective, an individual who *is void or has been voided by his Act* cannot properly be called *subject*. Here, we have finally reached the fulcrum separating Badiou from Lacan/Žižek, which can be defined as a difference in orientation to the concepts of subject and subjectivization. For Badiou, subject is merely the beginning or starting point of the process of subjectivization. The subject emerges with the Truth-Event, and the process of subjectivization corresponds to that subject's continued fidelity to the Truth-Event. For Lacan, subject and subjectivization are two distinct instances. First, there must be the subject of the *act*, the empty, voided subject prior to and *irreducible to* the gesture of subjectivization which fills out that void and marks the subject's dedication to some new Cause with which she identifies ('I am a subject in the service of...'). Žižek says it best:

In Lacan, Act is a purely *negative* category, which (in Badiou's terms) stands for the gesture of breaking out of the constraints of Being, for the reference to the Void at its core, *prior to the filling in of the Void*. In this precise sense, *act* involves the dimension of the death drive [disavowed by Badiou] which grounds the decision (to exercise fidelity to a Truth), but cannot be reduced to it. The Lacanian death drive is thus a kind of 'vanishing mediator' between Being and Event, a 'negative' gesture constitutive of subject that is then obfuscated in 'Being' (the established ontological order) and in fidelity to the Event. [...] In short, the Lacanian answer to the question asked (and answered in the negative) by such different philosophers as Althusser, Derrida, and Badiou - *Can the gap/opening/Void which precedes the gesture of subjectivization still be called 'subject'?* - is an emphatic *yes*.⁸⁰

I absolutely agree with Žižek, and not only because he convincingly demonstrates that Lacanian psychoanalysis is certainly *not* trapped in the dialectic of Law and transgression which is the target of Badiou's critique. I agree with Žižek because I believe that the necessity of calling the Void also Subject is the only way of positively discerning whether or not a Truth-Event is *authentic*:

There really *is* a difference between an authentic Truth-Event and its semblance, and it can be traced to the fact that in a Truth-Event the Void of the death-drive, of a radical negativity that momentarily suspends the Order of Being, continues to resonate.⁸¹

Authenticity then, as both of the above quotes explain, is dependent upon whether or not the subject can be said to have had his Act motivated by the encounter with the death-drive, which stands for the void before that void is filled in with any substantial content. What it is compelling to note here is thus how the imagination and apperception may be the first things posited by the death-drive, which persists beyond the subject and is irreducible to him/her.

It should by now, I hope, be clear what all of this has to do with the sublime. The experience of the sublime creates the radical aporia within the order of being that makes it possible for the individual to commit his *Act*, understood as the catastrophic encounter with the drive. (The central role of drive in the subject's Act is explored in detail in the second chapter of this project; I can mention it only briefly here.) The experience of the sublime carries the individual right to the precipice of this possibility, the aporatic as such, and gives him a choice far more radical than the *decision* to declare a Truth-Event. The experience of the sublime, nothing but the pure *Asynthesis* of Being, enables the individual to *choose his Act*,

the gesture which clears the place for the next, crucial decision: the *decision of fidelity* to the Truth-Event. Only *this* is the creation of a True *Subject of the Sublime*.

We are now in a position to assert the immanent necessity of the idea of the sublime for Badiou's philosophy of the Event. *It is only through the catastrophic experience of the sublime that a subject can be sure that the Event s/he wagers on will have been the emergence of a generic Truth*. It is in this way that the experience of the sublime functions as an *aesthetic marker* of the authenticity of a Truth-Event. As such, it rehabilitates aesthetics as the *crucial* category of all true innovations in politics, science, art, and love; and the experience of the sublime thus has profound implications for anyone who hopes for Truth.

NOTES

¹ Badiou, Alain. "On a Finally Objectless Subject". *The Symptom* 10, Spring 2009.

² Badiou, Alain. *L'Être et L'événement*. p 193. Trans. Peter Hallward in *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* [citations to follow will use the abbreviation 'EE']

³ Hallward, Peter. *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*. (114).

⁴ Badiou, Alain. *Court traité d'ontologie transitoire*. (59)

⁵ Hallward, *op. cit.* (107)

⁶ Hallward's summary is again helpful here: "It is not that the event itself is nothing. It has the same (inconsistent) being-as-being as anything else. An event can only be a multiple, but it is one that counts as nothing in the situation in which it takes place. If everything that exists or belongs to a situation is numbered or counted for one in this situation, an event is the (necessarily ephemeral) presentation of inconsistency in the situation. Though it thus indicates the true being of the situation, an event must for that very reason count as nothing for this situation." (115)

⁷ Badiou, Rev. of Gilles Deleuze, *Le Pli* (180)

⁸ Hallward, xxv.

⁹ Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. James T. Boulton ed., London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1958. (32)

¹⁰ Taken from Badiou's earlier *Théorie du sujet* (1982), and cited in Hallward (38).

¹¹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A271/B327

¹² And here we have the inverted qualification for the inaccessibility of the noumenal: because our finite human sensibility cannot perceive of objects as they are in themselves, an intuition of the void, of Being-as-Being, would be properly ‘thoughtless’, or at least nothing to us.

¹³ Hallward provides an excellent overview of Badiou’s criticisms of Kant in *A Subject to Truth* 163-168; the quote appears on page 165.

¹⁴ Žižek, Slavoj. *Tarrying with the negative Kant, Hegel, and the critique of ideology*. Durham: Duke UP, 1993. (14)

¹⁵ See Žižek, *Tarrying* (13-20).

¹⁶ Ibid. (16)

¹⁷ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 109.

¹⁸ Žižek, *Tarrying* (18).

¹⁹ As Žižek reminds us, “insofar as it [the transcendental object] functions as a metonymical placeholder of the objectivity *in whole*, it is an object which, if given to me in intuition, would simultaneously have to be given to me as it is in itself.” (18)

²⁰ Hallward, *op. cit.* (165)

²¹ This is as much a result of the Truth-Event’s and the subject’s shared objectless status as it is the result of Kant’s making the ‘object’ the sole basis for thought.

²² Kant *Critique of Pure Reason* B 157

²³ Žižek *Tarrying* (15)

²⁴ Hallward, *op. cit.* (165)

²⁵ Ibid. Badiou’s quotes come from *Court traité d’ontologie transitoire*, 156.

²⁶ “Kant’s powerful ontological intuitions” remain the prisoner of those epistemological relations whose operation they are ultimately designed to guarantee. Rather than ground his philosophy firmly on the void, “Kant assigns the foundational function to the *relation* of the two voids,” objective and subjective (*Court traité* 161), such that it is precisely the work of perception and synthesis that proceeds as primary. (Hallward, *op. cit.* 166).

²⁷ Paton, H.J. *Kant’s Metaphysics of Experience*. Vol. I, p.354.

²⁸ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* A78/B103

²⁹ Badiou, *Abrégé de métapolitique* 134 trans. Hallward, *op. cit.* (100)

³⁰ Badiou, *EE* 110-111 trans. Hallward, *op. cit.* (95)

³¹ Dieter Henrich, *Aesthetic Judgment and the Moral Image of the World: Studies in Kant* p. 42: “In one of its employments the power of judgment applies general terms to particular cases; as such it is ‘determinative’ judgment. But we are frequently in situations [the aesthetic situation, for example] that expose us to objects for which applicable general concepts are lacking. These situations call for the employment of ‘reflective’ judgment, which searches for and develops the appropriate general concept.”

³² Ibid (44-45), final emphasis mine

³³ Ibid (47)

³⁴ This lack of an a priori concept and the consequent need for an empirical concept is the minimal definition of a purely *subjective* judgment (as opposed to an *objective* judgment, which simply involves the application of a general a priori concept to a specific perception).

³⁵ Henrich, *op. cit.* (47)

³⁶ *Ibid* (51)

³⁷ See Kant *Critique of Judgment*, (32 emphasis mine).

³⁸ Henrich, *op. cit.* (53)

³⁹ “Multiplicity is the inevitable predicate of what is structured, since structuration, i.e., the counting for one, is an effect...Inconsistency, as pure multiplicity, is simply the presumption that, prior to or above the count, the one is not.” *EE* 32, 65 trans. Hallward *op. cit.* (91).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* in Hallward. Badiou’s quote is from *Petit manuel d’inéthétique*, 57

⁴¹ Kant *Critique of Judgment* (84)

⁴² Kant was not unfamiliar with this threat. As Crockett points out, “This threat, that any exercise of imagination not subordinated to the activity of the understanding results in a free play which is necessarily subjective and lacks objective content, motivates the rewriting of the Transcendental Deduction, in 1787” (70). This is the same year, of course, that Kant wrote the “Critique of Taste”, which motivates the writing of the *Critique of Judgment*, as well.

⁴³ Kant *Critique of Judgment* (82)

⁴⁴ Kant *Critique of Judgment* (106)

⁴⁵ Kant *Critique of Judgment* (108)

⁴⁶ cf. Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* subsection 26, “Of that estimation of the magnitude of natural things which is the requisite for the idea of the sublime”, from which the above block quote is taken.

⁴⁷ Badiou *EE* 127 trans. Hallward *op. cit.* (95)

⁴⁸ Kant *Critique of Judgment* (109)

⁴⁹ Kant’s text reads as follows: “But now the mind listens to the voice of reason which, for every given magnitude - even for those that can never be entirely apprehended [i.e., sublime magnitude], although (in sensible representation) they are judged as entirely given - requires totality. Reason consequently desires comprehension in *one* intuition, and so the joint *presentation* of all these members of a progressively increasing series.” *Critique of Judgment* (93)

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* (96)

⁵¹ “Yet,” says Kant, “this inadequacy is the arousal in us of the feeling that we have within us a suprasensible power.”

⁵² Kant *Critique of Judgment* (98)

⁵³ Kant *CPR* B 157

⁵⁴ “It must be possible for the ‘I think...’ to accompany all of my representations; for otherwise something would be represented in me which could not be thought at all, and that is equivalent to saying that the representation would be impossible, or at least would be nothing to me.” *CPR* B (131-2)

⁵⁵ Kant, *CPR* A (346)

⁵⁶ *Ibid* B (181), emphasis mine

⁵⁷ see Crockett, “The Transcendental Imagination” in *A Theology of the Sublime* (85-98).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* (93)

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* (92) emphasis mine

⁶⁰ Žižek, *Tarrying* (44)

⁶¹ See Žižek, *Tarrying* (34-36)

⁶² The shadow metaphor is from Beatrice Longuenesse’s *Hegel et la critique de la métaphysique* (Paris: Vrin, 1981) p.24, trans. Žižek in *Tarrying* (18).

⁶³ Žižek provides a detailed analysis of this impossibility in *Tarrying*, (16-20).

⁶⁴ cf. Ch. 1 p. 35-39, and Ch.2 p. 45-50 of *Tarrying*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* (47)

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Ibid. The question that continually nags me when working through Kant's notion of the sublime is simply, why does Kant describe such humiliation as the 'pleasure' we obtain from sublime experience? Of course, Kant is under pressure to devise a metaphysics that opposes David Hume's radical skepticism, and so the coherence of reality as it appears to us is Kant's ultimate aim. Historically, this meant (as I mention earlier) devising a phenomenology that could keep with the certainties of Newtonian physics and Euclidian geometry. So one answer may be that the humiliation which brings our experience of the sublime to a close is, for Kant, a small price to pay for the return of coherence and stability to our reality.

Another answer might arrive if we consider Kant's importance within the Romantic paradigm. If Kant's sublime can be described in terms of the encounter between an 'I' (the ego) and that which has the capacity to annihilate it completely, then the victory of the 'I' is an ennobling experience for the Romantic, a sign of the ego's triumph over even the most monstrous display of forces. So it may be this combination of historical pressure and philosophical ambition that caused Kant to insist on the redemptive pleasure of the sublime experience, rather than more fully embrace the revolutionary, though catastrophic, potential opened up by it. We can detect this hesitation apropos of the sublime in Kant's thoroughly ambivalent stance toward the French Revolution in his political philosophy. For Kant, the French Revolution represented an object of sublime enthusiasm (the affirmation of the sovereignty of the People) *as well as* the point of unthinkable, radical evil (the Jacobin terror).

But what Kant only incompletely pursues opens up a possibility of its own; the transposition of Kant's metaphysical split between noumena and phenomena, and between the void of subject and the void of object, into the central concepts of Lacanian psychoanalysis. In a way, it is absolutely essential that Kant configures reason such that it demands of the imagination that which it can never deliver (the transcendental object). Žižek explains:

Kant's merit consists of the very feature that is usually the target of his critics: *by means of one and the same gesture, his philosophy opens up the space (the possibility, the need) for a thing and makes this thing inaccessible and/or impossible to accomplish* - as if the opening is possible only at the price of the instantaneous crossing-out. (*Tarrying* 173)

Along the same lines, I have criticized Kant for conceiving of noumenal Things as the basis of our knowledge (they provide the 'material' for the sensory manifold that the transcendental imagination molds into a unified object) while at the same time making them inaccessible to our knowledge. In terms of the ethical implications of the sublime I have begun to outline, we find that "the pure ethical act is unconditionally imposed by the moral imperative *and* something that, for all practical purposes, remains impossible to accomplish" (173). My interest is in finding a way to preserve the 'purely ethical act' without depending on an (ultimately illusory) unconditional moral Law. But more importantly, what I am aiming for in my connection of the sublime to Badiou's notion of the truth-event is a way to assert the total *possibility* of a 'purely ethical act'. So when Žižek claims that Kant's signature paradox - necessity and impossibility in one and the same movement - "is the Lacanian Real" (173), I believe I am completely on course. Instead of the noumenal Idea and transcendental moral imperative imposing itself on the subject in the throws of sublimity, what is actually encountered is the (Lacanian) Real, the (Badiouan) Void; and it is precisely the courage to *choose the Void* (rather than the semblance of the moral Law) that - as I hope to demonstrate throughout the rest of this project - makes possible the subject's purely and radically ethical act.

⁶⁹ Kant *Critique of Judgment* (97)

⁷⁰ Žižek, *Tarrying* (38)

⁷¹ This is what Žižek is getting at when he claims that Hegel does not fill in the Kantian gap but affirms it as such, as properly *void*: “what Hegel accomplishes is not a ‘filling out’ of this void, but rather the simple reversal of the epistemological void into an ontological one: the negative definition of the Thing concerns the Thing itself, since this Thing is nothing but the void of absolute negativity.” *Tarrying* (246n.47)

⁷² See Žižek’s “Psychoanalysis in Post-Marxism: The Case of Alain Badiou”, in *South Atlantic Quarterly* 97:2, Spring 1998, thereafter reprinted in Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*.

⁷³ cf. Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, or Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, to name a few of the texts which advance this eventual perspective, or point out how 9/11 did *not* qualify as an event precisely because of the attitude adopted and mobilized by the Bush administration’s propaganda.

⁷⁴ Here, and throughout, what I indicate with the term ‘wager’ is that the individual risks his very identity, his place within the symbolic coordinates, in hopes that the decision to reconfigure his way of thinking and acting in the world in the name of an event will be in the service of a truth generic to humanity as such. In short, in his wager, the individual ‘stakes’ his very being on the truth of the event.

⁷⁵ Žižek, *Psychoanalysis and Post-Marxism* (244-246)

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Bosteels, *Badiou Without Žižek*, in *Polygraph* 17 (221-244).

⁷⁹ And this is precisely the domain (Žižek claims) Badiou charges psychoanalysis as unable to subtract itself from, that psychoanalysis remains trapped in the dialectic of Law and transgression that belongs properly to Being only.

⁸⁰ Žižek *Psychoanalysis and Post-Marxism* (257-258), brackets are mine

⁸¹ Ibid. (257)

CHAPTER 2: HINGEWORK

Asynthesis and Act in George Gordon Lord Byron's Verse-Drama *Manfred*

I

Where I begin my discussion of George Gordon Lord Byron's *Manfred* is not a place untrodden by critics' heels. Less encouraging is the fact that the three themes of particular relevance to my project here have had their earth packed hard by recurrent investigations, not least of them that of Jerome McGann's², and so it is not my aim (nor can it be) to discover some small island of Byron's drama which, having been left unexplored, would still suffice for a demonstration of the theory outlined in the previous chapter. No, my interests with *Manfred* concern the very epicenters of the text's continued resonances: (1) Byron's epistemological skepticism (which in *Manfred* follows the logic of ontological parallax); (2) the infiltration of a biographical subtext in the figuration of the Byronic hero (of which Manfred is both the critical apotheosis, in the sense of a point of crisis, and the decisive turning point); and (3) Byron's continued polemic against Wordsworth's poetics (delivered through *Manfred* in the form of a conflict between two incommensurable notions of the Romantic imagination).

Now those themes have received so much attention throughout Byron's canon generally and in *Manfred* particularly that reading the criticism one cannot help but detect the conclusiveness with which the arguments are drawn, as if, weighing *Childe Harold* on the one hand and *Don Juan* on the other, the only thing to do with *Manfred* is to account for its role in the transition from the former to the latter. On a speculative note, I am interested in this treatment because to me it configures Manfred/*Manfred* as a sort of vanishing mediator that has to be reconstructed in the critical gaze if a smooth continuity is to be established

between Byron's early and later protagonists. My hunch is, rather, that *Manfred* introduces a radical cut not only in the trajectory of Byron's poetics but into the very texture of Romanticism. *Manfred*, in this sense, ought not to be conceived as an experiment (immanently Byronic, surely) in the possibilities of Romantic poetry and thought, nor as a contentious negotiation of those possibilities with an opposing (Wordsworthian) mentality. If Byron's *Manfred* so drastically changes the coordinates of 'mainstream', Wordsworthian Romanticism it does so not via a clever manipulation of extant constructs (poetic forms, thematics, notions of experience, and so on), a play with possibilities, but by changing the very coordinates of *impossibility* within Romanticism itself, by opening up what typical Romanticism had deemed unthinkable to the right and light of thought.

Manfred is a case of unbounded extremity and excess whose capriciousness is, for me, the mark of its singularity, its being untethered to the constraints of Romanticism as much as it remains an emblem of a severe existential crisis and the product of its maker's acute alienation. *Manfred* is thus to me not a mere swerve on an otherwise easily delineated trajectory - though it can indeed be configured as one - but is instead an event whose sequence *makes possible* the conditions necessary to produce a text like *Don Juan*, and a decidedly *new* notion of the Byronic hero. Already, then, we can venture a reading of Manfred's famous last lines: 'tis not so difficult for Manfred qua Byronic hero to die, simply because he must, in order to be resurrected in the cavalier spirit of Don Juan.

Having offered my conclusions at the outset, I henceforth leave them behind, for my aims here possess a much narrower aperture than a discussion of how *Manfred* plays the pivotal role in Byron's career. I have already mentioned the three thematics most developed in the readings of Byron's *Manfred*, and insofar as I largely agree with the arguments of the three representative voices I will dialogue with throughout, it can be said that I am not

contributing anything ‘new’ to the discussion. If, to return to the agrarian metaphor, the ground(s) on which I situate my claims have been trampled and the dust fairly settled, my method must be one of *tillage*, a digging up and a digging deeper in such a way as to prepare the ground for new growth. My tools, of course, are the theoretics developed in the previous chapter. And my argument is simple: while *Manfred* has been recognized for its obvious transgressions against mainstream morality and Romantic sensibilities, in which an engagement with Kantian aesthetics plays a crucial role, such readings have not gone far enough to fully acknowledge the extent to which Byron, in *Manfred*, achieves a radical subtraction of his art from any attempt at (re)inscription into the known coordinates of Romanticism (even his own). It is in *this* way that *Manfred* ‘clears the space’, so to speak, for the emergence of the truth of Byron’s own art, and perhaps even of Romanticism itself. The theoretical work with *Manfred* that follows picks up where the previous chapter (perhaps somewhat abruptly) left off. One of my main intentions here is to expand on the previous claims and speculations while attempting to prove Manfred’s qualification as a subject of the sublime. In a somewhat unique way, I approach Byron’s *Manfred* not as a text to be decoded *by* my theoretical frame, but as a text that helps decode the theory. In other words, *Manfred* is quite a remarkable example *of* the theory of the sublime I put forth in the first chapter, and so my critical tack is to read the drama as that which ‘stages’ the dynamics of an eventual sublime experience, and a subject’s fidelity to that event.

It’s All in a Name

It doesn’t take long - only some two dozen lines into the play - for one to realize that Manfred’s is a tortured consciousness:

My slumbers - if I slumber - are not sleep,
But a continuance of enduring thought,
Which then I can resist not: in my heart

There is a vigil, and these eyes but close
 To look within;

 Sorrow is knowledge: they who know the most
 Must mourn the deepest o'er the fatal truth,
 The Tree of Knowledge is not that of Life.
 (I.i.3-12)

One can easily picture the scene: in a gloomy *Gothic Gallery*, against the backdrop of bells chiming midnight, Manfred offers a woebegone soliloquy of unforgettable failures and unspeakable sorrows. We see a figure wracked by “a continuance of enduring thought”, a man who cannot escape from his “vigil” because the person for whom it is maintained is *himself*, whose eyes, when they close to shut out the phenomenal world, can only look within. Removing all of the Gothic gloom and doom, however, Manfred’s opening soliloquy presents a series of straightforward epistemological propositions: knowledge is painful, the more one knows the more one is lost; the human brain possess the power to acquire knowledge but mere possession indicates nothing as to how such knowledge should be used, etc. Furthermore, such crises immediately place Manfred in a Badiouan conflict with Knowledge by treating human knowing as an ultimately impotent gesture not only in itself but in its practical application to matters of social intercourse. For Manfred, nothing avails, neither good deeds nor bad, neither power nor passions, because

...all I see in other beings,
 Have been to me as rain unto the sands,
 Since that all-nameless hour...
 (I.i.22-24)

Now any good Badiouan cannot help but notice that the cause of Manfred’s torment is linked to a moment which bears the mark of a possible event. Badiou writes in *L'étré et l'événement*, “the event will have as its name the nameless as such.”³ And yet there is a problem; if “that all-nameless hour” to which Manfred refers was indeed the happening of an event, it is impossible at this point to qualify Manfred as its subject. ‘Subject’ is the direct

implication of the event, the product of what Badiou calls an ‘evental statement’: a simple yes or no statement that the encounter with the real/void *happened* (though a statement ontologically fully detached from the happening of the event itself). In other words, subject emerges in and *of* a truth-event, as its agent, when an individual (subject of the state of being) *intervenes*, that is, presents a name “by which it is decided...that the event belongs to the situation.”⁴ Furthermore, Hallward assigns affective responses, ‘anguish’ and ‘confusion’, to the affirmation of the evental statement, feelings likely caused by what Badiou defines as the axiom of truth, which “always takes the form of ‘This took place, which I can neither calculate nor demonstrate.’”⁵ And yet, Hallward continues, “the anguish eventually recedes as the truthful consequences of the statement begin to transform the existing rules of logic, so as to force explicit acknowledgement of the statement” (i.e., ‘Yes, the earth does revolve around the sun’).⁶ Fittingly, as *Manfred* begins with its hero’s confused anguish over ‘that all-nameless hour’, it ends with a total retreat of that anguish in Manfred’s self-confident and fully autonomous death.

Yet the problem I am circling here is one that prevents any facile prescription of Badiou’s evental and subjective dynamics to the course of action in *Manfred*, despite the abundance of their telltale signs - e.g., conflict with knowledge and the order of being, anguish and confusion over a radical encounter with the void, fidelity to that encounter (dramatized as Manfred’s ‘vigil’), the resolution of that anguish as the situation is transformed. The problem, simply, is that of the name. As the necessarily primary starting point of a truth-procedure, the beginning of fidelity to the implication of an event, there absolutely must be a name given to the otherwise nameless (and therefore indiscernible) event. Thus, if one hopes to read *Manfred* as the subject of a truth-event, his inability at the opening of the drama to name the event (that nevertheless causes his anguish and haunts

him throughout the text) seriously jeopardizes such a reading. At the same time, however, as one who can make “his torture tributary to his will” (II.iv.160), Manfred’s own transformation at the climax of the drama and his subsequent reclamation of autonomy point convincingly to the emergence of a truth-subject. If so, then there are two elements to account for: (1) the encounter with some event *other than* the ‘nameless’ one which haunts Manfred from the domain of a kind of textual a priori; and (2) the nomination of and the intervention in-the-name-of that event.

It is my claim that both of these elements occur in the climactic central scene of *Manfred* - Act II, Scene 4 - where Manfred plunges into the hellish underworld of The Hall of Arimanes. It is here, of course, that Manfred confronts the phantom of Astarte, the woman whom Byron makes it far too easy for the reader to identify as the cause of Manfred’s torment - and whom the (nineteenth-century) reader would likely have been all too quick to conflate with Augusta Leigh, Byron’s half-sister. Without any further deferment, it is my reading that Manfred’s confrontation with Astarte - or more precisely, her *phantom* - is the dramatization of an encounter with the real/void, and that her laconic response to Manfred’s repeated pleas of “Speak to me!” (II.iv.118-150) - “Manfred! To-morrow ends thine earthly ills” (II.iv.152) - functions as the nomination of this event (its eventual statement), to which Manfred exercises his fidelity precisely by *dying*.

The significance of these claims is exactly what I point to above (yet cannot discuss adequately here): through *Manfred*, Byron radically alters the conditions of (im)possibility for Romantic poetry and thought, drastically shifting its coordinates as the truth of *his own* art haphazardly transforms the state of the situation we know call ‘Romanticism’. My view is thus to see *Manfred* as nothing but Byron’s (negative) revolutionary project of clearing the space - within Romanticism and, more crucially, within himself - for the possibility of a new,

unprecedented poetics. Such are the stakes of *Manfred*, and Byron goes to extraordinarily inventive lengths in *Manfred* to shield his project from the potentially devastating effects of its appropriation into the texture of a Romanticism inherently hostile to both Byron-the-man and the Byronic ethos.⁷ Considering that it is now commonplace to read *Manfred* qua apotheosis of the Byronic ethos and Manfred qua dramatization of Byron-the-man, the poet is up against some serious adversity. Wonderfully, Byron chooses the only tack possible for such an engagement: he creatively effects the *subtraction* of his verse-drama from the (oppositional) domain of a Wordsworthian Romanticism by the very same gesture that appears to offer it up to its lashings.

Two Byrons: an unwieldy excess

As infamous as *Manfred* was the scandalous context surrounding the place and period of its writing. As is well known, Byron left England in 1816 for the Bernese Oberland as a sort of social and familial exile; savage rumors about an incestuous relationship with his half-sister, Augusta Leigh, various adulteries, and the ill-treatment of his wife, Anne Isabella Milbanke, led ultimately to his separation from her and his departure from England in social ruin.

When in Switzerland, Byron joined up with (among others) Percy Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, her stepsister Claire Clairmont (who was pregnant with Byron's daughter, Allegra), and eventually M.G. Lewis - a cohort (later dubbed the 'Satanic School') that certainly did little to diminish the rumors of incest and Byron's cavorting with disreputable people. During this time, Lewis translated *viva voce* the first part of Goethe's *Faust* to Byron, who later wrote to his friend and publisher John Murray, "I was naturally much struck with it, but it was the *Staubach* and the *Jungfrau* - and something else - much more than Faustus that made me write Manfred."⁸ This 'something else', it seems easy

enough to deduce, could very well be the pain of a radical alienation and loneliness brought on by Byron's recent divorce and self-imposed exile. Corroborating such a notion is Byron's "Alpine Journal," a text invariably cited as support for readings of *Manfred* as the figure of Byron's anguished consciousness and conscience. Of this journal, McGann writes, "For thirteen carefully articulated days Byron records the minutest particulars of his physical and mental experiences. Nothing falls out of focus, nothing of the world, nothing of Byron, nothing past and nothing present."⁹ Written for Augusta, the journal's details of Byron's experiences in the Swiss Alps are so comprehensive, and reveal so much of his emotional and psychological states, that it is nearly impossible not to see *Manfred* (and Manfred) as the mere poetic dramatizations of those thoughts and experiences.

But for McGann, Byron's "Alpine Journal" is emblematic of the poet's very mode of thought, which he contrasts starkly with Wordsworth's. McGann reads the "Alpine Journal" as a reprise of the third canto of *Childe Harold*, a poem which he argues initiates Byron's confrontation with a Wordsworthian 'physic' - whose 'feeling of Nature' was recommended to Byron, by Shelley, as that which might help assuage the unrest of his mind.¹⁰ The journal, echoing Canto III of *Childe Harold*, "is an undertaking and rejection of the Wordsworthian ethos", whose "explicitness" in *Childe Harold* is mirrored by the journal which "is both coda to and commentary on the poem", as well as "the emblem of his [Byron's] identity and self-consciousness."¹¹ My interest in McGann's reading here has precisely to do with the properties of Byron's self-consciousness, its singularity as a distinctly Romantic *imagination*, and its significant opposition to the Wordsworthian imagination.

For me, this distinction crystallizes around divergent attitudes not just toward 'a feeling of Nature' but toward the experience of the *now*. The dynamics of the Wordsworthian imagination are clearly schematized in the 1802 Preface to his and

Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*, where the poetic mind orients itself toward experience through a sequence of two operations: the mind is overtaken by the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" which are then, as mere traces of the experience, only reflexively remembered as "emotion recollected in tranquility."¹² The consequence of both of these operations, however, is the total loss of the *immediacy* of the experience itself. The possibility of a 'happening' *present* is of little consequence to Wordsworth's notion of the poetic imagination, and it is the very absence of this presence (the present) that makes the process of Wordsworthian forgetting and remembering a function that repairs or redeems our experience of loss and recurrent disaster.¹³ The terms of Wordsworth's engagement with traumatic (possibly evental) encounters thus effect the kind of distancing from disaster described by Burke in the *Enquiry* as that necessary counterweight to terror, such that it softens into sublime delight - i.e., that pleasurable feeling of redemption Kant leverages as he forces sublime experience into Moral affirmation.¹⁴ In other words, the Wordsworthian imagination would commit itself to an event's traumatic negativity by ultimately ignoring it, that is, until the proper 'tranquility' is found that assures any lingering malevolence is defused.

The Kantian attributes of Wordsworth here are significant and not to be overlooked, and to make sense of them we have to bear in mind a relatively minor but nonetheless crucial feature of Kant's dynamical sublime: an overwhelming experience (of Nature) is sublime only when the subject perceives himself to be at a safe, unthreatened distance from the explosion of unbounded forces - the line in the sand, as it were, that separates terror ('I am going to be killed by this tsunami') from sublimity ('the powers of Nature are so vast', I say from the hillside, 'but look how all that power dwindles in comparison to the transnatural, suprasensible Idea it evokes in me, that colossal wave has no dominion over me, and so

on...).¹⁵ My point is simply that the Wordsworthian imagination is totally incapable of the subtraction required for sublime/evental experience to lead the subject to the precipice of his Act; Wordsworth's sublimities - taking an example from *The Prelude* which describes his own passage through the Swiss Alps - tell us

We are all like workings of one mind, the features
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree;
Characters of the great Apocalypse,
The types and symbols of Eternity,
Of first, and last, and midst, and without end.
(Book VI, 636-640)

Clearly, Wordsworth's sublimities are always already redemptive; the tranquility required to recollect and reflect on an overflow of emotions indicates that the mind's relation to sublime experience can refer itself only to Reason, to the 'truth' of its transcendental Idea of Eternity.

We can see, then, how important it is for Byron to reject, in an absolute way, Wordsworth's redemptive processing of experience, for such redemption could only be the vacuous identification with a truth whose status, as I show in the previous chapter, is that of a mere illusion. This is not, it should be stressed, the mere undermining of morality typically ascribed to Byron's activities and artworks; it is the complete *indifference* to morality as such. Moreover, the repression of the present can only suspend its traumatic impact for as long as the 'tranquility' can be maintained; obviously, this does nothing for a subject whose every passing moment is haunted by the catastrophe of some 'all-nameless hour', and can do nothing for a self-consciousness (and a poetics) that keeps the present, *its* present, always in view. And when this present is continually refreshed with a traumatic sense of emptiness and loss -

Passed *whole woods of withered pines - all withered -* trunks stripped & barkless -
branches lifeless - done by a single winter - their appearance reminded me of me &
my family.¹⁶ -

the consequence is an identity that (besides its patent anti-Wordsworthianism) is strictly anti-Kantian, anti-redemptive, and thus inherently predisposed to the courage it takes to choose one's Act:¹⁷

I am a lover of Nature - and an admirer of Beauty - I can bear fatigue - & welcome privation - and have seen some of the noblest views in the world. - But in all this, the recollections of bitterness - & more especially of recent & more home desolation - which must accompany me through life - have preyed upon me here - and neither the music of the Shepherd - the crashing of the Avalanche - nor the torrent - the mountain - the Glacier - the Forest - nor the Cloud - have for one moment - lightened the weight upon my hear - nor enabled me to lose my own wretched identity in the Majesty & the Power and the Glory - around - above - & beneath me.¹⁸

The elements listed by Byron in his journal reappear in *Manfred* as sublime objects in Manfred's gaze; yet they lack, as in the journal, that power to induce the mind to a subtractive infinite striving, and their impotence in the face of Manfred's personal tragedy and bitterness is repeatedly marked.¹⁹ So too, as McGann notes, does Manfred continually encounter Wordsworthian figures of redemption - the Chamois Hunter, the Witch of the Alps, the Abbot of St. Maurice - and his unconditional refusal of each is an essential component of subtracting the drama from the coordinates of an illusionistic Romanticism Byron blasts as a "wrong revolutionary poetical system."²⁰ It is not just that the Byronic ethos, of which Manfred is the epitome, "has no need of the redemptive processes put into play by the Wordsworthian imagination"²¹; the Byronic ethos *is fundamentally constituted on its rejection of this need*.

It is here, then, that I part ways with McGann - or rather, go further. For McGann, "[Manfred's] need for forgiveness and redemption does not locate something ultimate and

transformational, it is one more need among the strange variety of needs that constellate his ‘fatality to live’; and he goes on to cite the climactic encounter with Astarte as that which “argues very clearly” for the diversity of Manfred’s needs, a scene which “ends in the purest irresolution and anti-climax.”²² My interpretation, by contrast, is that a need for forgiveness and redemption, while certainly the whole preoccupation of Manfred’s ‘vigil of enduring thought’, is precisely what the *intensely* climactic episode with Astarte succeeds in annihilating. To put it another way, what Astarte ultimately reveals to Manfred is the utter ridiculousness of this need, the irrelevance of the term ‘forgiveness’ in the realm Manfred’s thought takes him to; succinctly, Astarte denounces this need - the need that sustains Manfred’s torturous vigil - as a mere semblance.

But I leave off momentarily my reading of Manfred’s encounter with Astarte because in order to provide for its legitimacy as an Act, it is necessary first to complete the proof of *Manfred’s* subtraction from its context. As we have seen by the example of Wordsworth, there is at least one serious threat to Byron’s project in *Manfred*: the ever-present temptation of redemption, which, in the drama as in Byron’s life, takes the form of a possible amnesia, a cleansing forgetfulness. Consider the case of the sublime. The experience of the sublime carries the subject to the cusp of a radical choice: there, in the breakdown of presentation, in the aporatic as such, on the edge of the void, the subject can either negate his experience with a self-affirming return to the semblance, to the texture of his fantasy - the *perverse* position of a forgetting that this texture has been totally undermined by the sublime experience; or, the subject can choose his Act and take the plunge into the void of radical openness and uncertainty, divesting himself of all symbolic/fantasy support to come face-to-face with the void of his lack, the dwelling place of the Drive and of catastrophic *jouissance*. It is no wonder that the Wordsworthian figures in *Manfred* each function as a superego, and

none more clearly than the Witch of the Alps, who promises Manfred redemptive forgetfulness on condition that he

Wilt swear obedience to my will, and do
My bidding.

(II.ii.156-157)

For Byron as for Manfred, such obedience is not only unpalatable but also impossible, for the hollowness of the comfort it offers cannot and will not enable him, taking a line from his Alpine Journal cited above, “to lose my own wretched identity.” All that remains on the side of the superego, for Manfred, and to borrow from Kant, is the perverse enjoyment of a pleasure derived from an implacable guilt, while the ‘wretched identity’ remains not only intact but is, rather than lost, merely repressed.²³

Of course, there is as we know only *one* way for an identity to be truly lost: the wager on the abyss, the courage to choose one’s Act. It will be my task to demonstrate Manfred’s courage soon; for now, I offer the claim that his vigil functions to maintain the aporia opened up by the - as yet unnamed - event, keeping the possibility of the *Decision* always within grasp. The price to be paid for this vigil, however, is the nuisance of continual harassment by the obscene superego injunctions of the Law (‘Obey!’ ‘Enjoy!’) of which the Abbot, the Witch, and the Hunter are so many configurations. Still, some might ask, if the rejection of superegoic redemption is the *sine qua non* of the Byronic hero Manfred, why does he habitually seek it out, using sorcery to conjure the spirits he first petitions for forgetfulness and then, seeing their inability to provide it, inevitably rejects? My exegetical answer would be that without these confrontations there simply would not be much of a drama. My other answer, more relevant to the contextual concerns here, is that it is necessary for Byron/Manfred to show up the inadequacy of these redemptive forces - their ultimate impotence and illusion - in the service of a rather surgical attack on Wordsworth.

Simply put, my claim is that Byron's admission of the Wordsworthian 'physic' to the 'inside' of his verse drama is a guerilla strategy for controlling what will unavoidably puncture the walls of the 'mental theatre' on which the reader stages her production of *Manfred*. The Romanticism Byron is trying to re-revolutionize in *Manfred's* mental theatre cannot tolerate a Wordsworth pounding on the door, disrupting the production. So Byron cleverly allows him entry, only to refute him at every turn, thus effecting his text's subtraction from the known coordinates of Romantic thought.²⁴

The other obstacle to overcome on the way to *Manfred's* subtraction is the much more banal one of Byron's reputation, which at the time of his writing *Manfred* was of course shattered by the rumors of an incest and the actuality of his 'home desolation'. The problem here is thus a serious one: how to shield a text that deals so explicitly with morality and its transgression, with guilt and the hope of forgetting and forgiveness, from its being immediately interpreted as and thus reduced to merely a vulgar working-through of a personal tragedy? In other words, in *Manfred* the task of separating Byron from the Byronic is more crucial than ever. Again, Byron's strategy is one of controlled admission (in the dual sense of the word), only this time it is mixed with a kind of evasion masquerading as revelation.

Emily A. Bernhard Jackson has argued for the importance of Byron's conceiving *Manfred* as a verse drama intended not for the stage but for the 'mental theatre' of its reader.²⁵ Of this, in a letter to Lady Byron, Byron wrote, "I am trying an experiment - which is to introduce into our language - the *regular* tragedy - without regard to the Stage - which will not admit of it - but merely to the *mental* theatre of the reader."²⁶ Byron's move here is telling, for reading *Manfred* one encounters nothing that seems incapable of being staged - indeed, actual stagings of *Manfred* were the first of Byron's plays to enjoy theatrical success.²⁷

As Jackson argues, at its most basic level, the purpose of a 'mental theatre' is to disrupt the possibility of an objective consensus toward the drama's 'meaning', thereby disrupting the stability of 'meaning' itself. Each reader will simply stage, to varying degrees, a 'different' play than her peer.²⁸ More importantly, this epistemological instability makes it possible for Byron to baffle those readers who would wish to conflate Astarte - the Greek goddess of Cyprian fame under the name Aphrodite, a figure of transgressive (incestuous) hermaphroditism - with Augusta Leigh, i.e., those readers who would undermine the gravity of Manfred's relationship to Astarte by cruelly vulgarizing it as a dramatization of a mere (though of course terribly damaging) rumor.

What is remarkable about Byron's own subversion of this possible reading on the part of his reader is that it is accomplished by a doubled transparency. On the first level, Byron comes as close as possible to giving the reader who sees in Astarte only Augusta exactly what she wants to hear. In the first major instance of this near-confession, Manfred replies to the Witch of the Alps's provocation to "let thy lips utter it" (II.ii.48) - where 'it' is that request for forgetfulness - with one of the most agonizing monologues in the whole drama. For almost fifty lines, Manfred rehearses the tale of his tortured life and its compulsive quest for knowledge with such expert concatenation that it - in the same way that one who, having told the story of his runaway dog so often it now flies from the tongue without any of the tragic inflection it once possessed - seems bereft of any actual pain, serving instead as a mere ritual incantation of the *form* of the tortured ego without any of the *substance* - until, of course, it is time to speak of Astarte. *Then*, Manfred resorts to the rhetoric familiar to any adolescent who, having revealed all there is to know save the juiciest morsel of gossip, decides at the last minute to maintain its secrecy:

Oh! I but thus prolong'd my words,
Boasting these idle attributes, because

As I approach the core of my heart's grief-
 But to my task. I have not named to thee
 Father or mother, mistress, friend, or being,
 With whom I wore the chain of human ties;
 If I had such, they seem'd not such to me-
 Yet there was one-

to which the disappointed confidant, still thirsting for the revelation, replies,

WITCH: Spare not thyself - proceed.
 (II.ii.97-104)

Manfred continues the elaboration of his torture with an equally torturous coyness, replete with unmistakable markers of sibling-hood - "She was like me in lineaments / She had the same lone thoughts and wanderings" (105, 109), etc. - and still circling around "the core of my heart's grief," until he alights upon the turn of phrase that marvelously provides the way out:

I loved her, and destroy'd her!
 WITCH: With thy hand?
 MANFRED: Not with my hand, but heart - which broke her heart-
 It gazed on mine, and wither'd. I have shed
 Blood, but not hers - and yet her blood was shed-
 I saw - and could not stanch it.
 (II.ii.117-121)

By creating such tortured confidences, the sort where grim secrets are usually revealed, Byron tantalizes his reader with a scene that appears to be one of shocking disclosure, but in actuality, reveals nothing.²⁹ As Jackson argues, "Manfred's statements are not hints to be unraveled; they are deliberate obfuscations on Byron's part," obfuscations that function counterintuitively to "hoodwink the reader."³⁰ Apparently unsatisfied, Byron carries his hoodwinking game to sheer ridiculousness near the close of the drama, where Herman and Manuel (Manfred's 'Dependents') can be found gossiping, much like Byron's readers might have, about the "gloomy vigil" of their master in a tower whose walls have seen merrier days. Here, an uncannily Badiouan vocabulary presents itself:

HERMAN: Relate me some to while away our watch:
 I've heard thee speak darkly of an event
 Which happen'd hereabouts, by this same tower.

Manuel obliges Herman with the details:

MANUEL: Count Manfred was, as now, within his tower,-
 How occupied, we knew not, but with him
 The sole companion of his wanderings
 And watchings - her, whom of all earthly things
 That lived, the only thing he seem'd to love,-
 As he, indeed, by blood was bound to do,
 The Lady Astarte, his-
 Hush! who comes here?
 (III.iii.31-47)

More of the same, only this time saturated with facetiousness; the promise of revelation is withdrawn at the last possible moment. The contrivance of this scene cannot possibly be lost on the reader, who is nevertheless, argues Jackson, “primed and ready, feel[ing] certain (even if only for a moment) that she has discovered something.”³¹

Considering, too, that contemporary readers of *Manfred*, as Jackson argues, “would have been alive to Byron’s epistemological manipulations,”³² and, as in St. Clair’s account, in full possession of “the freedom...to choose... which passages to give the most attention to, to skip, to argue, to resist, to read against the grain, to be influenced by irrelevancies...to be distracted, to slip into dreams, to disagree but to continue reading,”³³ Byron succeeds in stacking transparency atop transparency - the blatant playfulness with the incest rumor, the openness to the reader’s right to choose - in order to ‘hoodwink’ his reader into a harmless game of hermeneutics. In the same way that Manfred’s faux confessions ultimately safeguard the ‘core of his heart’s grief’ from the positivization that would nullify it (and the vigil that crucially keeps its emptiness in view), so does *Manfred*, by inducing in the ‘mental theatre’ an endless *play* of weighing this reading against that one, shield itself from an appropriation into an order of being that would inevitably compromise its revolutionary striving.³⁴

Yet Byron’s strategy here is even more refined than it appears. What Byron ultimately offers his hoodwinked, debunking, and rumor-chasing readers is the ‘sublimity’ of

a deconstructive *excess*.³⁵ What Frances Ferguson argues in her *Solitude and the Sublime* is that “deconstructive reading” - the endless, vacillatory choosing between performative and constative, between signified and referent, that Byron forces his reader into by infusing *ostensibly* biographical elements throughout the narrative of *Manfred* - “ultimately involves a technology for producing sublimity.”³⁶ But as I claim in the introduction to this work, this is a ridiculous ‘sublime’, accomplishing nothing but the demonstration of how knowledge in the state of being is always already mere ‘know-how’, “identical with the impossibility of epistemological certainty”, and a “knowledge of how to go on, how to continue a particular operation” that becomes “less a symptom of knowledge than of the blindness of action.”³⁷ In other words, the *production* of such sublimity only reinforces the meta-structure of the state by piling more on top of it, more ‘positions’ (signs, referents) to choose from, more *material* to foreclose the eruption of the void. Such is the paradox of deconstruction; while seeming to undermine the state (knowledge) by revealing the inherent excesses and arbitrariness of its structuring technologies, it nevertheless traps its subject within this field by claiming that this shifty, ‘slippery’ network of signifiers is all-that-can-be-known, all that the we (our language) can access. *This* is the feverish foreclosing of the void that our contemporary ‘post-ideological’ era prides itself on; the specious claim that we have moved beyond subscription to ideological Causes, that we live in a world where human rights and freedom, though ensured by a reference to some anonymous big Other (‘we are all human’), can only be secured through the proper *technological* management of specific populations (biopolitics), and so on, is the ideological gesture *par excellence*.³⁸ What more proof is needed than to notice how the criticism of state apparatuses is welcomed, built into the very force of their hegemony?

Now it may seem as though I am charging Byron with the same cynical use of these ‘post-ideological’ tactics. But the crucial difference here between Byron and postmodern phronetic sophistry is that while the latter utilizes a deconstructive ‘sublimity’ to sap human agency and ultimately protect the status quo from a truly *subtractive* sublime experience - denying the possibility that anything *new* can happen (only a shift in the already extant coordinates of the state) - Byron utilizes it to protect the very *possibility* of a truly sublime encounter, to make sure that the narrow (and potentially sadistic) interests of the state (Romanticism, Wordsworth, vile gossip) do not come in the way of the subject of the sublime and his Act. In other words, Byron protects the *encounter* dramatized in *Manfred*, not by disabling the agents that would seek to positivize the encounter by attempting to *force* it into an assimilable and therefore interpretable, re-cognizable ‘deviation’, but simply by baffling those inevitable efforts, by letting them churn through *Manfred’s* excess without ever being able to reach its ‘core’. There is a deep necessity in this, and one that sheds considerable light on Manfred’s so-called narcissism. The experience of the sublime is absolutely *individual* (subjective), and thus the negotiation of the void/real that is encountered is inherently unique and *idiosyncratic* (aesthetic). If, as seems completely reasonable, *Manfred* is (but *not merely*) a reflection of some personal catastrophe in Byron’s life, then this is because the engagement/negotiation of the event *can only be his own*.³⁹

Thus it is not enough to say, apropos of the deliberately unnamed hour/event, that “the reader must advance possibilities to fill this absence, must attempt to name the moment”, or even to recognize the “hoodwinking” such attempts fall into⁴⁰; to this one must add that such attempts are *fundamentally impossible*.⁴¹ But, the reader might be quick to protest, doesn’t this mean that Byron’s *Manfred* is, ultimately, inaccessible to *any* critical investigation? In asserting the gap that forever separates the ‘outside’ formal excess of

Manfred from its ‘inside’, the eventual ‘core’, aren’t such attempts, like those of Byron’s contemporaries, ultimately doomed to the same sophistic reasoning that would hoodwink even the most intelligent and informed critics? To escape from such a deadlock, I petition a metaphor used by Žižek in his recent musings on postmodern architecture - the notion of the ‘spandrel’:

The notion I propose here is ex-aptation, introduced by Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Lewontin: it refers to features that did not arise as adaptations through natural selection, but rather as side effects of adaptive processes that have been co-opted for a biological functioning. [Gould and Lewontin] borrowed the architectural term “spandrel” to designate the class of forms and spaces that arise as necessary byproducts of another decision in design, and not as adaptations for direct utility in themselves. [...] a spandrel is any geometric configuration of space inevitably left over as a consequence of other architectural decisions.⁴²

Does not Byron’s logic in *Manfred* correspond precisely to this architectural notion of ex-aptation? By making certain ‘design decisions’ - e.g., the blatant “stylistic moves within and against his play”, the “deliberately cultivated defects of style and outrageous breaches of linguistic decorum”⁴³ - as *adaptive* strategies to keep the outside of *Manfred* outside, does Byron not create a necessary byproduct, a ‘left over’ space between the two he *does* design for utility (the space of the ‘sublime’ deconstructible formal excess, and the space of the truly sublime eventual core)? And furthermore, is not this space between the two spaces not openly ex-aptable, capable of situating a critical gaze that would be able to glimpse and discuss the truly sublime dynamics of Byron’s verse-drama, allowing us to see that, in McGann’s words, “*imagination are being constructed?*”⁴⁴

Armed with the recognition of the ‘spandrel’ that the architecture of this mental theatre creates, it becomes remarkably *easy* to cut through the baffling excess of the text.

Indeed, let us take stock: crossing out from the list those characters who serve the drama only by helping Byron to cordon off the text from its context - i.e., all the characters who function as either Wordsworthian targets or rumor-mongers - the only *dramatis personæ* who remain are Manfred and the supernatural spirits his Gothic wizardry can summon. Thus if we are to get at *Manfred's* (and Manfred's) core - that is, if we are to get *beyond* the facile admission of an epistemological subversion - *these* alone must demand the whole focus of our critical attentions.

II

I begin, then, with a coupler of propositions. In the very first, it must be insisted upon that Astarte is *not* a monogram of Augusta Leigh, nor of any figure embroiled in the traumas of Byron-the-man, as much as *Manfred's* true significance is *not* as a working through of any personal difficulties on the part of Byron-the-man (unless we're speaking of the difficulty of revolutionizing one's poetics). What we are now necessarily dealing with is strictly the dramatization of a subtractive imagination negotiating, in the form of an artwork that bears the aesthetic markers of sublime experience, an encounter *with its own void*. As such, it will be the consequence of my argument here to assert that *Manfred* is truly an *authentic* new art of an *authentic* revolution in Romantic thought and poetics. My reading of the drama will follow the processes of the theory of the previous chapter, and will work through the play sequentially. When I have occasion, I will extend and elaborate the dynamics of the theory, as well as introduce a few new concepts. As a hopefully orienting p/review, what I am claiming here is that Byron's *Manfred* presents itself as a meticulous elaboration of the sequence that commences after the eruption of an event.

Asynthesis...

Manfred's opening soliloquy, which immediately describes the contours of his "vigil" and the consequences of the "all-nameless hour", is both the configuration of a Kantian dialectic between Good and Evil (in the sense of the Law and its transgression) *and* what reveals that the vigil is not just "a strategy for keeping emptiness constantly in view"⁴⁵ but that which sets Manfred against a prohibitory ban on thought itself. After the melodramatic setup, Manfred evokes a series of seven spirits, themselves elemental and *noumenal* representatives of the plenitude and force of the phenomenal world, who are the first to receive the fatal request for "Forgetfulness-" (I.i.136). When the First Spirit asks for the specifics of this 'quest' ("Of what - of whom - and why?"), Manfred issues a response that could not more clearly indicate his tarrying with the negative:

Of that which is within me; read it there-
Ye know it, and I cannot utter it.
.....
 Oblivion, self-oblivion-
Can ye not wring from out the hidden realms
Ye offer so profusely what I ask?

(I.i.136-146)

And when the Spirits respond with an admission of their inability to grant Manfred what he asks - "It is not in our essence, in our skill; / But - thou mayst die" (147-148) - we receive the conclusive evidence that the drama is staging a metaphysically Kantian dynamic. The 'essence' of these spirits of the 'hidden' (noumenal) realms can offer Manfred the Real only as a profusion of positive, substantial reality; the negativity he requests in the form of "oblivion, self-oblivion" simply cannot be given by those who represent absolute fullness, and they thus see Manfred's request as a mere death wish: "We are eternal; and to us the past / Is, as the future, present. [...] the thing / Mortals call death hath nought to do with us" (150-151, 162-163).

Manfred's enraged outburst at this denial accomplishes both the first indication of the illusory power of redemption as well as the subtractive power of his imagination (which he calls his 'will'). When the Spirits offer Manfred "Kingdom, and sway, and strength, and length of days" (168), one cannot help but scoff, as Manfred does (153), at how completely they miss the point. Melaney has noted how Manfred's appeal to "The mind, the spirit, the Promethean spark, / The lightning of my being" (I.i.154-155) is transgressive in the sense of breaking down the barriers between what dwells in nature (as force or power) and what appears in nature (as pure phenomenon).⁴⁶ Essentially, this observation points out how lightning is the symbol of a transgressive short-circuit between the noumenal and the phenomenal, such that it collapses Manfred's psyche into negativity. The divisions here are simple: if the Manfred we encounter in the opening scene is one who dwells in the (negative) openness occasioned by an event and has thus subtracted himself accordingly, the first frustration to follow must be the realization that, for a human creature, a mind "as bright, / Pervading, and far darting" [as a noumenal essence/spirit] (155-156) necessarily remains "Coop'd in clay" (157), accessible only as a phenomenal appearance. As a consequence of the event, which I discuss in the previous chapter, the empirico-transcendental doublet of self-consciousness is exposed to Manfred, and his impulse to shed his 'clay' and thus liberate his consciousness from the earthly cycle of corruption and decay is totally in line with his desire for forgetfulness qua self-oblivion.

But it is important to point out here how Manfred, in continually lamenting his transcendental status as "half-dust, half-deity" (I.ii.40), commits himself to a logical misstep; for what he fails to realize is that this status, rather than some external limit to be shed in the overcoming of his misery, is actually the *positive* condition of his freedom, and his power, to refute the agents of redemption that inevitably come his way. And of course, as the first

section of this chapter explains, these refutations are immanently *necessary* if Manfred is ever to truly leave his misery behind - which, of course, means subtracting himself from the dialectic of the Law and its transgression. To corroborate such a reading, simply observe how quickly Manfred falls prey to the possibility of a superficial redemption: in an act of pure sadism, a spirit appears to Manfred in the form of the beautiful figure of Astarte; but in having not yet fully confronted her traumatic *absence*, Manfred becomes the victim of an illusory *fullness*, and as he goes to clasp her, "*The figure vanishes*" (I.i.191). It is, then, no wonder that the Incantation which follows Manfred's Gothic swooning places a curse upon him that evokes "a whole tradition of guilt and ruin that seems to condemn Manfred in advance to a morally instructive end."⁴⁷

In a homologous way, the opening scene with the Seven Spirits can also be read as a dramatization of the structure of harmonious play which forms the reflective judgment of the Kantian Beautiful - the first stage, recall, that the mind must pass through on its way to the infinite striving that marks the experience of the sublime. In other words, Act I scene 1 is not yet a figuration of sublimity proper. Instead, the confrontation between Manfred's mind/will and the Spirits proceeds as he attempts to leave them behind - "Accursed! what have I to do with days? / They are too long already. - Hence - begone!" (169-170) - while the Spirits are relentless in their attempts to quell the mind that threatens to outstrip it: "Yet pause: being here, our will would do thee service" (171). Again, a logical blunder momentarily suspends Manfred's conviction to reject and move beyond these Spirits: "yet stay - one moment, ere we part - / I would behold ye face to face. I hear / Your voices, sweet and melancholy sounds" (174-176). The noise of the Spirits, "sweet and melancholy," are hence *harmonious*, and Manfred falls prey, as we have seen, to this proffering of a soft redemption that succeeds in extinguishing (for now) his 'Promethean spark'.

In the next scene, however, we encounter a Manfred who has apparently realized the foolishness of buying into the Spirits' false promises, and how those promises only serve to increase his tormented, anxious psyche.

The spirits I have raised abandon me-
 The spells which I have studied baffle me-
 The remedy I reck'd of tortured me;
 I lean no more on super-human aid
 (I.ii.1-4).

This last line is absolutely crucial, for it is a marker of Manfred's recognition that the overcoming of his guilt will not be gotten from anyone or anything other than himself; and this is a thinking that stays with him for the remainder of the drama, which, to move ahead just a bit, consists *entirely* of his confrontations and subsequent rejections of those who seek to offer him a resolution to his turmoil - excepting, of course, the climactic central scene of which I will soon speak. But returning to the scene at hand, Manfred's contemplation of suicide on the precipice of the peak of the Jungfrau Mountain *is* the scene that stages the dynamics of the Kantian sublime.

As a mental 'set-piece', the Jungfrau possess an immense symbolic valence. If we accept the notion that Manfred arrives there in the trauma of a full subtraction - more precisely, a subtraction carried to its sublime limit - then the rest of the scene unfolds as a virtually perfect articulation of the crisis (of the sublime) that places the subject on the *precipice* of his Act. On the one side of this limit, the scene becomes aestheticized by the proliferation of sublime objects, the presentation of unboundedness characteristic of the unrepresentable presentation of the void:

And you, ye crags, upon whose extreme edge
 I stand, and on the torrent's brink beneath
 Behold the tall pines dwindled as to shrubs
 In dizziness of distance; when a leap,
 A stir, a motion, even a breath, would bring
 My breast upon its rocky bosom's bed.
 To rest for ever -

(I.ii.13-19).

So there is certainly one option: the plunge into the abyss. Only here, this is not the abyss of a loss of identity or symbolic destitution that clears the space for a new identification in the name of the event; no subject would remain after such a leap, only a corpse. Manfred's consideration here is metaphysical suicide pure and simple. And yet, he does not do it.

- wherefore do I pause?
 I feel the impulse - yet I do not plunge;
 I see the peril - yet do not recede;
 And my brain reels - yet my foot is firm:
 There is a power upon me which withholds,
 And makes it my fatality to live;
 If it be life to wear within myself
 This barrenness of spirit, and to be
 My own soul's sepulchre.

(I.ii.19-27)

What exactly has happened here? To make sense of Manfred's words, we must return to the Kantian logic at work in the dynamical sublime. In this regard, Žižek's precision is worth quoting in full:

The logic at work in the experience of the dynamical sublime is therefore: true, I may be a tiny particle of dust thrown around by wind and sea, powerless in the face of the raging forces of nature, *yet all this fury of nature pales in comparison to the absolute pressure exerted on me by the superego, which humiliates me and compels me to act against my fundamental interests!*⁴⁸

Let's not prevaricate; considering Manfred's attitude toward his own life, throwing himself off of that cliff is absolutely in his best interests. But instead, the 'power upon me which withholds' - a clear emblem of the superego - cuts down Manfred's radical freedom and autonomy by holding his foot firm.⁴⁹ The result is, predictably, Manfred's launching into another monologue lamenting the human condition of a "mix'd essence / A conflict of its elements" that keeps the individual trapped within the dialectic of prohibition, "Contending

with low wants and lofty will, / Till our mortality predominates" (I.ii.41-44). Of course it is only fitting that the next figure to enter the scene is the Chamois Hunter who - as if the parasitic thrust of the superego directly materialized into a physical body - after appealing to an (appropriately) unhearing Manfred to "stand not on that brink!" (102), literally "*seizes and retains him with a sudden grasp*" just as Manfred "*is in act to spring from the cliff*" (109-110). Thus once again, Manfred's Act is spoiled by the intervention of a figure who obviously embodies nothing but the interests of the state of being - Hunter qua Wordsworth, Hunter qua superego, Hunter qua productive member of the human community.

In the scene that begins the next act, where the Chamois Hunter leads Manfred to the repose of his quaint cottage, Byron makes it far too easy for the sentimental reader to cringe at Manfred's coldness toward the Hunter's kindness. Against such condemnation, we should admire Manfred's cold indifference as a sign of his fidelity to the event; against the Hunter's recommendations for "The aid of holy men, and heavenly patience" (II.i.34), Manfred insists on following the path he has set for himself, knowing his "route full well, and need[ing] no further guidance" (II.i.7). In other words, the *tragedy* of the play at this point is that Manfred, though in obvious ways fully committed to carrying out the implications of the event, cannot yet see how the "convulsion" (II.i.43) his fidelity induces *is* that which will allow him to transcend the constraints of banal bodily existence, and the transgression he yet feels binds him to it. Despite the foil this scene presents - with, on the one hand, the C. Hunter as a man of "humble virtues, hospitable home, / And spirit patient, pious, proud, and free," with "days of health, and nights of sleep" and "hopes / Of cheerful old age and a quiet grave" (II.i.64-69); and, on the other, Manfred as one who lives a convulsed, unhealthy life (II.i.43) - ought we not to ask the question: who here is *really* alive?

What if one is ‘really alive’ only when one commits himself with an excessive intensity to that which puts one beyond ‘mere life’? What if, like the C. Hunter, when we focus on mere survival, even if it is qualified as ‘having a good life’, what we ultimately lose is life itself? What if the convulsed Manfred on the brink of suicide is, in an emphatic sense, ‘more alive’ than the Hunter engaged in the carrying out of his humble virtues and dignified toils?⁵⁰ Reading the scene in *this* way, does not the Hunter’s retort to Manfred’s claim, “I am not of thine order”, a condescending “Thanks to heaven! / I would not be of thine for the free fame / Of William Tell” (38-39), reveal precisely the *lack of life* inherent in one who fears the madness of an event, foreclosing the possibility that something *will really happen* to him? And again, the tragedy is that Manfred does not hear the truth in his own words - “Do I not bear it? - Look on me - I live” (42). He has not yet realized the ex-static potential his vigil opens to him, how his fidelity to the event places him in a domain beyond ‘mere life’ in which he is *more alive* than the “mortals of dust” (36) that repulse him.

Thus we know that Manfred is a man caught in the ecstatic catastrophe of sublime experience. Psychoanalytically, each of his confrontations with the superego only incites further his drive toward the Act; his sublimic imagination is on a course that can be delayed but not stopped. Aesthetically, Manfred’s existence becomes of the sublime:

Think’st thou existence doth depend on time?
 It doth; but *actions are our epochs*: mine
 Have made my days and nights imperishable,
 Endless, and all alike, as sands on the shore,
 Innumerable atoms; and one desert,
 Barren and cold, on which the wild waves break,
 But nothing rests, save carcasses and wrecks,
 Rocks, and the salt-surf weeds of bitterness.

(II.i.51-58, *mine*)

The ontology of Manfred’s speech indicates an occurrence of the sublime at its purest, the prolonged moment in which time stands still. Evidence of such atemporality abounds in the

drama as its language circles around the event (cf. Manuel and Herman's gossiping, discussed above, where the night of the event and the night of Manfred's death are collapsed into identical moments: "Twas twilight, as it may be now, [...] yon red cloud, which rests / On Eigher's pinnacle, so rested then,- / So like that it might be the same" [III.iii.35-38]).

Furthermore, what this collapsing of linear time substantiates is a claim that Byron's *Manfred* is indeed a very deliberate, very detailed account of the sequence that commences after the experience of an event, as the subject makes the courageous decision to risk his Act; a sequence that in 'ordinary time' may happen in a matter of seconds or minutes - the anxious vacillation between abyssal Act and superegoic redemption in the ephemeral moment of sublime experience - is instead dilated into the duration of an entire drama, allowing Byron to catalogue, as it were, each 'stage' of the encounter.

Unfortunately, in having been forced by a Hunter (superego), who would not quit his hold (I.ii.II2), away from the precipice of his Act (the symbolic valence of the Jungfrau peak), Manfred must undergo a repetition of the same lamentations to and rejections of redemptive, superegoic figures, in order to 'subtract his way back' to the verge. But the Witch of the Alps scene (II.ii), even though it is another of these repetitions, is worth our attention, for here Manfred issues a couple of statements that will greatly assist the reading of the scene of Manfred's Act (II.iv). These statements are important because they *finally* reveal (to the Witch and thus to us) how Manfred *indulges* in his fidelity, deriving an almost obscene *pleasure* from his vigil. It is my contention that this *pleasure* follows the Lacanian logic of *plus-de-jouir*, or surplus-enjoyment.

I am, of course, not the first to notice *Manfred's* participation in the thematic of Kantian aesthetics, nor how those thematics concern the problematic of ethics.⁵¹ Remember that Kant's Sublime is ultimately an experience that testifies to the infallibility of the

suprasensible moral Law and thus is the decisive ‘proof’ for Kant’s claim of the possibility of a ‘non-pathological’ ethics, that is, an ethics of pure altruism (a purity that is, recall, purely impossible). But what Kantian ethics obfuscates, and what Byron’s *Manfred* so brilliantly exposes, is that this renunciation of all personal, pathological interests and concerns produces a certain surplus-enjoyment. This is the basis of Lacan’s thesis, Kant *avec* Sade, where the truth of Kantian ethics is the perverse, sadistic pleasure one obtains from the renunciation of all other pleasures by deciding to unconditionally *obey* the moral Law.⁵² This notion is of course of extreme importance for the possibility of identifying with an *authentic* Truth-Event. For instance, what is there to distinguish between the Fascist call to unconditional sacrifice in the name of Fascism itself (sacrifice and obedience for its own sake, rather than for any of the positive ‘benefits’ the Fascist regime could possibly offer), and the subject’s unconditional decision to declare the Event and become the agent of its Truth (indifferent to the immediate benefits of such a declaration)? That is, *both* rely on a purely formal decision and sacrifice in order to sustain them. But the difference between a subject’s Act in the name of an authentic Truth-Event versus an absolutely *inauthentic* event (Fascism) is the presence of an obscene surplus-enjoyment in the one and not the other.

To demonstrate this fact, it is necessary to recall the relationship between the Lacanian *objet petit a* (the small object *a*) and the *objet A* (the ‘Big Other’). For Lacan, *objet petit a* is the embodiment of surplus-enjoyment, a ‘little piece of the Real’ leftover from/eluding symbolization (into a coherent, ‘total’ mesh-work of signifiers that creates the texture of being, i.e. what we access as reality). So to stay with our Kantian example, *objet petit a* designates the sadistic enjoyment that remains after Kant ‘totalizes’ phenomenal reality with reference to the moral Law and categorical imperative which determine our imagination’s structuring/synthesizing/symbolizing operations - i.e., the imagination is

supposed to unconditionally *obey* the categorical imperative in order to ensure the coherence and boundedness of the reality we perceive (while this obeying is itself a testament to the suprasensible moral Law, and so on).

So what of the *objet petit a* (also written as *objet a*)? In the case of the sublime, remember, the imagination utterly blasts the categorical imperative, and in refusing to obey it, shows up the inadequacy and ultimate illusion of the moral Law. Now recall that the primordial synthesis that makes all subsequent syntheses possible is that between the transcendental subject and transcendental object, or the *void* of the empty form of the subject ('I think...') on the one hand and the *void* of the transcendental object as the metonymical placeholder for objectivity *in toto* on the other.⁵³ The crucial element here is that, from our finite human perspective, objectivity *in toto*, the *noumenal* object, is irredeemably lost; hence, our cognition requires the transcendental object to 'fill out' this absence. Lacan copies this Kantian formulation of transcendental apperception for his own formula of subjectivity - $\$ \diamond a$ - where $\$$ is the matheme for the empty form of the 'I' and a the matheme for the *fantasy object* that fills out its void, i.e., what makes me a 'me', or in Lacanese, " a is the stuff of the I", the object-cause of desire.⁵⁴ Hence, *objet a is identical to the Kantian transcendental object*, which is, quite literally, *the imaginary-real*. To repeat schematically: (1) the Real/Void is that which eludes/resists symbolization; (2) the gesture of subjectivity requires the correlation of the void of $\$$ and the void of a ; (3) but a is metonymical, a fantasmatic semblance of the Real/Void, and is thus the *imaginary-real*; (4) and as the metonymical object cannot ever be completely 'filled-in' by intuited experience and thus symbolized reality, there are leftovers which also become embodied as *objets a*, 'little pieces of the imaginary real'.

All of this concerns the sublime and the authenticity of the Truth-Event in two ways. The previous chapter advanced the claim that authenticity could be guaranteed if the individual encountering the event's eruption underwent an experience of the sublime. What this means is that the experience qualifies as sublime when the individual, subtracting himself to the primordial unity of apperception, encounters the transcendental object *a as a semblance, i.e., as the fantasy object responsible for determining his place in the given coordinates of the symbolic texture he identifies himself with* - i.e., that texture that *includes him*. The choice to submit to the superego is thus a choice to return to this semblance, and to *forget* that what one has encountered indeed was a semblance, the fantasy that sustains one's desire. Obviously, this sheds profound light on both Manfred's temptation to forget and his commitment to refuse such a return. The decision to Act, however, is the radical choice of affirming this semblance as such, what Lacanian psychoanalysis calls *traversing the fantasy* - quite literally, the *getting beyond* of the semblance, which can only mean the radical immersion in the Void, of pure indifferent multiplicity, the total chaos of the abyss, or, what Lacan calls *jouissance*. Thus I am with Žižek here in being adamantly against Badiou when Badiou claims that Void cannot be called Subject: *it must be*, in order to discern the authenticity of a Truth-Event. Traversing the fantasy is *the only way to achieve the complete subtraction of the individual from the order of being*; or, in other words, it is the only way to eject the *objet a* that made the symbolization of a given situation possible. Thus, the radical experience of traversing the fantasy, which *only the sublime* makes possible, ensures that the declaration of a Truth-Event will be made by an individual totally and completely indifferent to the situation as such, with no interest whatsoever in preserving even the slightest trace of the status quo. Such a decision is thus *revolution* at its absolute purest: having made it, there is a moment of sublime openness *where anything is possible*.

In the scene with the Witch of the Alps, Manfred's indulgence in his own suffering (cf. II.ii.49-150) betrays his *plus-de-jouir* in a formulation that would make a Lacanian psychoanalyst drool. Manfred describes his quest for "conclusions most forbidden" - recall from the previous chapter that in order for our access to reality to remain consistent, that is, to foreclose the possibility of an eruption of the real/void, "something must remain unthought"⁵⁵ - as involving a confrontation with *death*, in which he "searches its cause in its effect" (II.ii.81-83). Now death is, of course, the a priori frame of our self-consciousness, what allows our life-experiences to act they way they do. In other words, death generates the ultimate horizon of all of our earthly, phenomenal experiences. Thus we have another reading of the notion that an experience of the sublime involves a confrontation with death; by shattering the consistency of our phenomenal reality, and in disclosing the void on which it is founded, does one enter that liminal domain 'in between the two deaths' in which Lacan, following Freud, situates the Death Drive of *jouissance*? In 'searching death's cause in its effects [the life-drive?]', can we not say that what Manfred quests after is the *void*? Manfred continues, "and with my knowledge grew / The thirst of knowledge, and the power and joy / Of this most bright intelligence, until-" (II.ii.94-96). Simply, surplus-enjoyment = surplus-value;⁵⁶ the more you have, the more you want, until... this accumulation reaches its inherent deadlock, which is none other than the very form of knowing itself.

This is what Manfred cannot quite formulate; but what he *does* manage to articulate to the goading Witch is absolutely telling: "I loved her, and destroyed her" (II.ii.117). I cannot insist enough upon the importance of scraping off the thick coating of epistemological decoys Byron plasters on here to protect the most revelatory moment in the text. Of all the attributes Byron has Manfred list as he describes Astarte to the Witch, *only one matters*, and all the rest are fluff added by Byron to obfuscate it: "a mind / To comprehend

the universe” (II.ii.110-111). Does “a mind to comprehend the universe” not perfectly announce that what Astarte *is* the *objet a*, the transcendental object, *the object cause of Manfred's desire?* Insofar as *objet a* is the fantasy object that makes all knowledge possible, it itself cannot be known as it is in itself (a semblance), or else the whole texture of knowledge disintegrates. Thus in ‘loving her’ - and is not *love* an Event? - in loving the *objet a*, Manfred *destroys it*,

Not with my hand, but heart - which broke her heart -
It gazed on mine, and wither'd. I have shed
Blood, but not hers - and yet her blood was shed-
I saw - and could not stanch it.

(II.ii.118-121)

By gazing on the object cause of his desire, a desire to carry human knowing past its transcendental limit, Manfred destroys it, and “shrink'st back / To recreant mortality” (II.ii.125-126). Yet in a true paradox, it is the very destruction of the object cause of his desire - and this destruction is of course the event, the all-nameless hour - that enables Manfred to refute the false agents of redemption that approach him, offering him the forgetfulness of his ‘crime’ by offering him the plenitude of their suprasensible powers and knowledge - on condition, of course, that he serve and obey them, that is, that he never use that power to truly transcend his ‘clay’, and become their equal. In other words, what these agents offer is simply another fantasy object, another semblance that, if unconditionally obeyed, will grant Manfred a whole host of earthly benefits he clearly has neither use nor desire for. In destroying the object cause of his desire, Manfred realizes that all this power and knowledge ultimately amounts to nothing, and it is this realization that makes it possible for him to refute the superegoic forces that would prevent him from achieving that next, crucial realization: that Astarte, the *objet a*, *is herself a semblance*. This is the step Manfred has not yet accomplished, his *Act*, and must, if he is ever to traverse the fantasy that sustains his

wretched identity. And at the close of Act 2, scene 2, this is exactly what he seems poised to do:

But I can act even what I most abhor
And champion human fears. - The night approaches
(II.ii.204-205).⁵⁷

...and Act

We have good cause to consider the peak of the Jungfrau as the symbolic equivalent of Badiou's evental site. It was the place of Manfred's first attempt to wager on the abyss (its first symbolic valence); and in Act 2, scene 3, it is the rendezvous point of *Manfred's* dramatization of pure, destructive *jouissance* (its second symbolic valence). As the evental site, it makes sense that the Jungfrau would be the place where the chaos and disorder of the void's pure multiplicity would first emerge. Indeed, it seems as though Byron included this drastically short scene, only 72 lines, to do just that; Nemesis and the Three Destinies embody nothing if not the pleasure the universe obtains in unleashing death on humankind, and in torturing mortals who "dared to ponder for themselves, / To weigh kings in the balance, and to speak / Of freedom, the forbidden fruit" (II.iii.69-71). Additionally, the acerbic critiques of Kant, and Wordsworth are here so patent as to not warrant any more discussion about them. But I mention the scene simply to show how Manfred's descent into the hellish underworld of the Hall of Arimanes is a symbolic figuration of the confrontation with death necessary for an authentic Act. But I now proceed directly to the point, the confrontation with Astarte.

Against much resistance and even more mockery, Manfred finally succeeds in his adjuration to Arimanes to call up the dead, that is, to call up the dead object of Manfred's desire, Astarte. The lines that precede Arimanes's final compliance are, predictably, loaded with

statements that, at this, point, both the reader and Manfred must be tired of hearing repeated,

That knowledge is not happiness, and science
But an exchange of ignorance for that
Which is another kind of ignorance
(II.iv.61-63).

Manfred is not after the wisdom he knows all too well, already. What he *is* after is the object of his desire. And when she appears, Manfred gets exactly what he seeks, a *semblance* - for Astarte appears as a *Phantom* - that he misperceives as a *fullness*: “Can this be death? there’s bloom upon her cheek.” The illusion, however, is quick to fade:

But now I see it is no living hue,
But a strange hectic - like the unnatural red
Which Autumn plants upon the perish’d leaf.
It is the same! Oh, God! that I should dread
To look upon the same - Astarte!
(II.iv.99-103).

But if Manfred has, as he tells himself on the Jungfrau, “ceased / To justify my deeds unto myself” (I.ii.27-28), he has not yet ceased in his attempts to have Astarte justify them unto him, and so he begs her to “forgive me or condemn me” (II.iv.105).

What this means is twofold. On the one hand, Manfred still cannot shed the last vestiges of his enchainment to the dialectic of prohibition (the guilt inducing complicity between the Law and its transgression); and on the other, this enchainment persists because he *still* has not affirmed Astarte as a semblance, has *still* not traversed her as the object of his fantasy. (And if we needed any more proof of Astarte’s transcendental status as *objet a*, we might simply point out how Manfred [on the mortal side] and Arimanes and his cohort [on the immortal side] are *both* baffled by the Phantom of Astarte, who refuses to obey either.) The simple truth is that neither forgiveness nor condemnation exist as part of Astarte’s

vocabulary; all she can possibly utter is the word that reflects her subject in the language of death: “Manfred! To-morrow ends thine earthly ills” (II.iv.153).

But Astarte’s utterance of this signifier, “Manfred!”, is radically transformative, for it refers no longer to the individual who has tortured himself in search of a way out of his guilt (by questing after the lost object that would fill out the void of his sublime transgressions); in speaking *only this, only* “Manfred!”, Astarte refers to the *subject* who affirms her as a semblance, to the subject who traverses her as a fantasy, and thus to the subject for whom ‘all the earthly ills’ brought about by this fantasy will end forever. And then, the phantom/semblance is gone, “*The Spirit of Astarte disappears,*” and all that remains is the empty form of the subject, \$, the void of the subject named “Manfred”.⁵⁸

Of course, such a divestment is an utter catastrophe, and so it is no wonder that “he is convulsed” - this is, indeed, “to be a mortal / and seek the things beyond mortality” (II.iv.158-159). But out of this catastrophe - “Yet, see, he mastereth himself, and makes / His torture tributary to his will” (II.iv.160-161) - a *new* Manfred is born. Indeed, a Manfred for whom the earthly constraints of knowledge and power, ethics and Law, the entire state of being, is of utter in consequence:

There is a calm upon me-
Inexplicable stillness! which till now
Did not belong to what I knew of life.
(III.i.6-8)

Here, Badiou’s concept of the nomination can illustrate why Manfred finds such stillness and calm after his radical Act of confronting the (his) *objet a*. Nomination revolves around the bifurcation of the Name and the Unnameable. The Unnameable refers to an inherent antagonism that ensures the Void cannot ever be totally foreclosed - there is always *something* that must necessarily remain unnamed, uncounted, un(re)presentable within any structure or situation. The unnameable also ensures that a given truth-procedure is always

infinite, that its work can never be total or finished. Manfred's unnamable is, of course, the loss of the *objet a* ("that all-nameless hour"), and it is this absence that ensures his encounter with the void is not foreclosed - i.e., that enables him to maintain the aporatic as such in his rejections of redemption, a 'work' that, were it not for his Act, would seem to go on in the drama forever. By contrast, the Name is a signifier that introduces a new order of intelligibility into confused multiplicity, such as the kind the subject encounters in his Act.⁵⁹ This name always follows the logic of antidescriptivism,⁶⁰ such that the name "Manfred" can be kept without at all referring to the individual prior to his Act. This 'new order of intelligibility' is configured in *Manfred* as the protagonist finds a peace that

hath enlarged my thoughts with a new sense,
And I within my tablets would note down
That there is such a feeling...

(III.i.16-18)

Fidelity to this name means, of course, the death of Manfred, his passing from the phenomenal, earthly world. Crucially, this death is his own, and not a punishment for any of his crimes or transgression (notions that Manfred has now gotten beyond). Hence he can make both the demons that come to collect his soul and the Abbot that attempts to save it look equally foolish, utterly ridiculous in their appeals (III.iv). Thus 'tis, for Manfred, "not so difficult to die" (III.iv.151), because his is a death in-the-name-of Truth, the Truth of himself.

NOTES

¹ Lord Byron, George Gordon. *Manfred*. Damrosch, David, Susan J. Wolfson, and Peter J. Manning. *The Longman Anthology of British Literature, Volume 2A The Romantics and Their Contemporaries*. New York: Longman, 2005. (660-695)

² McGann, Jerome T. "Byron and Wordsworth", *Byron and Romanticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. (175-201).

³ Badiou *EE* 227 trans. Hallward *op. cit.* (124). As the emergence of the event is an eruption of the void, the *nomination* of the event must be absolutely inventive, pure poetry - that is, of a name without any object or reference in the situation undermined by the event. Hallward explains, "evental nomination is the creation of terms that, without referents in the given situation as it stands, express elements that will have been presented in a new situation to come, that is, in the situation considered, hypothetically, once it has been transformed by truth (*EE* 436-437)."

⁴ Badiou, "Dix-neuf réponses", 257 trans. Hallward (125)

⁵ Badiou *Conditions* (190)

⁶ Hallward *op. cit.* (125)

⁷ The history of Romantic scholarship is itself ample evidence of this claim of hostility. Evan Gottlieb, my advisor and a Romantic scholar, once told me in a conversation that his graduate and doctoral seminars routinely marginalized Byron as 'not a major Romantic figure'.

⁸ Norton Anthology gloss, (659)

⁹ McGann, "Byron and Wordsworth" (177)

¹⁰ *Ibid.* (176)

¹¹ *Ibid.* (177)

¹² Wordsworth, William. "Preface to Lyrical Ballads", Damrosch, David, Susan J. Wolfson, and Peter J. Manning. *The Longman Anthology of British Literature, Volume 2A The Romantics and Their Contemporaries*. New York: Longman, 2005. (410, 417)

¹³ McGann, *op. cit.* (188)

¹⁴ And Ruskin, too, notes this Wordsworthian softness, a technique that melts the "whats" of the experience in a meshed network of "hows," a process of the soul's "Remembering how she felt, but what she felt / Remembering not" (*The Prelude*, II, 316-317). from McGann, *op. cit.* (178)

¹⁵ cf. Kant "Of the Dynamically Sublime in Nature" *Critique of Judgment* (99-104).

¹⁶ "Alpine Journal" qtd. in McGann, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ I would like to take a brief moment here and explain the my use of the word ‘courage’ is not at all partial to my admiration of Manfred, but is instead highly precise, and extremely important in Badiou’s lexicon. A brief explanation of the significance of the word courage will also help substantiate the claims made in the previous chapter regarding the superego and the subject’s immersion in the void/real. Hallward explains that Badiou deploys a schema of four subjective components: anguish, superego, justice, and courage. In a mostly Kantian way, Badiou describes superego as that which “makes destruction something consistent”, while anguish - akin to Kant’s ‘pain’ - sets in “through submersion in the real, the radical excess of the real” (Badiou, *Théorie du sujet* 174, 164, trans. Hallward, 38). Superego and anguish are thus the two traumatic conditions of the subject and the experience of an evental sublime. Justice and courage, on the other hand, make the process of subjectivation bearable, and it is courage that, as Hallward explains, ties the whole system together: “courage is the courage to wager on Pascal’s model, a ‘radical wager on the real’ (*Théorie* 310)” (Hallward 38). And in a striking affinity to the context in which Byron composed *Manfred*, Badiou says, “Courage has no other definition: *exile without return*” (*Théorie* 185, trans. Hallward, 38). I therefore invite the reader to keep Badiou’s schema in mind whenever I invoke the attribute of courage.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ cf. Act I, scene 1, lines 50-191, where Manfred’s confrontation with the seven SPIRITS of earth, ocean, air, night, mountains, winds, thy star - though at his “beck and bidding” (133) - only cruelly reenforce Manfred’s suffering:

SEVENTH SPIRIT [*Appearing in the shape of a beautiful female figure*]: Behold!

MANFRED: Oh God! if it be thus, and *thou*

Art not a madness and a mockery,

I yet might be most happy. I will clasp thee,

And we again will be- [*The figure vanishes.*]

My heart is crush’d! [*Manfred falls senseless.*]

(I.i.188-192)

²⁰ qtd. in McGann *op. cit.* (183)

²¹ McGann, (189)

²² McGann, (189)

²³ cf. *Critique of Judgment* “Of the Quality of the Satisfaction in Our Judgments Upon the Sublime”, where sublime pleasure “is only possible through the medium of a pain.” (99)

²⁴ It was recently pointed out to me that Byron’s strategy here is remarkably similar to Roland Barthes’s notion of ‘innoculation’, which appears in an essay titled “Myth Today” in his *Mythologies* (New York: Vintage Classics, 2009). I can attest to no familiarity with Barthes’s ‘innoculation’, and have arrived at this similar formulation purely by coincidence.

²⁵ Emily A Bernhard Jackson “*Manfred’s* Mental Theatre and the Construction of Knowledge”, *SEL* 47: 7, Autumn 2007. (799-824)

²⁶ Byron’s Letters and Journals, Ed. Leslie Marchand, 12 vols. (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1973-82) 8:210

²⁷ *Norton Anthology*, (659)

²⁸ Jackson, (810)

²⁹ Jackson, (815)

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid. (816)

³² Ibid. (801)

³³ William St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2007. (5). Though I might point out that St. Clair is describing Romantic reading practices in general, not those specific to *Manfred*.

³⁴ McGann reaches a similar conclusion when, in citing the numerous formal and stylistic plays and deviations Byron deploys in *Manfred*, he claims apropos of a pun on the word 'awful' - appropriately found in the scene of the climactic confrontation with Astarte - that "once Byron makes this stylistic move within and against his play [like each the examples I have described above also do], all conventional understandings are hurled into an abyss." (184) cf. 182-188. Wonderfully, McGann borrows (wittingly or not) from a comment Ralph Ellison has made regarding the "cruel contradiction" of jazz improvisation, "implicit in the art form itself; for true jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group." In the same way, Byron 'riffs' off of the melodramatic and overblown Gothicism of his play, a move that in Jackson's view presents an "extravagant bombast and glower begging its own debunking" (801); but this a debunking that is, in the final analysis, completely inconsequential in light of the true stakes of *Manfred*. It is Byron's extraordinary accomplishment to have succeeded in rendering such debunking inconsequential, and to have done so by way of openly *inviting* it.

³⁵ Refer to the introduction of this thesis.

³⁶ Ferguson, *op. cit.* (14)

³⁷ Ibid. (15)

³⁸ I must attribute this point to Žižek, for I encounter it in nearly every one of his texts, though he is certainly not its only exponent. One might refer to his essay "From *Homo Sucker* to *Homo Sacer*" in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London: Verso, 2002).

³⁹ McGann writes, comparing Byron to Wordsworth, "Byron's 'one mind' [like Manfred's] is only his own as it observes, relates, and remembers." (176)

⁴⁰ Jackson, *op. cit.* (86)

⁴¹ Recall that, from the perspective of one who belongs to the order of Being, who identifies its interests as one's own, it is impossible for the Event to be declared (named) as such; it is only recognized as a momentary deviation capable of being accessed and corrected with the language qua technology of Being - quite literally, with the words already at its disposal (here, Augusta Leigh, incest, Wordsworth, and so on) - rather than be-ing felt as the irruption of the repressed/inarticulate Truth of Being (i.e., the Real).

⁴² Žižek, "Architectural Parallax: Spandrels and Other Phenomena of Class Struggle" Lacan.com, Spring 2009. penultimate paragraph. Žižek reaches this point, fittingly, by observing the trend in the postmodern architecture of performance spaces (e.g. the Kimmel Center in Philadelphia) to 'cover' the actual performance building itself with an excessive outer skin, thus creating a liminal zone between the outside (of the performance building) and the 'true outside' of the street which functions as an ex-aptable 'inner' space.

- ⁴³ McGann, (183). Here, McGann is discussing the consequences of Byron's *Spoiler's Art*.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid. (182, question mark and italics mine)
- ⁴⁵ Melaney, William D. "Ambiguous Difference: Ethical Concern in Byron's *Manfred*". *New Literary History*, 2005, 36: 461-475. (467)
- ⁴⁶ Ibid. (463)
- ⁴⁷ Ibid, (467)
- ⁴⁸ Žižek, *Tarrying* (47)
- ⁴⁹ Žižek continues, "What we encounter here is the basic paradox of the Kantian autonomy: I am a free and autonomous subject, [...] precisely and only insofar as my feeling of self-esteem is crushed down by the humiliating pressure of the moral Law" (47).
- ⁵⁰ I owe this formulation to Žižek ("From *Homo Sucker* to *Homo Sacer*") in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*.
- ⁵¹ Melaney, "Ambiguous Difference: Ethical Concern in Byron's *Manfred*". However, Melaney does not, in my opinion, pursue his observation of *Manfred*'s Kantian sublimity through to the end, and so misses a crucial point. His notion that although *Manfred* "does participate in aspects of Kant's [aesthetic] thematic" it cannot be read as "an application of Kantian aesthetics" (474n.3) is an equivocation that allows him to shy away from a full acknowledgement of the significance of *Manfred*'s rejection of an application of Kantian aesthetics", insofar as that application necessitates a positive ethical resolution.
- ⁵² Lacan, Jacques, "Kant avec Sade," in *Écrits 2* (Paris: Seuil, 1971), 120. English translation by James B. Swenson, Jr. as "Kant with Sade," *October* 51 (1989): 55.
- ⁵³ Pages 1-15 of the previous chapter will be helpful to revisit for the ideas presented here.
- ⁵⁴ See Žižek, *Tarrying* (14)
- ⁵⁵ Ibid. (44)
- ⁵⁶ see Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology* (50-53) Lacan, observes Žižek, bases his notion of surplus-enjoyment off of Marx's surplus-value, as the fundamental antagonism that perpetually drives the capitalist engine.
- ⁵⁷ Painfully tragic, however, is that once again Manfred had stumbled upon this truth without the least bit knowing it. In Act 2, scene 2, he describes Astarte to the C. Hunter as "a sufferer for my sins- / A thing I dare not think upon - or nothing" (lines 197-198). Notice the wonderful double valence here, where 'a thing I dare not think upon' can refer at once to both the transcendental object, the *thing* the human mind dare not think upon, and to Astarte qua sufferer for his sins, which of course she cannot be. Furthermore, is not Astarte, as the fantasy object *a*, not precisely such a *no-thing*?

⁵⁸ But what it is crucial to understand here is that Astarte, qua *objet a*, is not another agent 'outside' or detached from Manfred; she is, to borrow a Lacanian phrase, what is in Manfred more than Manfred. Remember that the formula of the subject's fantasy is $\$ \diamond a$, it is the *unity* of 'I' ($\$$) and 'me' (a) that installs a person into a symbolic (fantasy) texture as a 'subject'. So when Manfred confronts Astarte, he is not confronting the abyss of the Other, but the abyss of the 'other in him', the *objet a* as the cause of desire that grants Manfred his identity. So perhaps here we can offer a new, unexpected reading of Byron's use of the incest 'motif' as well as the allegations of Manfred's narcissism. If we consider these alongside the mythology Byron draws on with the name 'Astarte' (an incestuous, hermaphroditic pagan goddess), what Manfred loves and pursues is essentially *himself* (narcissism), but what is *in him more than himself* (which becomes 'incestuous' when the *objet a* is gendered female in the figure of Astarte).

⁵⁹ cf. Hallward, *op cit.* (122-126).

⁶⁰ Leo Kripke's notion, discussed in length in Žižek's *Sublime Object*, (89-100).

CHAPTER 3: EVENT, THE SUBLIME, AND HOWARD BARKER'S ART OF THEATRE

Howard Barker's Art of Theatre is the nomination of a total aesthetic whose intervention into the state of (Anglo-European) contemporary Theatre is fundamentally *evental*. The subject of this Art of Theatre-Event is exclusively the Actor, to whom Barker attributes an almost divine status.¹ It is the Actor who confronts and experiences the truth of the Art of Theatre. It is the Actor who is sublime; and the audience who experiences the Actor's performance - though it is more truly an *ordeal*; and to *be* sublime is a *catastrophic* ordeal - is thus challenged with an experience of the sublime, the form of the spectator's ordeal. The audience member *seduced* by this experience becomes a subject of *this* sublime; *this* sublime is the aesthetic marker of an authentic revolution in tragic theatre, a revolution whose name is Art of Theatre. This nomination designates the rehabilitation of Theatre to the status of True Art - a status, Barker argues, that the Theatre relinquished the moment it abandoned Death as its proper subject. Barker's entire aesthetic is informed by the Art of Theatre's mesmerization with Death, and its unflinching engagement with its absolute (and absolutely singular) *unknowableness*:

Nothing *said* about death by the living can possibly relate to death as it will be experienced by the dying. Nothing *known* about death by the dead can be communicated to the living. Over this appalling chasm tragedy throws a frail bridge of imagination.²

The aesthetic which is a product of this imagination thus stands as a rejection and "refutation of pleasure as an organizing principle of existence"³, a refutation and "contempt" that "is also an ecstasy" (*DTOAT* 3). As such, Barker's Art of Theatre takes complete subtraction (from the known) as its starting point; Barker's mantra, for example: "I do not

know *the theatre*, and *the theatre* does not know me” (D_{TOAT} 1). From out of this domain of full subtraction, situated over ‘an appalling chasm’, the *place* of Barker’s Art of Theatre (the site(s) of his plays) becomes an evental site par excellence, and the plays themselves the staging of existence as radically open, of moments where anything is possible because *nothing is forbidden*.

Over the following few pages, I will outline the three ‘aspects’ of Howard Barker’s theatre that I am interested in exploring throughout this chapter: the Art of Theatre’s attitude toward and subtraction from the state of the Theatre; the concentric sublimities of the Actor and the audience (qua collection of non-communal individuals); and the Actor’s ordeal as the spiritual condition of Barker’s theatre.

The Art of Theatre challenges the theatre (primarily) and the sociopolitical (secondarily) on the grounds of their inability (or hesitation, or refusal, or failure) to *imagine* the human individual as s/he who not only desires but actively *seeks* surprise, strangeness, passion, risk, mystery, excess, transgression, and (*im*)*possibility* - that is, beyond the sclerotic virtualization of these acts which strips them of their necessary counterpart: *the ecstatic encounter with death*. What Barker’s Art of Theatre admits and thoroughly endorses is the catastrophe and pain that must accompany *any* act of breaking out of the constraints of being:

Some have had to do with *the art of theatre*, but finding it too arduous, chose to join *the theatre*. These are legion. A few remained faithful. Very few, because it is a painful path.

*

The theatre purports to give pleasure to the many. *The art of theatre* lends anxiety to the few. Which is the greater gift? (D_{TOAT} 1)⁴

Therein lies the irreducible difference between The Art of Theatre and the Theatre: the willingness, the deep *necessity* of the former for the emancipation that only the tragic willingness to contemplate death can provide. And because “death is the first enemy of political systems,⁵ tragedy” - which the Theatre, as an apparatus of political systems, cannot truly imagine - “is caricatured as *negativity*” (D_{TOAT} 3). It is only the Art of Theatre which fully recognizes and accepts the *necessity* of tragedy, and mobilizes its relation to *death* as the sole vehicle for the transformation of *life*:

The play of *the theatre* asks *how shall we live?* The tragedy asks *how should we die?* But where is the antithesis, for the tragedy answers the question *how shall we live* in the very act of exposing the way into death. It draws death back into life, and consequently *alters life*... (D_{TOAT} 94)⁶

Death is Void, formally and ontologically; it is the ontological horizon of our existence as well as the a priori frame within which our existence appears to us the way it does (as finite, limited, mortal, etc). The previous chapters have tackled the importance of death for both the authenticity of Badiou’s Truth-Event and also the subject’s radical experience of the sublime. *Manfred*’s lesson is perfectly clear in this regard: the agents of Being (Hunter, Witch, Abbot, but also the elemental/noumenal Spirits) can offer answers only to the question, ‘How shall I live?’, and they repeatedly misinterpret Manfred’s quest as a search driven by that question, his vigil as a disciplined waiting for those answers. Manfred’s question is of course the exact obverse; what he seeks is an answer to the question, ‘How should I die?’ In the scene with Arimanes (II.iv), Manfred makes this ecstatic *demand*, not of ‘the dead’, but of death itself, of “One without a tomb” (II.iv.83). His confrontation with the Phantom of Astarte, an anthropomorphic ‘*personae*’ of death, is what finally (and can only) answer Manfred’s true question; it is this encounter that draws death back into Manfred’s life

and consequently alters it, *precisely by exposing to Manfred the way into death*.⁷ And it is because of this exposure that Manfred is able to utter his (in)famous last line, “‘Tis not so difficult to die” (III.iv.151) - i.e., death is easy for the very reason that Manfred now knows the way into it. It is thus with that final line that *Manfred becomes a tragedy* in the Barkerian sense of the word.⁸

Barker’s deduction also ‘fits’ perfectly into Badiou’s cosmology. If death is void, if death = void (and equally, if life = being), then it is the event that ‘draws the void *back into being*’, and the subject’s intervention/nomination/declaration of that event is the first ‘count’ of a new situation, the primary instance of an event succeeding in *altering life*.⁹ Considering such properties, it is no wonder that the Art of Theatre’s form of tragedy deploys a sublimic aesthetic¹⁰ - it is the *only* aesthetic that can house the aims of the Art of Theatre, which “overwhelms the audience by the *plethora* of what it experiences:”

The sense of witnessing *too much*, of being *out of control* is essential to the Catastrophic play, which as in all other respects, rejects the socially-acceptable subject matter and the socially-acceptable duration of the experience ... it has a vastness and a disjointed experience which defies all clarity!¹¹

The unbounded asynthesis of Barker’s productions present the audience with an experience of the sublime that takes place within a venue painstakingly subtracted from the domain of being (what Barker derides as ‘the street’), and thus from its notions of clarity, accessibility, acceptability, community, and its terms of (market) exchange. (The subtraction of the venue - here more specific than the subtraction of the Art of Theatre from the Theatre - is achieved by Barker’s revisioning of the Greek *exordium*. I address Barker’s own discourse on his use of exordia below.) This subtraction is, as the previous two chapters demonstrate, absolutely crucial if the individual is to encounter in the sublime the possibility of an Act.

Or, the same may be true, yet in a different register: in witnessing the character's Act (on stage), a member of the audience - and it is important to speak only of an audience of individuals, rather than of audience as community, no matter how heterogeneous - *suffers* the exposure of another's 'way into death', an ordeal whose ecstasy might, in time, seduce her/him into considerations of his/her own possible Acts. Of this, Barker/Houth writes,

Barker knew the emotional stress his work induced in the best actors, and knew it was no little thing to submit to it. His whole attitude to the tragic experience implied an ordeal both for the performer and his public, and this ordeal became for Barker the spiritual condition of his *Theatre of Catastrophe*. In this he was already in contradiction not only to the prevailing culture of English theatre but to his own director...¹²

The sublime - as the subtractive experience of pure asynthesis which reveals to the individual the inextinguishable possibility of her Act - behaves in the Art of Theatre as a kind of telescopic concentricity, radiating outward from its epicenter, the dramatic text: the dramatic text implies a dramatist, which implies a theatre, which implies a stage, which implies scenography and actors, which imply an individual witness, which implies an audience. The experience of sublimity is not limited to certain levels of this concentricity, though it does *privilege* the Actor above all others - the nature of the Actor's experience being none other than catastrophic, and higher in degree and intensity than anything the audience could experience.

So far, then, I have traced the basic relays between my theory of the sublime, which of course involves a transposition of Badiou's void-based ontology and event-based philosophy atop Lacanian psychoanalytic theory (refracted heavily, of course, by Žižek's dialectical materialism). I now pursue these explorations further by tracing the development

of Barker's Art of Theatre across the three major texts of his theoretical discourse, all cited above: *Arguments for a Theatre* (1st ed. 1989, 3rd ed. 1993), *Death, the One, and the Art of Theatre* (2005), and *A Style and Its Origins* (2007).

David Ian Rabey, whom Barker calls his 'critical ally' (from the period when Barker and his drama were not only ignored but actively derided by the critical establishment), now the premier Barker scholar and critic in a rapidly expanding school of Barker scholarship, observes how

Barker is striving in his theoretical writing to discover his own critical discourse *emerging* from his drama and theatre, impatient with the journalistic misperceptions and dismissals which would evaluate his work in terms of inappropriately conventional criteria and objectives, and miss the point(s). Rather, Barker's theoretical essays provide a space and opportunity for him to articulate *his own terms*: the crucially different aesthetics and challenging propositions of his unusually ambitious endeavours.¹³

Rabey compares Barker's ideas here to Lyotard's notion of the 'philosopher's discourse' as the philosopher's effort to find the rule of his\her own discourse.¹⁴ To this I would add that Barker's theoretical discourse is also akin to Badiou's notion of 'subject language'. Hallward reminds us that only those who remain faithful to the implications of an event can grasp it at all; its truth is for its subjects, not for its spectators,¹⁵ hence the 'journalistic misperceptions and dismissals' which plagued early (critical, popular) receptions of Barker's work. It is the *need* for Barker's *own* (critical) discourse which designates it as a subject-language, a "language meaningless from the standpoint of Knowledge, which judges propositions according to their referents within the positive domain of Being."¹⁶ However, Žižek notes, the fact that the subject-language involves a difference visible only from within "does not mean that [it] involves another, 'deeper' reference to a hidden, true referent, but rather

“leaves the referent ‘empty’ with a ‘wager’ that this void will be filled when the goal is reached, that is, when Truth actualizes itself in a new situation.”¹⁷ Thus although the first text of Barker’s subject-language reads throughout like arguments *against* a theatre (as Rabey points out, ‘*the theatre*’ Barker’s Art absolutely opposes), the use of the preposition ‘for’ in *Arguments for a Theatre* is extremely important, for it articulates a theatre ‘in his own terms’, terms *for* a theatre *not as yet* fully actualized. *Arguments for a Theatre* is thus Barker’s initial wager that the efforts of his theatrical *practice* will ‘fill in’ the void of ‘empty’ referents, that is, when the theatre which they are *for* becomes fully actualized.¹⁸

After sixteen years in pursuit of this actualization, Barker wrote *Death, the One, and the Art of Theatre*, a text which in my view marks the moment when Barker acknowledges the full actualization of his dramatistic ambitions: a form of tragedy named Art of Theatre.¹⁹ In *Arguments for a Theatre*, the theatre being argued for was a new form of tragedy Barker called Theatre of Catastrophe. However, the Theatre of Catastrophe was an already extant ‘genre’ - practiced most notably by the late Sarah Kane - under which Barker probably felt his unique style of tragedy could be adequately subsumed. The Art of Theatre, by contrast, is a singular nomination and distinctly Barker’s own, representing a decisive independence from all other forms of (the) theatre as well as a complete creative autonomy. Following swiftly after *Death, the One...* is Barker/Houth’s *A Style and Its Origins*, a text which essentially historicizes the development of Barker’s Art of Theatre, representing it from an ‘outside’ perspective.

A Style and Its Origins is written from a wonderfully paradoxical position of enunciation. After the establishment of Barker’s own theatre company, The Wrestling School - well, after shedding cofounders Kenny Ireland, Ian McDiarmid and others - Barker was able to control every aspect of his productions. But as he “knew well the English

prejudice against writers directing their own works... [and] did not wish to compound his offence by admitting he was entirely responsible for every visual and audial element as well,” Barker invented a cast of “fictional friends with international credentials” who “earned excellent reviews for the beautiful and austere framing of Barker’s texts which, by contrast, routinely attracted bad notices...” (SAIO 45-46).²⁰ Thus at the same time that *A Style* exposes the *personæ* of Kaiser, Leipzig, etc., it maintains the existence of the fictional Eduardo Houth, Barker’s photographer, enabling Barker to write about himself in the third person, and as if he were dead. Rabey observes how this move sees Barker dramatizing “*himself* against the crowd, as if reversing the telescope through which he usually scrutinized the outside world, training it inwards.”²¹ The consequence is a series of reflections, memories, and arguments that may have otherwise been impossible had they been written by Barker as himself, and that reveal a history of tremendous hardship, endurance, as well as unprecedented success and intimate personal passions. What Barker/Houth accomplishes in *A Style and Its Origins* is therefore the suturing of the truth-procedure to its event, its obscure *origins*, and to its fullest actualization, the *style* of the Art of Theatre.

Excommunications/Excavations, or Preparing the Site: The Conditions of Barker’s Theatre

Before even discussing the specifics, it is easy to imagine the coordinates of the ‘state of the situation’, both theatrical and political, into which Barker’s *Arguments for a Theatre* and his practice of a Theatre of Catastrophe intervene. The end of official socialism has ushered in an era of ubiquitous populism, whose pretense of openness and self-determination succeeds in its (unacknowledged) aim of blunting the subversive edge of any oppositional or radical politics that could have emerged from the regular breakdowns in political, economic, and

social consensus. In short, what a populist politics achieves in acknowledging and embracing the conflicting heterogeneity of ‘the people’ is a control over its own excess: political and social opposition is reduced to merely local, particular antagonisms, deprived of the claim to universality needed to actually endanger the system. In Badiouese, the metastructure of the (populist) State, constitutively in excess of the situation it structures, begins including in its ‘count’ the very excess this counting generates, attempting to more thoroughly ‘totalize’ its edifice.

Yet while this symbolic *reduplicatio* of the sociopolitical edifice diffuses in advance the subversive sting of protests and movements - always willing to listen to their demands, the state becomes by definition open, tolerant, ecumenical, playing the game of negotiation with its opposition and thus depriving it of its universal scope - the consequence of its game of tolerance is the radicalization of the split between the state and its void: what remains entirely ‘outside’ its circle, what to it is ‘nothing’ (or void), becomes increasingly more powerful and anarchic. *Arguments for a Theatre*, which Rabey describes as “a series of interrogations and variously developed identifications of conflicts,” is in my view not only Barker’s thorough recognition the nature of the conflict but also the militant seizure of the opportunity for (an) art opened by it, that is, the need for art to speak from the place of nothing-ness:²²

I gnawed at English socialism for ten years (from *Claw*, through *A Passion in Six Days*, to *Downchild*), coming at last to History, which is where I had begun, neither official history, whose truth I deny, but the history of emotion, looking for a politics of emotion. I discovered that the only things worth describing now are things that did not happen, just as the only history plays worth writing concern themselves with what did not occur. [...] Writing now has to engage with what is not seen (i.e. the imagination) because real life is annexed, reproduced, soporific. (AT 23)

It is in this way that Barker acerbically distinguishes his notion of a tragic theatre from previous (and contemporary) efforts that sought to make the theatre a place of political and social subversion whilst clinging to the impotent aesthetic of social realism. For Barker, who “experienced a nausea at social realism very early in his life,” the social-realist theatrical regime is as sclerotic as it is hegemonic, “a grinning corpse propped by the critical regime” and backed with a political investment that “insured it both thrived and was crowned with legitimacy long after its manifest decay,” “exhal[ing] the moral hypocrisy of an entire era” (*SAIO* 85).

The most persistent target of these attacks are the Marxist-revolutionary writers and the realists, specifically Bertolt Brecht, whom Barker reviles as much for his condescension and contempt toward his public as for his theatrical aesthetics, which famously flooded the traditionally (and in Barker’s view necessarily) dark theatre with white light - a move Barker considered as pretentious and impoverished as “the toy donkey in Brecht’s study, whose head nodded foolishly and who wore a sign reading ‘EVEN I MUST UNDERSTAND...’” (*SAIO* 85). Following Adorno, Barker recognizes the lie behind the idea that exposing the wretchedness of the ‘real conditions’ of society can actually undermine the agents responsible for such wretchedness or bring about any significant change in regime; such provocations are (always) already subsumed by the insidious culture industry, which “impresses the same stamp upon everything”.²³ But the much more dangerous consequence of social realism, Barker argues, is how its “preposterous claims to educate and the subsequent grotesque simplifications” function to “afflict the entire range of [the theatre’s] activity,” drawing it “deeper into rackets of social amelioration... funding... posts... careers...” where “dissent [is] licensed but only when properly rehearsed,” bolstering a “moral unanimity” he found to be a “treacherous surface” (*SAIO* 86).

Reading Barker's *Arguments*, one cannot but notice the author's desperate urgency to make a case for the necessity of art, of a tragic theatre, to excavate a space wherein its activity could survive and flourish in full subtraction from the engagements and interests that would render it complicit in what it seeks to absolutely undermine (i.e. 'the theatre's' inevitable reduction to order). The Pauline/Badiouan message here is worth pointing out: Barker fully recognizes the obscene relationship between the Law and its transgression, knowing "how deeply implicated all men are in their own oppression" (*SAIO* 85); the task for art is thus to reach beyond the domain of mere contradiction (Being qua Being) to the realm of absolute autonomy, where the prescriptivist and determinist platitudes of the moralists lose their authority and appear foolish, totally inadequate.²⁴ Barker writes, "The task of theatre is not to produce cohesion or the myth of solidarity but to return the individual to himself. Not 'We must act!' but 'Are we thus?'" (*AT* 23).

'Returning the individual to himself' is a complex and ambitious project for art in such culturally, politically, and socially stagnant conditions (1980s Thatcherism).²⁵ But while it would be easy, as any reader of Barker's theoretical texts would find, to pile citation upon citation evidencing the dramatist's vehement distaste for and impatience with extant theatrical structures, it may be more advantageous to proceed with a discussion that focuses more (but not entirely) on what Barker's theatre *is*, rather than what it is not (though its 'negative' characterization does reveal the tremendous breadth and depth of Barker's polemic, and helps explain the deep necessity for his vision of tragic theatre). The major thrusts of his opposition, however, can be summed into two obstacles.

First of all, Barker must tackle the straightforward problem of creating a space for the production of his plays that isn't contaminated by the commercialism responsible for reducing the actor to marketeer, the theatre company to advertisement agency, and the

audience to consumer - in short, Barker's theatre requires economic and logistic independence.²⁶ This holds for the theatre company and its actors as well as for the expectations of the audience, whom Barker sees as conditioned to expect from the theatre an exchange-relation.²⁷ It also holds for the dramaturge as well as the critic, and in a wonderful articulation of the importance of theatre's subtraction from such base economic concerns, Barker observes how

infantile critics are forever in search of 'important' [and thus marketable, 'relevant', 'rewarding'] plays. The important play cannot exist, however, without denying its own importance. This is because to be recognized as such it must trade in the very cultural, political and social conventions that constitute the discourse of the world *outside* the theatre. (AT 68)

Thus economic independence (and also a healthy distrust of the venues that promote a play's 'value', market or otherwise) is a crucial prerequisite for a theatre that does not wish to replace, reorganize, or re-perceive the elements of existent ideology; in other words, a theatre *un(ac)countable* within/to the coordinates of Being. For Barker, this is a long and arduous battle that does not come to rest even with the creation of The Wrestling School. *A Style and Its Origins* catalogues the internal conflicts between Barker and TWS's first directors, as well as the continued struggle to sustain that "tent of sticks" (SAOI 92).

But even as Barker is able to create the conditions for the autonomous production of his plays, the greater challenge is to encourage the audience to surrender its expectations that the play will be accessible, consumable, and submitted to its evaluative prejudices. This problematic is the subject and focus of a great deal of Barker's writing on theatre. Essentially, Barker aims to excommunicate his audience, both from each other (for the temptation for community and unanimity always haunts an audience) and from 'the

street' (with its notions of exchange, success and failure, value, and accessibility). An early claim in *Death, the One, and the Art of Theatre* reads, "Let us confess, *the art of theatre* has many characteristics of religion. For example, it finds so much theatre *anathema*. It *excommunicates*. Its methods are akin to *prayer*" (2). But more crucially, Barker seeks to excommunicate the individual audience member from him- or herself, that is, from his\her prejudices of looking at and listening to, and subsequent expectations of, theatre art, which in any case have been overdetermined not only by the exchange relations discussed above but by the usual pedagogical prescriptivism which they have come to expect from 'important' or 'worthwhile' art. So when Barker claims the need to 'return the individual to himself', this first means disturbing the blockade of clichéd expectations which prevent the individual from experiencing the play from the perspective of his\her uniqueness. Only then can the spectator engage with the play on his\her own terms, building an imaginative dialogue with the play and its action free from the strangulatory compulsions toward consensus and finite interpretation.

For Barker, returning the individual to himself involves the instillation of a willingness to confront pain and the unknowable or unassimilable, a "spiritual condition," argues Barker, echoing the Art of Theatre's religiosity and methods of 'prayer', for "a theatre of pain, but one without obligations to reconciliation or harmony" (*AT* 97), and which thus effects a feeling of *anxiety*.²⁸ The dynamics of sublime experience are thus at the heart of Barker's excommunicative project, which is fundamentally subtractive. A nice example of the difficulty Barker encounters here is one of his cherished anecdotes: after the showing of his television play, *Pity in History* (1984), which depicts an army cook dying with 'characteristic energy', an old soldier, bedecked with medals, confronts Barker with a profound hostility, yelling 'Men don't die like that!' Barker's analysis points out how "decades

of naturalist drama” had taught the audience that “the sole purpose of showing an action on stage was to achieve the highest proximity to human experience, and that any deviation from it constituted an offence against the collective” (AT 95). But the intention of Barker’s work is rather to achieve “an emphatic disassociation, a rupture between stage and reality,” what he considers “a bargain with impossibility” “in pursuit of the hidden [and] unarticulated material of the psyche where it *confronts* reality” (AT 94). Again, the language here abounds with resonances of the sublime and the notion of the event: both the sublime and the event are ruptures between the scene of imagination (the stage) and reality, the subject’s wager precisely a *bargain* with impossibility.²⁹

Trained to experience pain, suffering, and extremity only if such experience is neatly enclosed within the consolation of a final restoration and reassertion of existing moral values, the audience approaches the theatre with the hope that it will offer social ‘correction’ and personal ‘improvement’ in the form of an anodyne portrayal of what it already knows (e.g., the corruption of the powerful, the wickedness of the rich): a populist declaration of loyalty to withering moral principles. Perfect Kantians (without being aware of it), they submit themselves to painful experience and then leap immediately into the arms of a reconciliatory idealism³⁰, expecting the theatre to *teach* them something and shamefully gratified to *learn* what they already knew. By refusing to offer such paltry affirmation, by refusing to treat his plays as means to an end, but as *means* in themselves - for what? - “a passionate assertion of human complexity[;] liberation from the shackles of meaning” (AT 82), Barker succeeds in maintaining the aporias his plays open up in the imaginations of his audience. Dwelling in this sublime space, the audience is free to *speculate*, but at the cost of comfort and security which may (the dramatist hopes) come to be experienced as an *ecstasy* on the order of an experience of love: is not love to be (mis)led from oneself? By making

expression and not communication its objective, Barker's theatre summons an audience "which demands the very thing in shortest supply in a populist regime of culture - complexity, contradiction, pain and absence" (AT 88). In his theatre "all is obscurity, since nothing is known, it is relentlessly speculative, and its judgments are made, if at all, in the days and weeks following the performance, never in the experience itself" (AT 88). If a person does not seek such an experience, he simply stays away; Barker's theatre is not *for* him. Hence Barker's consciously provocative assertion of a 'radically elitist' theatre (AT 32-37), which is "consciously provocative because Barker located his elitism, not in economic opportunity, but in imagination, which is available to all (classes), but defies generalization."³¹

I must, at this point, claim fatigue; for the evidence that Barker's attitude toward his audience proves his recognition of the need to prepare it for a sublime, eventual experience seems to be inexhaustible. But I'd like to draw some clear conclusions in the terms of my theory of the sublime. Because he addresses his art to the *imagination* of each individual member of the audience, Barker isolates the singular element that both eludes totalization by the state *and* which can most powerfully *subtract* the individual from the state's totalization (of the theatre situation, the social/moral situation, etc.).³² Eugenio Barba, an exploratory director and theorist who shares Barker's theatrical objectives concerning the audience, describes how a theatre might "ritualize the reciprocal strangeness and the laceration of the social body hidden beneath the uniform skin of dead myths and values,"³³ a subtractive move which would enable the play to speak "to a particular *part* of each individual audience member" - the play does not *have* its own audience, but instead addresses itself to a specific component of the human experience in every audience.³⁴ And if that 'specific component' is the generic (though un-generalizable) *imagination*, then it can be claimed that Barker's Art of Theatre *addresses itself to generic humanity*, or in other words,

precisely to the Universal that no amount of ‘consensus’ or ‘tolerance’ can adequately represent.

Indeed, the uncanny similarity between Barker’s philosophy of theatre and Badiou’s philosophy of truth is striking. Both affirm the uncompromising universality of truth (in Barker’s case, the truth of death and the radical freedom occasioned by tragedy’s willingness to draw death back into life, profoundly altering it), and the consequent subtraction of this truth from the legislation of judgement or interpretation. Both assume that truth can be reached only through a process that breaks decisively with all established criteria for judging (or interpreting) the validity (or profundity) of opinions (or understandings), e.g., the Art of Theatre’s aesthetics and style. Both recognize that the truth of situation will always concern whatever is most indistinct or generic about that situation; hence Barker’s early call for a theatre of Obscurity (*AT* 85-90). And both subscribe to the “simple, powerful idea that any existence can one day be transfigured by what happens to it, and commit itself from then on to what holds for all.”³⁵ Hence we can confidently assert the properly revolutionary dimension of the Art of Theatre as it builds off of what was, in Barker’s view, the failed revolution of social-realist theatre. First, there is Brecht and the realist/Marxist-revolutionaries. Brecht’s project involved the open endorsement of the politicization of ethics - hence the ‘white light’ aesthetics of his theatre - collapsing the moral terrain into another contest of political hegemony and thus resorting to direct ethical arguments and measures to discredit the (capitalist) enemy. Thus when Brecht famously says that “a Communist tells the truth when it is necessary, and he lies when it is necessary; he is kind when it is necessary, and he is brutal when it is necessary... Of all virtues, he has only one: that he fights for Communism,” such ethical suspension of morality is no doubt a central element of Barker’s own ‘politics’. But Barker would claim that Brecht’s *failures* lie precisely

in the mode through which he dispenses his politics, which sought to supplant one political institution with the installation of another: the social(ist)-realist theatre. Thus Brecht's art never addresses itself to the actual complexity of his audience, but to an idealized collection of (homogenous) individuals who, once they overcame their ignorance, would respond unanimously to the call for regime change.

What Barker proposes, by contrast, is that the audience should not be forced into collectivity, but must come to the 'message' (whatever she finds it to be) on his\her own terms, not on the terms of an institutionalized political art or aesthetic. Simply, Brecht's ethical suspension of morality rests upon an ultimately *moral* paradigm that bleeds through in the realist aesthetic - i.e., 'this play has a message and a lesson that is univocal and *tells you* how to think and act.' Barker's 'repetition of Brecht' (if I dare put it so) is therefore not a *return*; to repeat Brecht is to accept that 'Brecht is dead', that his particular theatre 'failed', but that there is a utopian spark worth saving: precisely this ethical suspension of morality, which is what Barker's plays ultimately express. In other words, to repeat Brecht is not to repeat what Brecht did but what he *failed to do* - i.e., to construct an aesthetic that does not conflict with its politics, and that does not rely on unanimous reception and reductive interpretation. In this way, Barker's second revolution, the Art of Theatre, succeeds where Brecht missed an opportunity; it devises an aesthetic that opens up the possibility for radical change precisely by allowing the audience to make the *choice* for itself. Furthermore, this second, Barkerian revolution demonstrates, as Barker repeatedly claims, a deeper necessity, a *deep need* for the Art of Theatre, the experience of which would indeed be felt as a privilege. An exchange between the duchess Algeria and her friend Istorina in the opening scene of *The Fence in its Thousandth Year* (2005) marvelously captures Barker's conception of the audience-

actor relationship, and acts as a not-so-oblique prologue clearly addressed to the theatre audience (in addition to the crowd on stage):

ISTORIA: (*Indignant for ALGERIA.*) CROWD
 BEG
 CLUSTER
 ALGERIA: I describe I do not
 ISTORIA: RUSH
 PLEAD FOR THE PRIVILEGE
 ALGERIA: Shh
 ISTORIA: DIE IN THE CRUSH
 ALGERIA: I do not solicit I describe

Such are Barker's aesthetical ethics; a refusal to *solicit* (responses, interpretations, judgments) in favor of a rich *description* (expression, interrogation) of the complexity of human desire and the mysteries of death, which is exactly the *privilege* the 'elite' in imagination will clamour to receive.

What to my mind makes Howard Barker such a powerful and uniquely challenging artist is precisely how his aesthetic is supported by the most rigorous intellectual and philosophical (and spiritual) explorations into the possibilities of theatre art, and in turn, how his Art of Theatre does not hesitate to enact in the fullest and most ambitious way the conclusions reached in that philosophy. I have mentioned Barker's use of the exordium in this critical project of excommunicating the audience. A brief exposition and analysis of his exordia here will demonstrate how perfectly Barker translates his theory into his practice, and, for that matter, "better than any other professional director."³⁶

In a conversation with David Ian Rabey and Karoline Gritzner, published in a recent collection of essays on Barker,³⁷ Barker explains (in response to Rabey's opening comments on the exordia)³⁸ how "The exordium is my substitute for properly possessing the performance space. I have often said that the foyer is an obstacle to a spiritual experience, an area of trivia littered with the distractive detritus of entertainment."³⁹ This unexpected and

startling environment, visually composed of repetitive, rhythmic movements and gestures by the actors and punctuated with invasive sounds - “drones or reassembled cuts from a small number of modern composers” - has the effect of breaking “with the normal continuum of street-foyer-performance-street, and admonition that they [the audience] will not be seeing or hearing according to the conventional rules of social-realist theatre, comedy, or what is routinely an offer.”⁴⁰ The play itself, then, sustains the musical nature of the exordium and uses its highly charged visual elements, “so that the play is like a string quartet by Bartók... the themes keep returning always developed and furthered, the torsion increased...”⁴¹ Barker/Houth writes on the exordium in *A Style*, as well, were a similar critique of the foyer and the emphasis on the need for the audience to enter the performance space of darkness (real and metaphorical) “in a *condition of anxiety*” is supplemented by a detailed account of the play *Judith* (based on the Apocryphal legend of Holofernes, murdered by Judith), which describes how the *unreal* imagery of the exordium returns throughout the play.⁴² Barker/Houth describes how “Barker threw off with infinite pleasure the conventions of naturalism [...] and substituted intensely conceived imagery that sustained the emotional pressure of the performance and the text, without risking the peculiar bathos of mimesis and its attendant deflation...” (SAIO 44-45).

Thus the exordium, beyond its excommunicative function, works to maintain the *sublimity* of the experience of the play by disrupting the expectation for mimesis while “simultaneously deepening the obligation on the audience to permit the *inauthentic* into its experience...” (SAIO 45). Only in such a way can a *theatrical* sublime aesthetic sustain itself, for it is clearly impossible to stage a dynamical or mathematical infinity or objective unboundedness. Instead, sublimity is evoked (aesthetically) in the overwhelming of the senses through intense imagery and sound, which provoke a breakdown in the field of

representations - an aporia maintained by the audience's willingness to permit the inauthenticity of what it experiences.⁴³

Concentric Sublimities: on the Pact between Actor and Audience

Barker's relationship towards his actors is one of deep intimacy and reverence for their craft; "they were his only allies in theatre" (*SAIO* 28). Above, I have touched on a few key aspects of this relationship; namely, Barker's recognition that the demands of his theatre place an extraordinary burden on the actor, who experiences an *ordeal* during his\her performance. Here, I explore these demands more fully in order to make a case for considering the actor in the Art of Theatre as a subject not only in the Badiouan sense of the subject (of a truth) but also she who *is of the sublime* (sublimic) insofar as the audience experiences the actor as sublime. The apotheosis of the sublime actor in Barker's plays is always the central protagonist, usually (and crucially, as I argue later) a woman, who achieves this status due to her performance of an Act (in the sense explored in the previous chapters). This actor I distinguish with a proper name, Actor, the capital letter indicating not only her involvement in Act but her spiritual superiority over the other figures in the play. But first, of Barker's actors in general.

In *Arguments for a Theatre*, Barker reprints the programme notes to his play, *The Bite of the Night*. Itself an aesthetic and theatrical breakthrough in Barker's art, *The Bite of the Night* (1987) is the first of Barker's plays to, in his view, adequately capture the objectives of the aesthetic theory and philosophy that inform his Theatre of Catastrophe. The programme notes provide the audience with a dense but concise summation of this theory at that point, best exemplified in the poetic language of the first paragraph: "the play for an age of fracture is itself fractured, and hard to hold, as a broken bottle is hard to hold" (*AT* 38).

The majority of this brief text goes on to argue for the “restoration of dignity” to the audience that commences upon the production’s acceptance of ambiguity and does not lead the audience, but allows it to “make its own way through a play whose effects are cumulative” (AT 38). The notes also speak of a subject:

The real end of drama in this period must be not the reproduction of reality, critical or otherwise [in Badiouese, the reflexive posturing of the State], but speculation - not what is (now unbearably decadent) but what might be, what is *imaginable*. The subject then becomes not man-in-society, but knowledge itself, and the protagonist not the man-of-action but the struggler with self. (AT 38).

For me it is telling, considering my argument in the first chapter about the deep connection between imagination and subjectivity, that ‘subject’ - the first instance of the word in *Arguments* - directly follows Barker’s emphasis on the imagination and the imaginable. Barker concludes his reflection on the subject with another revealing (and for my claims rather propitious) statement: “*desire* becomes the field of inquiry most likely to stimulate a creative *disorder*” (AT 38). Of course, death is also the field of inquiry in Barker’s tragic theatre, and so death and desire (as any psychoanalyst will point out) are deeply intertwined in (creative and) revolutionary energies.

This intertwining is also the necessary ‘stuff’ of the sublime. Remember that the sublime opens up the space for the radical encounter with the domain beyond the (moral, categorical, etc.) Law, at the same time that it reveals the obscene complicity of the Law with its transgression; or, in Freudian parlance, the superego’s intimate connection with the id. Again, the sublime demonstrates that superego is not some ethical agency, but a thrust which parasitizes upon the subject (to use Žižek’s phrasing from *Tarrying with the Negative*), subverting his illicit id such that the subject becomes trapped in the deadlock of his own

desire: obey the id, assert your freedom, and the consequence (for a symbolically constituted subject) is a feeling of guilt at having transgressed taboos and moral/regulative principles; obey superego, refuse the whims of your pathological nature, and the consequence is the same - i.e., another version of the same guilt, configured as humiliation. Superego is an agency that bombards us with impossible demands and then laughs at us when we cannot fulfill them; the more we obey superego, the more we feel guilty, humiliated. The experience of the sublime is thus an opportunity to get beyond this prohibitory dialectic, which one can do precisely by choosing to abandon his symbolic coordinates (fantasy) and risk a confrontation with the Real (of his desire) as the substance of *jouissance* radically external to the symbolic order.⁴⁴ *Jouissance* is thus another name for the intersection between death (qua subjective destitution) and desire (whose name in the Real is Drive). For Freud as for Lacan, id is the seat of these primordial drives, while the ego (rational, symbolically constituted person) is the level of consciousness that mediates between the id and superego. The crucial dimension of the id here is its thorough ambiguity: the id oscillates between a kind of childlike innocence, just striving for pleasure, and a kind of primordial evil, aggressive all the time, strangely violent, etc. It is this commixture of utter corruption and pure innocence that characterizes the id, and it is only when this ambiguity is thrown into the texture of the symbolic order ('regulated' by superegoic laws) that the desires of the id acquire the status of illegality proper.

What does it mean, then, to be a subject/actor caught in this radical nexus of desire and death? The answer can only be the terrifying experience of *jouissance*, or in other words, the catastrophic, distinctly *sublime* encounter with the real/void, the very *abyss* of one's desire. But here we encounter a problem: because it is situated external to the Symbolic order, the Real, obviously, cannot be symbolized - i.e., it lacks a language or a voice that could

articulate it (hence its Badiouan status as void, the element that is strictly no-thing in a situation). The objective of Barker's Art of Theatre is to *speak* from this domain of nothingness; his plays insinuate themselves in the interstices of culture and are therefore "ideologically void" (AT 59). Thus it is no less obvious how this problematic concerns the actor: the issue becomes precisely a question of language; the actor is called upon to *speak* from the position of the sublime, that is, from a position where symbolization and access to available codes and meanings break down. And in the case of desire, this means embracing the disclosure of its radical ambiguity, that oscillation between evil and innocence. This ordeal is even more severe for the Actor, for she must find the means to speak from out of the depths of her Act. It is therefore no surprise, in this regard, to find that Barker's discourse on the actor always includes an argument for the absolute primacy of his/her *voice*, and the need for the perfect marriage of the body to the voice.

Arguments for a Theatre catalogues one such ordeal - and its successful alignment of body and voice - in an evaluation of Nigel Terry's performance of Savage in *The Bite of the Night*, doing so in terms explicitly in line with the actor's specific breed of sublime experience.

[Terry] found in Savage the innocence which is a crucial ingredient in evil [...] He saw that evil was small in its origins [...] He saw that it was childish. [...] By this he demonstrated the actor's choice of significant physical expression making manifest internal states. [...] He found a posture in which to watch the unforgivable act. [...] Eventually, this posture developed an ease, a casualness, an objectivity, which was the essence of his corruption. [...] Often in rehearsal he cried out 'I don't know what I'm doing!' Angrily, he contended with the most complex motivations which were not always explicit in the text. He found these by excavating himself, by going deeper

into self than actors are required to go[, taking] risks with his own conscience. [...]

He controlled the language without being controlled by it.” (AT 63-64).

Every element of this review is testament to the sublime integrity of Barker’s actors, who find the voice and body to express the deepest ambiguities of desire and death. They challenge their consciences, often dispensing with them when personal excavations reveal their superficiality. The review goes on to discuss how Terry’s performance “implicated them [the audience] in his acts, unsettling the routine relations of actors and audience” (AT 64). Such concentric sublimity is the power of Barker’s theatre and the essence of its ability to transfigure its audience into (potentially) revolutionary agents of social and political revaluation.

Elsewhere, Barker focuses explicitly on the voice of the actor in ways that to me align him with psuedo-Longinus, the anonymous author of a fragmentary ancient Greek treatise on stylistic greatness in spoken speech, titled *Peri Hypsous (About Elevation)*.⁴⁵ This text eventually comes, through the emphases of various translations, to locate the sublime as a property of dramatic speech and texts that spellbinds the audience and involves them in a dislocating *ekstasis* - i.e., exactly what Barker’s texts and the voices they require seek to invoke. In *A Style and Its Origins*, Barker/Houth explains how “they [actors] responded to his texts because they needed to speak, and to speak to the speech’s limits. [...] He had a vision of acting as a form of religious practice, which in its most spiritual manifestation became an ecstasy, an ecstasy in which the actor would not know himself” (SAIO 28 - also an echo of Nigel Terry’s cries, ‘I do not know what I am doing!’ cited in the previous paragraph). Further along in *A Style*, Barker addresses the need for his leading characters to possess “a dexterity with speech” he found threatened if not facing elimination as “drama schools failed in their obligations to keep voice at the heart of their teaching”, smearing the disciplines of

projection and articulation as ‘elitism’ (SAIO 48). To the contrary, Barker affirmed and supported such elitism; “He argued for - and demanded of his actors - a clarity in delivery [...] The more depth and contradiction contained within the speech, the more essential became a distinctive mode of delivery” (SAIO 49). Thus what I am petitioning in this sketched comparison between Barker’s emphasis on speech and voice and Longinus’s notion of *hypsous* is the simple claim that *the* crucial, central element of Barker’s Art of Theatre aesthetics reaches back - as Terry’s performance “reached through time to the worst of the Caesars” (AT 63) - to the first instance of the idea of the sublime in recorded history, an idea that aligns the sublime, prior to its installation in a subjective aesthetics, with powerful and inspired modes of vocal delivery.

But the Actor is, of course, enslaved to the language of the text, and so it is the onus of the dramatist to provide a dramatic text that facilitates sublime vocal expression. Any reader of Barker’s play texts will notice immediately the uniquely innovative, and distinctly *poetic*, nature of Barker’s language. Akin to Beckett, whom Badiou admires very much, Barker’s lines are devoid of any punctuation, creating a syntactical and grammatical ‘unboundedness’ that leaves the choice of vocality and rhythm up to the actor. But perhaps the most distinct and idiosyncratic element of Barker’s dramatic texts is what could be described as a ‘stacking’ of line atop line. Early in *A Style and Its Origins*, Barker/Houth isolates this unique characteristic as an essential property of his dramatic aesthetic:

And on this sheet of white [rare foolscap paper], the ordering of speeches so peculiar to Barker, the lines separated according to their rhythms of

Word

Placed

Under

Word

to indicate the burden of pain with which each syllable is to be uttered, a discipline bewildering to actors until they spoke and then self-evident. In this as in so much with Barker's texts things lucid only with the act of articulation... (SAIO 15).

Simply, Barker's Art of Theatre requires its event, its articulation. The sublimity of the actors facilitate this happening. But the performance, like Badiou's Event, is ultimately ephemeral. Just so, Barker/Houth offers this charming appraisal of his actors' performance of the play *Victory*, one of the

most outstanding performances Barker had ever seen, plunging from chagrin to self-pity, from whimsy to contempt, simultaneously ugly and beautiful, spiritual and coarse, the apotheosis of contradiction and the ecstasy unleashed by it. How few saw it, and how this struck Barker as the authentic nature of great work, which flourishes as a secret, is witnessed as an accident and is extinguished as swiftly as it is seen... (SAIO 38).

So too is the *authentic* Truth-Event: how few see it, and how many fewer *declare* it; its truth flourishes as a secret unknown to Being; its event witnessed as an accident, pure chance, and gone as soon as it arrives. And justly, the aesthetic of the sublime is there to announce the authenticity of this great art-event, simultaneously painful and beautiful, spiritual and coarse, an apotheosis of contradiction and ecstasy. How can we not say the Art of the Theatre is *of the sublime?*

Conspicuously absent from my discussion thus far has been a sustained engagement with Barker's most enigmatic philosophical text and theatrical treatise, *Death, the One, and the Art of Theatre*. Barker/Houth addresses this text only once in *A Style and Its Origins*:

Death, the One, and the Art of Theatre, for all its metaphysical speculation, was a statement of fact, first articulated in a Paris interview, that he did not know the theatre and the theatre did not know him. (SAIO 102)

That text, Barker/Houth continues, was an effort not only to distinguish his theatre as an entirely different practice from all others, characterized by a supreme *unknowingness*, but also an effort to break free from an increasingly dejecting alienation: “Barker himself was not tolerated and he needed to know why, if only to spare himself the destructive bitterness that might have spoiled his art” (SAIO 102). At the same time, *Death, the One...* is another example of Barker’s mischievousness with his enemies, while also his “taking pains to identify the profound schisms that lay inside theatre’s complacent tolerances...” (102).

The profundity of *Death, the One...*, however, lies for me precisely in its metaphysical speculations. For Rabey, this philosophical treatise “fuses a radical questioning of the world with a radical questioning of the status of art”, where the sustained meditative confrontation with death and desire is not “fatalistic or debilitating, but paradoxically vivifying.”⁴⁶ So if Barker’s speculations “poeticize a juncture between aesthetics and metaphysics, and argue for the art of theatre as the proper crucible of philosophy,”⁴⁷ then my effort here is to demonstrate that the *sublime* aesthetics of the Art of Theatre intersect with a *sublimic* metaphysics, and by extension, that the philosophy most suited for its crucible is that of Badiou’s Truth-Event (and specifically my own treatment of that philosophy). What follows, then, is a series of my own metaphysical reflections upon Barker’s, all taken from *Death, the One, and the Art of Theatre*. It is my hope that these pensées and deductions will help stabilize and concentrate the arguments and claims dispersed throughout the preceding pages, whose erratic enthusiasm, while covering a good bit of ground, may have lacked a conventionally linear mapping. Here, by comparison, I offer punctuated responses to

Barker's statements in the language developed across the range of this project, establishing what I believe to be exacting and exciting relays between the dramatist's metaphysics and mine own. My goal is to demonstrate beyond doubt that Barker's Art of Theatre is explicitly *of the sublime* (if the previous pages failed to do so), but also, because the form is essentially indexical, to offer conclusions and conclusiveness to the above arguments, which will serve as a fine transition into the final phase of this project, an analysis of Barker's *The Fence in its Thousandth Year*.

Death is the secret of secrets, the origin of the idea of the secret, of which desire is the highest manifestation in life... (35)

Of what ontological importance is *the secret*? Is it not what designates the hole in knowledge and in being? Is the secret not the primordial locus of the subject, who is constituted on the unthought, the disavowed? If the secret is what forever undermines the totalizing pretension of the situation, with its noxious doxa of accessibility and transparency, its ruthless drive to eliminate all ambiguity, then it is the final bastion of art. And what of the truth-subject's faith in her truth; is fidelity not sustained by the absence of illumination (otherwise, why go on?); but further, is not the subject energized by his self-determination, the secret of his new epoch of activity, which is founded on a *forbidden* knowledge that to the bewildered spectator is perfectly incompatible with his collective discipline? Claudius's ecstatic declaration in *Gertrude - The Cry*: 'FAITH COMES FROM SECRET PLACES AND IN THE DAZZLING CATHEDRALS OF LIGHT IT DIES' (*Plays Two* 145). The secret is the fuel of all desire. The (loved) One is so because of that unfathomable thing in her more than just her fragile person - the *abyss* of the other is magnetized by the secret of one's own self: a state of oneness. Death as the secret of secrets: is not the only death we can survive the

traversing of the secret that sustains us but *only for the substitution of another*, we hope *truer*, *secret*, revealed to us in the event but even then a *secret* upon which we wager our very existence? The demand made of death in the sublime Act is the surrender of its secret, but death's power to keep its secret is the secret of its power.⁴⁸ Where does that leave us, left on the side of life? The *desire to demand of death*, the demand *itself*...this is what alters life.

To love death must be to love the possibility of something which declines to reveal itself except upon an irreversible decision. (76)

The experience of the sublime is the only avenue to the precipice of irreversibility; it opens up the possibility for an irreversible *decision*: the Act. But what is revealed? A Void, a Truth, certainly, but of...? "The tragic protagonist: I did it to be revealed to myself" (*DTOAT* 78). Sublime is possibility, openness, but at risk of death. Who would take this risk but he who embraces death? This is *Manfred's* lesson, the loving of death/the loving of Astarte, Manfred's demand to be revealed to himself. It is this *impossible act*, the *irreversible decision*, that takes place in every authentic revelatory (and hence revolutionary) process. Are we prepared, then, to accept death as an object of desire (rather than its consequence)? The tragic protagonist, like the subject of the sublime, penetrates the semblance of his desire, the *objet a*, searching beyond it for the encounter with its truth. From here there is no 'going back'; if she fails she knows she has not failed in love.

The tragic character - the despair of the psychoanalysts...nothing is repressed... (98).

Can we not say this is also the victory of psychoanalysis?

Pain is mesmerizing, let us admit it. The tragic protagonist observes her own pain without asking to be saved. Saved for what? For more of this life? But she has already repudiated this life...! This is the secret intelligence of the tragic experience, that the world is inadequate. (55)

The inadequacy of the world is *the lesson* of Kant's sublime. If only finitude can attain coherence, what is the use of it, have we not had enough of both finitude and coherence? Neither the unbounded excess of experience (which hints at its 'something more'), nor the suprasensible Idea which claims the guarantee of this 'more', asking us obstinately 'don't you want to be saved?' (saved for what is beyond us?) seem to resolve the sense of the poverty of existence. Sense and Idea are both indices of the world's inadequacy, caught in each other's mirror. But like two facing mirrors, a telescopic tunnel the depth of infinity appears in the *impossible*, intangible space between their two reflections - or more precisely, within the void space of both reflections' mediation.⁴⁹

The subtractive, *infinity-striving* (and so, sublimic) imagination is our only means of occupying this impossible space: *we can imagine it*. (The) Imagination is thus our only force of repudiation, but a repudiation not in despair, but in ecstasy of having seized this 'more' from within ourselves. We are thus the benefactors of the secreted intelligence of Kant; what he conceals, though not quite enough, is the secret of his whole metaphysics: the imagination's *desire* for pain - or else how can it be *mesmerizing*? The tragic protagonist and the subject of the sublime alike have been *seduced* by nothing other than their *imagination*. It is mesmerization that enables repudiation - the mesmerization in the face of the event, for example. Is not the event possible only because of being's (the world's) inadequacy; is it not the violent repudiation of this inadequacy?

Nothing knowable is not already known. The problem is to create the conditions under which the knowable might make itself known, should one wish to know it. To know more, we must violate ourselves more. We must violate our own secret. (24)

The necessary masochism of subtraction: Manfred's education; Barker's a priori. The importance of *violating ourselves*. It is Deleuze's great point to have seized upon the

liberating power in self-torture. While sadism is a relation of domination, the masochist frustrates the sadist, stripping him of his power:⁵⁰ a crucial element in the tragic protagonist's repudiation of the enjoyment his denigrators obtain from their attacks, which anyway simply betray their profound ignorance and helplessness in the face of death, their cowardice in the face of the sublime and the might of their own imaginations. But the tragic protagonist's and the subject of the sublime's self-violation is also what frees each from the obscene enjoyment they take in their own subjection; not because that *ecstasy* can be lost - it is always sutured to pain - but in order to *seize if for themselves*: the ultimate liberation. Thus, the need to violate our own secret is *always* the impetus behind the radical Act, which is precisely the *decision* to know more... while the *wager* is that along with knowing more we will also *know differently*. But such liberation cannot be achieved by intellectual reflection alone, it must be *staged* in a bodily performance of a purely masochistic nature (that is, it must appear to the dominator *as* masochism) - one *has* to stage the the painful process of hitting back at oneself.⁵¹

HAMLET: (*Hurting himself*) I SLAP MYSELF
I SLAP MYSELF
(*GERTRUDE is horrified.*)

- *Gertrude - the Cry (Plays Two 133)*.

Hence the absolute necessity for *a theatre*, the art that can provide the conditions needed to make truth known. "Tragic experience is never consolation, rather it compels an action from mourning itself..." (*DTOAT 74*). The stage...: an evental site.

Tragedy makes of murder its most creative instrument, the first gesture of re-ordering that dominates the spiritual revolution of the protagonists. In this sense it is a grace... (61)

Badiou, too, speaks of grace. It is his only metaphor for the event.⁵² Truth springs from a "moment of grace, defined as 'that which comes to pass without being the basis of any

predicate, that which is translegal, that which happens to one without any ascribable reason' or justification."⁵³

'I intend to kill you. I value neither my own life nor yours.'
'You ought not to kill me. I have hardly lived yet.'
 (D_{TOAT} 103).

"It is the essence of the event not to be preceded by any sign, and to surprise us by its grace."⁵⁴ Recall Badiou's assertion that the event is not only preceded by no sign, but also leaves no *durable* trace of itself - it is purely haphazard. Thus the first work of the subject: nomination. How wonderfully fitting, then, that in the first days of Barker's theatre company,

The Wrestling School became a *rumor*, its very existence a denial of the laws of entertainment, its appearances unadvertised, so that it came and went unnoticed except by the cognoscenti or those who, by accident or hidden signs, had found their way to it and emerged amazed... (S_{AIO} 47).

The gesture of tragedy is so sublime as to make the prospect of judgment unthinkable... (in this it is most distinct from history, where the will-to-judgment is inextinguishable...) (89)

For the Art of Theatre, tragedy is the form of its event. Event - a surge of pure indifferent multiplicity - is the form of Truth. Not only indifferent, but in-different, simultaneously; a double antidote against judgment. The truth is at once indifferent to judgement and that which judgment finds *unthinkable*, for it can think merely in terms of difference. It is, of course, the power of the imagination to baffle judgment in this way. When we experience this baffling we are in the throes of sublimity. Yet, the sublime is only a marker...but it is true that it is also the mark of a subjective experience and thus an aesthetic. The sublime is a marker, and its aesthetic is the slipcover of truth. It is also its strongest armor.

A vocabulary for the art of theatre

Infinite
Functionless
Intractable
Nowhere
Incalculable
Illogical
Arbitrary

Are these not the attributes of death? (92)

A glossary for the sublime:

Infinite: or the imagination's striving, while infinity is merely a limit - *nothing is unimaginable*.

In Badiou's ontology, truth and void share the same axiomatization - the axiom of infinity: the sublimic imagination demonstrates precisely this. The truth-procedure is an infinite process; hence its requirement of the uniform of fidelity. The subject's involvement in the process of a truth, though only a finite fragment of its procedure, is sustained by his belief in the infinity of the truth he serves.

Functionless: beyond purposive purposiveness, the sublime is - from the perspective of being - strictly purposeless; or more accurately, the sublime demonstrates the possibility of a 'purposeless' Act. Purpose and function are terms legible only in the situation as it is - terms on which its State depends, and terms that it serves. What kind of function is *asynthesis* but the *functionless* one? In the sublime, the imagination asserts its power *for its own sake*, not as a cog in the function of reproduction. The result...

Intractable: ...Kant shrank from this apparently functionless power, and his revisions to the first *Critique* see the disappearance of the imagination, its 'collapse' into the understanding.

The *intractable* striving of the sublimic imagination: not even a harmonious play can sate it; the imagination will not forgo its desire for pain and the mesmeric ecstasy attached to it.

Nowhere: where else is the Void; where else is the Real? The imagination: our power to access that *nowhere* which persists *everywhere*.

Incalculable: another word for the *mathematical* sublime, an interminable counting. How else can we calculate truth but by the slow accumulation of its elements in the situation, one by one, *ad infinitum*?

Illogical: Where is the logic in sublime experience? If it defies all conventional logic, we must assert that the sublime has a logic of its own. Indeed, there is a logic to asynthesis, a logic that belongs to the imagination, a logic unique to the imagination. So perhaps it is the Act that is illogical. Indeed, one's Act must appear as entirely illogical, the wager of one's very being without the promise of compensation, an exile without return.

Arbitrary: For this last entry, I petition Barker's own writing as a way into mine: "Tragedy's *a priori* - that we live only to be destroyed by life - renders the notion of wrong decisions meaningless. A right decision, by extension, is equally untenable. It remains to be said that the decisions of the tragic character have value only in so far as they enable him to enter the unknown on a condition of active acquiescence...(neither 'I don't want to die' nor 'so what if I die' but 'nothing can keep me here...')" (97). It is only after the event is decided by a subject that its signs *will have been* detected in the situation - i.e., the retroactivity of meaning; but the nomination of the event, the assignation that it belongs to the situation, is

made possible by a sign (Name) whose meaning is as yet to be fulfilled. Barker writes, “the effects of the Art of Theatre are characterized by *delay* (SAIO 76). Thus the declaration of an event is *arbitrary* in the fullest sense of the term. The Act, in this regard, is as well; for subtracted from being the Act cannot be judged in any meaningful way from the position of the situation. The situation attempts to wrestle with the Act, groping for an ascription of ‘that was right’, ‘that was wrong’. But the Act is the entering into the unknown, the emphatic assertion that ‘nothing can keep me here.’

Are these not the attributes of Truth?

NOTES

¹ But Actors have Masters, and in this case, the dramatist...when I say ‘exclusively the Actor’, I thus implicitly include Barker (who anyway has been an actor in some of his plays’ performances).

² Barker, Howard. *Death, the One, and the Art of Theatre*. New York: Routledge, 2005. (1) [hereafter cited in text as *DTOAT*] Of course, it is highly significant that the poetry of sublimity - a chasm both breached and bridged by the imagination - appears in the heart of one of Barker’s central theses.

³ Torrents of associations and resonances: the Kantian ‘pleasure’ of sublime experience (as that which organizes and orients our moral/ethical behavior); the Freudian pleasure principle; the obscene superego injunction to *enjoy!* (the form of unconditionally obeying today’s ideology); the Lacano-Marxist notion of surplus-enjoyment (as that which organizes our experience of reality), etc.

⁴ Here now, the poetry of a Badiouan subjectivity; to be a subject of the Art of Theatre is to remain faithful to the painful path. Is not *fidelity* the constitutive principle of the subject of an event?

⁵ Simply think of the West’s ‘war on terror’, marketed as ‘a war without casualties’ (on our side, of course), or the fantasy of deathlessness that sustains all biopolitics, all eugenics, and the virtualization of reality itself. cf. Jean Baudrillard *The Vital Illusion*.

⁶ The Badiouan *and* Lacanian valences here are remarkable. Is not the Act a subject chooses his answer to the question ‘how should I die?’ And is not the subject who survives his Act filled with a new answer to the question ‘how shall I live?’ - his confrontation with death has forever *altere*d life, his very be-ing.

⁷ The evidence of Manfred's alteration is discussed in the previous chapter, but its remarkable palpability should be recited here:

There is a calm upon me-
Inexplicable stillness! which till now
Did not belong to what I knew of life.

(III.i.6-8, *mine*)

Equally clear is Phantom Astarte's act of exposing to Manfred the way into death: the only words spoken by her, besides "Manfred!" and "Farewell!" - indeed, sandwiched between them - are "To-morrow ends thine earthly ills" (II.iv.152).

⁸ The Norton Anthology glosses this line with a footnote that reads: "When this line was dropped in the first edition, Byron told Murray, 'You have destroyed the whole effect and moral of the poem by omitting the last line of Manfred's speaking'" (695 n.5). In other words, remove that line, and the tragedy of the drama vanishes.

⁹ I have italicized *back into* to highlight the very exactitude of this language. As Badiou's Void is identical in nature to Lacan's Real, it is that which is both repressed/excluded and that which inexorably resists inclusion simultaneously. The event, an eruption/irruption of the void/real, draws its excluded/repressed element(s) *back into* the texture of being/the symbolic, consequently shattering/*altering* that texture. Furthermore, does not this same radical ambiguity of the Real apply also to death? Death, too, is that which remains inexorably and forever 'beyond' the horizon of our life-experience, *and simultaneously* that which is excluded from the count, that which *all* structuring and symbolizing operations actively repress, as evidenced in everything from non-alcoholic beer to cryogenics, from coding the genome to wars without (acknowledged) casualties to the figure of *homo sacer* (as that 'ahuman' figure whose death is divested of any symbolic status whatsoever). Hence the justification (or one of the justifications) for my opening claim that Barker's Art of Theatre is fundamentally evental; by making Tragedy its form, the Art of Theatre succeeds in altering life/being by drawing death *back into* it.

¹⁰ As a reminder, I employ the neologism 'sublimic' to differentiate my meaning from the descriptive noun, 'sublimity' and the aesthetic adjective, 'sublime'. 'Sublimic', also an adjective, means, *of the sublime* (just as 'sulfuric' means 'of sulfur').

¹¹ Barker, Howard. *Arguments for a Theatre* (147) [hereafter cited in text as *AT*].

¹² Barker, Howard/Houth, Eduardo. *A Style and Its Origins*. London: Oberon Books, 2007. (22) That director is Kenny Ireland, who directed most of Barker's plays prior to the 1988 inception of The Wrestling School, Barker's own theatre company, which finally afforded him complete creative control over the productions of his dramas. [*A Style and Its Origins* is hereafter cited in text as *SAIO*].

¹³ Rabey, David Ian. *Howard Barker: Ecstasy and Death: an expository study of his Drama, Theory and Production Work, 1988-2008*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009. (18)

¹⁴ cf. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Lyotard Reader*, xv.

¹⁵ Hallward, *op. cit.* (128)

¹⁶ Žižek, "Psychoanalysis and Post-Marxism" (242).

¹⁷ *Ibid.* (243)

¹⁸ I am tempted here to offer a brief analysis of Rabey's involvement in this process of actualization. In short, I read his involvement along the lines of Badiou's description of the subject qua operator of a truth-procedure. Summarizing and translating, Hallward writes

In the wake of intervention, subjectivization proceeds through the slow accumulation, point by point, of inquiries or 'investigations' (*enquêtes*) undertaken to determine the relation each element of the situation might entertain with the event. Investigation is a *militant* rather than a *scholarly* process. It is an attempt to win over each element to the event; it is a matter of 'enthusiasm' and 'commitment' rather than of knowledge or interpretation (EE, 364-65).

Of course, I am not suggesting that Rabey is not a scholar of Barker's work, or that he does not create knowledge of that work via interpretation. But that interpretation is always informed by Barker's own critical discourse, that is, interpreted in Barker's terms or at the very least in conversation with them (and thus 'within' the domain of the Barker-event). Furthermore, Rabey's major works, two volumes of expository studies covering the totality of Barker's oeuvre, are precisely *militant* in their unbridled enthusiasm and excitement, not to mention that they represent a total commitment to Barker and his work from 1969 to the present. His exposition is not argument, but rather the investigation of the relationship of a vast array of philosophical, theoretical, and political elements (of the situation) to the Barker-event.

On a personal note, I include this project and my writing of it as a fragment of this truth-procedure; my investigation is to test all of the elements of the situation informing my theory of the sublime in their relation to the Barker-event.

¹⁹ It is important to note here, however, that the actualization of a truth can never be completely 'full', for a truth-procedure's infinity (that is, its unending progression) is secured by what Badiou calls the 'Unnameable' - i.e., that hard kernel that will forever resist positive actualization in any form. In Barker's *Art of Theatre*, the unnameable is of course death, and it is the infinite speculation and engagement with the mystery of death that guarantees the *Art of Theatre's* project will never be complete, that its style will continue to evolve with the innovations and experimentations of its creators and practitioners as they seek ever newer ways to approach death's mystery.

²⁰ These are, Thomas Leipzig for designer, Billie Kaiser for costumes, Helen Morley for lighting, and Paul Bull for sound, whose names are printed on the cast lists of all his subsequently published plays.

²¹ Rabey, *Ecstasy and Death* (250).

²² The very first argument in *Arguments* appears under the heading 'Fortynine asides for a tragic theatre' and reads, "We are living the extinction of official socialism. When the opposition loses its politics, it must root in art" (AT 17).

²³ Adorno, T.W., Horkheimer, Max. "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 1997) p. 120

²⁴ “We make a fetish now of contradiction. We make banality of the discovery that the personal and the political do not sit, that socialism has violated as many as it has liberated, that the individual is both an imperialist of the soul and the entire locus of freedom. [...] All these contradictions we artistically rejoice in, finding it a sort of freedom, for the new man Brecht would have engineered is anathema to us, a mechanical proletarian cosmonaut, horribly unafraid [...] the task of serious art is to describe not wickedness but collusion, not simply authority but submission.” (AT 22-23).

²⁵ Even John le Carré, an emblem of populist politics in his middle-of-the-road ‘conservative liberalism’, admits that as a consequence of the “love affair between Thatcher and Reagan” in Western nations and especially the UK, “the social infrastructure had practically stopped working.” John le Carré, “My vote? I would like to punish Blair”, interview with David Hare, *The Daily Telegraph*, Thursday 17 May 2001, p.23.

²⁶ Rabey explains how “the structures and funding of British theatre, increasingly dominated by the figure of the director, also increasingly resisted (and disparaged) the prospect of theatre artists speaking, writing, and acting for themselves. In most cases, the mediation of the dramatist by the director and a major subsidised company (and the dramatist’s acceptability to the long-term economic prospects of these) was enshrined as crucial and necessary; hence the offensiveness of a self-determining artist who proclaimed the artistic, political, and ethical redundancy of most theatrical practice and proposed a new aesthetics.” in *Ecstasy and Death* (21-22).

²⁷ In *Arguments for a Theatre*, under the heading ‘The offer, the reward, and the need to disappoint:’

In the old theatre, the actors offered the play as a salesman displays his product - unctuously and with fake gentility. The prologue was the patter of the potentially unemployed. Thus the audience became customers, whose satisfaction was the necessary end of the performance.

In the new theatre, the audience will offer itself to the actors. It will relinquish its status as customer and abandon its expectations of reward. When it ceases to see itself as customer, it will also cease to experience offence.

The reward is the relic of the market place. The old theatre pretends to reward its audience for its effort of attendance, its effort at concentration, its surrender of futile time. You must reward the audience, say the poor critics. Why? Is theatre so intolerable? Is art not necessary for itself? The contrary is the case. It is a privilege to witness art. It is a privilege to hear good actors. In the new theatre there will be no reward because there will be no deal, no swop, or compact. The new theatre will not perceive itself as product. The audience will enter the new theatre out of necessity. In this condition, which is the compulsion of spiritual hunger, it will cease to pass facile judgments on the play. (AT 67)

²⁸ Recall the role of anxiety in the experience of the sublime, discussed in the previous chapter. And also note that the purely anti-Kantian, anti-moralist notion of a pain without obligations to reconciliation or harmony is the language *par excellence* of the eventual sublime.

²⁹ Furthermore, “The bargain between the stage and the audience is struck not a priori by common principles but between individuals in pursuit of imaginative reconnoiter. This crucial point of rupture with governing principles of politics and morality is its distinguishing feature[...].” (AT 94).

³⁰ From *Death, the One, and The Art of Theatre*:

Since theatre ceased to make death its subject it surrendered its authority over the human soul. Since it allowed itself to be incorporated into mundane projects of political indoctrination and social therapy it abdicated its power. Always theatre is suborned by the idealism of its makers. Always it is traduced by the sentimental. In *the art of theatre* we pity the idealist as one pities the man with a fatal disease. This pity is strictly circumscribed. Whilst many have tried to make hospitals from theatres we keep our stage infection-free. (2)

³¹ Rabey, *Ecstasy and Death* (21)

³² cf. Chapter One of this text, 'The Subtractive Power of the Imagination'

³³ I owe this citation to Rabey's discussion of Barba (23).

³⁴ A. Bogart, *And Then, You Act: Making Art in an Unpredictable World*. New York: Routledge, 2007. (42)

³⁵ Hallward, *op. cit.* xxiii, quote from Badiou's *Saint Paul et la fondation de l'universalisme* (70) trans. Hallward.

³⁶ Rabey, *op. cit.* (21)

³⁷ ed. Rabey & Gritzner. "Howard Barker in Conversation", *Theatre of Catastrophe: new essays on Howard Barker*. London: Oberon, 2006. (30-37)

³⁸ [Barker] "The exordium is a sequence and proposition combining recorded sound with strong visual images and rhythmic movement, presenting the audience with striking imagery as soon as they enter the space; so that the audience enter the space on the performers' terms, rather than on those of their own daily routines and discourses of 'sense'. These images then resolve into narrative when the performers are released into language" (30).

³⁹ *Ibid.* (30)

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* (30-31)

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² "To rinse it [the audience] of the concerns and triviality of the street, domesticity, friendship or even love" (*SAIO* 43).

⁴³ Such a notion further reinforces my claim that the unboundedness of the sublime experience does not depend only on the presence of some inconceivably large object or a monstrous demonstration of nature's might; sublimity is present everywhere that there is a dis-integration of the coded norms of perceiving and processing perception; any agency responsible for this dis-integration is properly sublime (or sublimic).

⁴⁴ cf. Žižek, *Tarrying* (35)

⁴⁵ Christine Battersby, in *The Sublime, Terror, and Human Difference* (London: Routledge, 2007) explains the fascinating history of this text, and how it connects to the sublime and eventually to theatre. The first printed edition of *Peri Hypsōw* was that of Francisco Robertello in Basel in 1554, translated into Latin under the title *De Sublimi Genere Dicendi (Of the Sublime in Types of Speech)*. In the Greek text *hypsōw* is a stylistic/rhetorical category with an emphasis on a type of speech that “overpowers and transports the hearer” (4). Longinus links this state of elevated transport to the inspired author, and to texts that are themselves ‘frenzied’, with the ‘strong and inspired’ impact transmitted directly to the audience from the animated author and text. Furthermore, the text explores the means whereby an audience might be elevated (gain *hypsōw*) or attain ‘*ekstasis*’ (meaning, literally, to ‘stand outside’ oneself). [The Barkerian implications here are clear.] The audience achieves this transport through the texts appeal to an obscure quality - a ‘*je-ne-sais-quoi*’ - as the causal origin of the power that ‘sublime’ speeches or texts exercised on a *spellbound audience*; a force that transforms not only language but its audience also. Battersby explains further how Longinus’ text sparked a kind of mania in the eighteenth century, with new translations appearing by the score, in English and other languages. Most of these translations followed Boileau’s French translation of 1674, titled *Du Sublime*, which left out any reference to ‘Types of Speech’ from the title of the treatise, so that gradually the scope of the sublime was broadened out to include not only speeches, but also images and events - *especially as depicted on the stage*. [All of this summary is a near-direct quotation of Battersby’s text, pages 4-5, emphasis mine.]

⁴⁶ Rabey, *Ecstasy and Death* (28)

⁴⁷ Ibid. (30)

⁴⁸ I borrow the phrase from Lingis, *The Community of Those Who have Nothing in Common*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994. (10)

⁴⁹ This is the domain of Subject - i.e., Void; but never the place of subjectivity, never the place of *a* subject, who is always decentered in his process subjectivation. A simple experiment can help to demonstrate this. Try to make your eye occupy the space that would allow you to see the ‘mirror-tunnel’ to infinity (and convince yourself of the illusion that you are between two perfect mirrors, because in ‘real life’, mirrors are always distorted - another terribly compelling metaphor - for the infinity within any actual mirror-tunnel would be swerved. It is this swerving of infinity that I claim, but can do so only instinctually, is responsible for the Drive.) The Act - the decision to enter the abyss - is therefore always an act of blindness - a radical risk taken whose outcome cannot possibly be known. Are we surprised to find that blindness is often a trait of the tragic protagonist in Barker’s plays? “Blindness in my plays has something intensely and fundamentally *of theatre* about it...blindness is licence to penetrate more deeply than the sighted might require.” (“Barker in Conversation” *Theatre of Catastrophe*, Rabey Gritzner, 32).

⁵⁰ Gilles, Deleuze, and Leopold VonSacher-Masoch. *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty e³ Venus in Furs*. New York: Zone Books, 1991.

⁵¹ Deleuze, *op. cit.*

⁵² Badiou, “Politics and Philosophy”, 125. “When I use the metaphor of grace,” Badiou writes, “I do so only to indicate the radical contingency, with respect to the parameters of a situation, of what happens to it eventually [*écévènementiellement*]. But *what* happens is simply indifferent multiplicity” in a letter to Peter Hallward, qtd. from Hallward *op. cit.* (371)

⁵³ Ibid. (110), trans. Hallward from Badiou *Saint Paul*, 80-81.

⁵⁴ Ibid in Badiou, (119). trans. Hallward

EPILOGUE

A Reading of Howard Barker's *The Fence in Its Thousandth Year*

What I'd like to offer here, by way of a kind of 'in-conclusion', is a reading of Howard Barker's play *The Fence in Its Thousandth Year* (2005). My play on the hyphenated 'in-conclusion' should indicate that this reading does not aim to secure decisive closure or finalization either of the ideas and theory ventured throughout this project or their affinity to Barker's own theoretics and aesthetics. Quite to the contrary, I hope to discuss *The Fence* in a way that seizes the dynamic potentiality of my discourse of the sublime by demonstrating how this discourse 'opens up' a host of energetic and deeply investigative (though always speculative) critical 'routes' through Barker's theatre, suitable to explorations of the production 'whole' (text, actor, audience, scenography, as they converge in the performance event) as well as to directly textual engagements. Consequently, my methodological approach will differ significantly from the preceding, 'proof-based' expositions of Barker's *Art of Theatre* (and Byron's *Manfred*). Instead of working to cement philosophical and aesthetic relays between my theory of the sublime and the *Art of Theatre* - attempting to prove its (near-perfect) artistic elaboration of Badiou's concept of Truth (i.e., how well those paradigms fit Barker's own artistic and intellectual instincts), and exploring how an aesthetic of the sublime is central and indispensable to both (as I do throughout the previous chapters) - I now experiment with the possibilities that avail themselves when such correlations are taken as given, or rather, taken as truth, and thus as starting points for new critical forays into Barker's challenging, enigmatic, and revolutionary theatre.

What all of this means concretely is simply this: whereas in the second chapter I use *Manfred* to elaborate the opening chapter's theoretics, finding Byron's verse drama to be an

uncanny figuration of the subject's tortured engagement with an event, and thus treating it as a kind of 'model' of/for the theory; and whereas in the third chapter I make a case for understanding Barker's Art of Theatre as an evental disruption of the 'state-of-theatre,' attempting to show how every one of its elements is in explicit accordance with (my transposition of) a Lacano-Badiouan configuration of a *sublimic* truth-event, that is, a truth-event where the dynamics of sublime experience and the presence of a sublimic aesthetic are immanent; in this final chapter, my reading of *The Fence* will *not* seek to further substantiate these claims by arguing that the play is a specific instance or particular 'example'. Instead, I rely on the previous chapter to have proven that adequately enough, and therefore my reading of *The Fence* leaves that 'proving-game' behind in favor of an engagement that while recognizing sublime and evental dynamics within the play, does not make them its primary focus, but rather attends to the play's highly metaphorical and densely political speculations on desire, nationhood, and personal transgression. Paradoxically, this may have the effect of proving even more strongly the evental vitality of Barker's sublime aesthetic, locating the Art of Theatre squarely in what Badiou would call a truth procedure, on the order of the *générique* of Art.

One of the great personal pains I have had to contend with in my intellectual and academic devotion to Barker's Art of Theatre is the simple fact that I have never experienced a production of his work (nor a reproduction of it, for that matter), and have had to content myself with written descriptions of various productions (Barker's own and those of his major academic exponents), actor testimonies, and the imaginative quality of my own 'mental theatre'. Obviously, this tips the balance of what I can adequately discuss toward the textual dimension of his theatre - his *drama*. But with *The Fence in Its Thousandth Year* I have chosen a play whose exordium is discussed by Barker/Houth in *A Style and Its Origins*, and whose

production scenography is described by David Ian Rabey in *Ecstasy and Death*, in order that I might be able to include some reflections on key production elements of *The Fence* in my investigations and excavations of the text. In this regard, I have no singular thesis or hypothesis in mind, but rather wander through the text more or less haphazardly, encountering scenes and exchanges, movements and voicings that seem to invite excavation with the theoretical tools at my disposal. However, some familiar themes and theses do appear: the notions of subtraction and the radical Act, the spirituality of anxiety and desire, the centrality of the sublime, and the anguished ecstasy of the tragic protagonists' encounters with death.

The Fence in Its Thousandth Year is published and produced in the same year (2005) that saw the publication of Howard Barker's *Death, the One, and The Art of Theatre*. With *The Fence*, Barker encountered the same kind of resistance that he must have, by that point, come to expect from 'the dramaturgy'. Although *Dead Hands* (2004) was being played at Birmingham Rep, Barker's petition to director Jonathan Church to stage *The Fence* wasn't met with much enthusiasm, but Church was willing to accommodate the play for a few days, though during a 'slack' period. So Barker turned also to Dee Evans, the director at Colchester Rep and an ally of The Wrestling School, who agreed to take *The Fence* on more amenable terms. Interestingly, Barker/Houth describes how Barker was able to infiltrate, as it were, the theatre 'establishment' due to *The Fence*'s ostensible 'relevance':

Barker never wrote for them [the theatre] but he was able on occasion to imitate their game...*The Fence* had a theme which at first sight looked uncommonly *topical* and therefore by the criteria of *the dramaturgy*, hard to dismiss, for topicality was inscribed on the tablets of their faith... (SAIO 78).

These topoi include issues such as mass immigration and the illegal entry of foreigners, the definition and character of ‘the nation’, and the decay of the frontier, all subjects that were “increasingly contentious” (*SAIO* 79) in the sociopolitical climate of post 9/11 globalization. Barker exploited the ostensible themes of the work in his applications for funding, whilst the text and the production alike, of course, “defied the facile expectations of *the dramaturgy* and the critical class in equal measure...” (*SAIO* 79).¹

So while it is easy to identify the intensely political invocations of a play that centers around the ethical notion and physical presence of a frontier fence, it is important to recognize that these are *also* densely metaphorical: limits, boundaries, and frontiers exist in the psyche as well, and are typically much more implacable (and hence their transgression much more shattering) than merely physical barriers. Indeed, Barker exquisitely enacts such metaphor by striking at the heart of our libidinal investment in concepts such as borders and limits, frontiers and boundaries, all variations of ‘the fence’. For example, the Fence in *The Fence* becomes the site of (an eventually ritualized) miscegenation; acts that seriously undermine the separation of ‘Thieves’ and ‘Farmers’ are thus deeply subversive of the political-libidinal investments in that distinction. The character of Kidney, faithful servant to the duchess Algeria and a man who stakes quite a bit on the integrity of the Fence, observes in a fit of bitter laughter, “High is the Fence... Long is the Fence... HOW DEEP IS IT THOUGH” (*FTY* 29).

Hence the political suggestiveness of a shockingly permeable fence is transposed almost immediately into the erotic, and political transgression becomes inseparable and sometimes indistinguishable from sexual transgression. Barker throws this relationship into tragic extremity when the play discloses that the incestuous relationship between Algeria and congenitally blind Photo (‘nephew’ to Algeria) is in fact that between mother and son,

and a son conceived in an illicit (and anonymous) copulation between Algeria and a Thief on the far side of the Fence. Yet the glaring Oedipal backdrop is either diffused across an array of seductions and coercions that break with or are ultimately indifferent to the mother-father-son triangulation of the Oedipus myth, or defused by the (impossible) erotic triumph of Algeria and Photo that ends the play. In other words, Barker employs the Oedipal schema (as a particularly strong example of desire's limits) to, in Rabey's words, "address, depict, and exemplify the phenomenon of *singularity* within sociality: that which occurs *at the limit*; that which challenges and redesignates conventional terms..."² In *The Fence*, to put it another way, The Oedipal merely constructs the incest taboo - perhaps the conventional psycho-social limit par excellence - as merely another 'fence' to be gotten through (should we possess the imaginative endurance). The incest taboo, a defining limit of all civilization, is like all limits painful to occupy but simultaneously a horizon of previously unimagined (and unimaginable) possibility, because the 'limit' is constitutive of its 'beyond', and therefore invites its own violation.

And the same holds for all variants of the limit in Barker's *The Fence*; each is constructed not as an authoritative end but to seduce the play's characters into the ecstatic (and therefore tragic) negotiation of those limits' transgression. Yet the play remains ominously hopeless; transgression is never transcendence, and the dissolution of one's boundaries necessarily involves that catastrophic encounter with the abyss of one's desire and the death that stalks there: an ecstasy whose continuation unravels consciousness (and an ecstasy often abandoned therefore, as the intellect escapes behind yet another fence). As the program notes to The Wrestling School's production of *The Fence* read,

We like to imagine a world without frontiers. This flatters our humanity. It is a vanity of the Western mind. But the barrier merely moves. We dismantle one to erect another.³

The thorough ambiguity between the dismantling and relocating of limits and frontiers becomes the spiritual labyrinth in which the play's tragic protagonists search for an individual autonomy and freedom that can exist without ideological (or psychological) circumscription - or, as is equally (im)possible, an identity sustained by the insatiable drive to transgress. This ordeal requires the tragic will to persist in the void, to endure the pain that commences upon stepping outside of the 'normal' symbolic texture, and to survive the sequence of self-loss and self-recovery initiated by desire's radical reconfigurations.

But the play's irreducible contradictions reach even further beyond that of the incommensurate desires for transgression and for limitlessness; *The Fence* can also be said to suggest that it is only the forbidden that holds erotic charge, that a society increasingly obsessed with accessibility and the dismantling of borders everywhere unwittingly threatens to extinguish desire. Thus the impetus for one who craves the erotic ecstasy of transgression to seek out and even *invent* new methods and venues for doing so, if it seems the fence has vanished; for sometimes we can erect them in the most unexpected of places: "ALGERIA: MADNESS ALSO IS A FENCE" (*FTY* 59). Barker's play excavates the deep undercurrents of desire that circulate beneath not only our identities but the politicized notions of freedom and citizenship sustaining them. If we accept the (potentially cynical) possibility that "we are human *because* of the frontier,"⁴ we must also accept that this 'humanity' includes the exploitation and disenfranchisement of those the border designates as 'other', as much as we admit that this exploitation is not only economical and political but *sexual*, also. From the perspective of one who admits the inevitability of the fence, but denies it as a

limit, transgression becomes an ethical compulsion; it is, therefore, only the tragic protagonist who embraces the annihilation of self risked in each act of transgression. “The tragic protagonist: *‘I am unforgivable, and if the consequence of my act had not been death I should never have undertaken it...’*” (DFOAT 78).

The Fence is the battlefield of the singularity (in both Nancy’s and Badiou’s sense); Algeria exclaims in some of her very first lines, “I am a war” (FTY 9). As duchess to the ‘situation’, Algeria is a figure of (the excess of) institutional representation - she is ‘part’ of the State. But her radical acts of transgression, which span the public and private domains, completely undermine the State, and thus catapult her into the status of singularity - she is that which is obviously presented in the situation, but incapable of being represented by it. The extreme torsion between these two positions becomes a sublime ordeal for Algeria, and she refuses to sacrifice either in the name of personal or national stability - an act of unimaginable dignity in the face of obscene humiliation and loss.

Barker’s exordium to *The Fence* establishes resonances between all the elements discussed above, “a shrunken model of the entire work, with its juxtaposition of flesh against wire, class against class, anger, bravery and privilege”:

Algeria appears to grieve beside a coffin... the pram which contains her only child is parked adjacently, the nursemaid seated against a wheel, negligently reading while the infant is lifted infinitely slowly out of the pram into the sky on the invisible cable that will later lower it again between Algeria’s legs as she gives birth... at the same, scarcely visible velocity the great steel frontier fence descends, against which Algeria will perform her first transgressive act... bowler-hatted court servants pass to and fro to the drones and taps of Jani Cristou interspersed with the wild, abusive shouts that

her lovers make on her departure, handkerchief clutched to her mouth... the mist of the frontier clings to the stage... (SAIO 80).

In the first scene, set at night, Algeria rushes to the wire of the fence to expose herself to a clustered mass of Thieves on the far side, with whom she copulates. Barker/Houth describes this opening scene as one of Barker's most startling theatrical images: "the clustering mass of impoverished men fighting for access to the duchess's immaculate body is typically complex, beautiful, and reverberative... in the obscurity, her black costume is suddenly flung up and reveals the dazzling white froth of her petticoats, while the searchlight passes, briefly illuminating the bizarre but passionate act..." (SAIO 79-80). The opening scenography of the stage - an *obscurity* that the light of a surveillance beam, a clear metaphor for the State, can only partially illuminate - immediately renders the fence as a kind of evental site (and remember, too, that all events begin in obscurity); here, we have a proliferation of singularity: the Thieves on the far side are "*dim figures*" (FTY 7), the excluded, unrepresented other, presented in the state only via their exclusion from it. Algeria's act is, consequently, the initial tremor that announces the beginning of the fence's disintegration, but it is so in a highly ambivalent and problematic way.

What we encounter in *The Fence's* exordium and its opening scene is Barker's identification of the fundamentally *erotic* character of 'the limit' and the *seductive* capacity of singularity. At the same time, the scenes' political valence expose the *sexual* exploitation that undercuts divisions in power and status, captured visibly in the stark contrast between Algeria's 'immaculate body' and the 'impoverished' men. Yet the scenes refuse an unambiguous reading by problematizing relations of power and the moral binary of 'exploiter' and 'victim'. From one perspective, Algeria's act exploits the frontier, of which the fence is both symbol and spectacle, for a sexual liaison that uses the fence itself as the vector

of its own subversion. From another, the (political) question remains as to whether or not Algeria's act victimizes the men on the other side of the Fence; that is, whether her transgression is driven by personal desire and pleasure, where the thieves and the fence are merely instrumental, or whether her act temporarily suspends the distinctions and exclusions effected by the fence, with a sexual infiltration amounting to the ultimate threat to the integrity of the frontier. The audience members confront these contradictions and ambiguities in intensely suggestive and metaphorical stage images, before voice and speech enter the production. The effect of witnessing an excessively emotional and erotic act suspended in dim obscurity, and that frustrates any attempt at interpretation or legislation, evokes the aesthetic dimension of the sublime, and induces that feeling of *anxiety* repeatedly praised by Barker as the necessary *spiritual* condition of his tragic theatre.

My own reading of the play's exordium and opening scene petitions these notions of infiltration and singularity to conceive of Algeria's transgression *itself* as the precise locus where the symbolic texture fails to close, where re-presentation breaks down, and thus as the site where the void (beyond the Fence) threatens to erupt. This is the sublime dimension of Algeria's Act: it both defies and refuses conventional understanding by hurtling all available codes of interpretation into an abyss, leaving the individual spectator to confront the bare (un-symbolically mediated) image of Algeria's *jouissance*, her desire in its most radical form. Under Barker's criteria, we know immediately that Algeria will be the apotheosis of the tragic protagonists in *The Fence*.

It was my argument in the last chapter that Barker's tragic protagonist is identical in nature to my notion of the *subject of the sublime*, a Subject who coincides with her Act (insofar as the possibility for that Act was opened up by an experience of the sublime). However, there arises a crucial anamorphic shift when we consider the experience of the sublime and

the subject's Act from the perspective of Being qua the state of a situation. To the state, the sublime experience is excessively transgressive of moral norms, while the Act itself is essentially impossible - i.e., it exists outside the horizon of possibility within the situation, which is why the Act effects the total subtraction of the individual from Being. To the subject of the sublime however, the preceding experience (of the sublime) was the ordeal of refusing to accept (and abide by) the moral imperatives that judge one's actions and thoughts as transgressive or admissible; hence the Act, despite its occurrence in a moment of radical openness, avails itself as the only acceptable possibility. *The Fence* seizes the incongruity of these two perspectives to create an atmosphere of thick tension between competing characters and interests. These competitions revolve around, or more precisely, *in* the vortex of Algeria's desire; efforts to claim or subdue this desire become the engagements of the 'war' men fight in and through Algeria (though no one yet has survived this war):

ALGERIA: Husbands I had three look at their monuments
(She gestures.)
 Uniform like soldiers guarding me and it is not tasteless I am a war
(She challenges them.)
 I am a war and they fell in me
(She bites her lip.)

(FTY 9)

Those lines are delivered in scene 2, which is set in a cemetery draped with mourning. In this scene, several of the play's central antagonisms announce themselves. Barker writes in *Death, the One...*, "tragic experience is never consolation, rather it compels an action from mourning itself...(to seduce the grieving widow)" (74). One wonders whether Barker had the second scene of *The Fence* in mind as he wrote the above passage, for after Algeria's cryptic eulogy for her dead husband - which ends with, "My needs... My needs which are... *(Pause. She bites her lip again.)* Never mind what my needs are" (10) - a suitor, Doorway, "*with a move*", declaims an exquisite (and masterfully erotic) poem to Algeria in an

attempt to seduce her.⁵ Following Baudrillard, Barker locates the act of seduction in the realm of death, and thus it is highly suggestive that Doorway's seduction of Algeria occurs beside the grave of her recently deceased husband, amid mourners at the funeral.⁶ But the language of Doorway's seduction poem reveals that he, perhaps, is not prepared to confront the real of Algeria's desire - the 'war' she says she is - or at least gravely underestimates the stakes of that conflict. The final lines of his poem read, "What can prepare a husband for your mystery nothing can but the war you say you are would cease for this small peace" (*FTY* 10). Doorway somewhat arrogantly assumes that his making love to Algeria would quell the 'war', but such lines betray themselves as a bluff when Algeria unexpectedly decides to accept his proposal, and "*A look of shock passes over DOORWAY,*"

ALGERIA: Oh yes
 Oh yes
 AND POETRY GIVES WAY TO DREAD
 (*She laughs.*)

Moreover, this a dread that Algeria mercilessly compounds as she reveals to Doorway, at the close of the scene, that she plans to continue her incestuous affair with the boy Photo, her *son*, and not her nephew - a revelation to which Doorway responds in floundering silence, "*a gulf of incomprehension and despair*" (14).

Thus Doorway's seduction poem is half-true: nothing could, indeed, prepare him for Algeria's mysteries, and it is for this reason that he is powerless against the war of her desire. As further secrets are revealed to Doorway, for example Algeria's nocturnal liaisons at the Fence, he finds himself consumed by madness and despair, and eventually succumbs to his ordeal. To me, Doorway is the figure of one who risks his Act (Algeria's seduction) without first having confronted the real of his (and her) desire, having assumed, instead, that such a traumatic encounter can be avoided or deferred. In other words, Doorway assumes that he can bring peace to Algeria's 'war' without first confronting its mystery (i.e., her unique

appetite for transgression). Thus, when Algeria reveals to Doorway one dimension of this mystery (her incest with Photo), he finds himself in a domain that no amount of intellectualizing or rationalizing can comprehend:

DOORWAY: (*Erupting again.*) There is no pain that with sufficient intellectual energy cannot be overcome I possess this energy and in abundance
 TALKING AGAIN
 (*He stops, shaking his head, his fists clenched at his sides.*)
 (FTY 14)

Doorway's inability to survive his marriage to Algeria stems, paradoxically, from his inability to accept death as a possible consequence of his desire for her.

DOORWAY [to Algeria]: I REFUSE TO BE KILLED
 (*She is motionless.*)
 You are profoundly ugly and I refuse to be killed [...] you are a war a most ugly war but still I refuse to be killed it's a choice being killed death invites you you can always refuse I refuse I refuse
 (FTY 21)

This pathetically resolute appeal announces Doorway's fatal weakness, for he dissents from death rather than embracing it as the only way "to relinquish the unsatisfactory nature of existence" (*DTOAT* 88). He is, therefore, no subject of the sublime either, for he attempts to overcome pain with an intellectual resolution, his way of reinscribing transgression into the coordinates of knowledge he already possesses.

Doorway's struggle with self, and its inevitably catastrophic end, is provoked and catalyzed by his rival, Photo, and their 'competition' for Algeria. This rivalry begins in the second scene, where Photo's incredulity at his 'aunt's' acceptance of Doorway's seduction sparks a horrific outburst. The initial exchange between Doorway and Photo commences after Photo taunts the mourners with his affair with Algeria. Doorway intervenes with a laconic sneer, calling Photo a "Suicide" (8), to which Photo responds with a casual "I don't think so" (8). But Doorway persists, citing the three circumstances he believes point to one conclusion - Photo's suicide:

DOORWAY: Cruel woman
 PHOTO: Allegedly
 DOORWAY: Fragile boy
 PHOTO: Ostensibly
 DOORWAY: And the slow but irreversible disintegration of society
 (FTY 8)

Photo's reply to this deduction, "We cannot know if society is disintegrating or merely reordering itself... Those inhabiting a specific period of human history lack the necessary perspective to issue such categorical judgments" (FTY 8), presents a tremendously layered metaphysical commentary on history and politics that reverberates in later scenes, accumulating meaning as the narrative unfolds. On a philosophical level, Photo echoes here Hegel's claim that 'there is no metalanguage', no 'objective' position from which to judge a situation from its 'outside'. In a Badiouan context, Photo touches on the violent excess of the State's re-presentation of its situation; that is, although the institutions of the state claim to be 'transparent' in their representation of 'the people' and objective in their application of the law - in other words, they claim to possess an objective, 'outside' perspective on the situation - we know in fact that the State violently intervenes in the situation it represents, and that 'objectivity' may even conceal the interests of certain individuals who hold power. Furthermore, Photo's observation that the lack of a metalanguage to the situation necessitates a kind of naiveté - where the distinction between 'disintegration' and 'reordering' becomes an impossible judgment - is remarkably keen. The ambiguity between disintegration and reordering is *precisely* why the subject of a truth must take the risk of fidelity to the event, even if, as Žižek claims, paraphrasing Badiou, "the event ends up in an obscure disaster."⁷

Hence Doorway's choice to see society as slowly but irreversibly disintegrating is the consequence of his reading the situation from the perspective of Being, while Photo's acceptance of the very ambiguity between disintegration and reordering is possible because

of his transgressive allegiance to Algeria, a fidelity that subtracts him from the situation at the same time that it announces his indifference to its (moralizing) perspective - "I won't go on I see am I resented resent by all means..." (7-8). And since I locate the crux of this ambiguity in Algeria's Act - does her miscegenational transgression result in the disintegration of the State, or its reordering? - I am able to claim that her 'war' is in this instance a *political* metaphor for the contested domain of indeterminacy and singularity that haunts the symbolic texture. Yet in typically Barkerian form, *The Fence* "replaces the question by the *vortex of desire*", and does not ask whether a character should or should not have acted as she did because "she acts as she wills" (*DTOAT* 58). This statement from *Death, the One...* resonates with Photo's reflections in scene 13: "but you have never understood her the source of her magnificence and how could you she acts my aunt she only acts consequences are for others" (*FTY* 61). The source of Algeria's magnificence is, in my reading, this vortex of desire; those who choose to enter this vortex must therefore leave their questioning behind.⁸

Nevertheless, there are forces who insist, and often insist brutally, on the question. In *The Fence*, we might trace the character of Lou, whom Barker depicts rather univocally as the apotheosis of liberal humanism and its prescriptive moral dictates. In her first appearance, Lou arrives late to the scene of a bizarre ritual: at some early point in the history of the Fence, a Farmer had tossed a watering can over to the Thieves on the other side, telling them to 'copy' (the act of planting and cultivating food, irrigating crops, etc.); in response, the Thieves collected the watering can and smashed it with hammers (an act of defiance). The State, it seems, began to define itself in reference to this act, for the women of the city are now obliged to perform it as a ritual (and the Thieves, too, always do their part). But Lou, who it is clear has missed the ceremony intentionally, argues its "silliness"

and “absurdity” to Photo, and, insisting that those on the other side “are not thieves,” protests that “The fence itself is an eyesore an insult and a cruel relic of a bygone age surely now we...” (18). But Photo disagrees, and echoing his sentiments from earlier in the scene that “the fence is not beautiful it is nevertheless the condition of beauty,” (17) he explains to Lou that “it is the idea of the frontier that you judge offensive there is nothing intrinsically objectionable in wire or concrete posts” (19). To Photo, the Fence itself is of a paradoxically ambivalent status - “It is only the fence that enables us to contemplate the fence a paradox I am perfectly aware of” (17) - while to Lou the Fence itself represents a barbaric past that ought to be left behind. The end of the scene, however, offers a critique of Lou’s unwillingness to participate in the frontier ritual, implicitly condemning her vacuous moral superiority. Left alone after Photo exits, a thief steals up to the fence and gestures for Lou to throw her can over the wire; but she refuses, and the thief “*becomes wilder in his frustration,*” shouting at her and shaking the fence until she runs away (20). Confronted by the terrifying other, Lou’s tolerant humanism vanishes into thin air. She fails, also, to recognize that the Thieves may enjoy the ritual as much as the Farmers, that their hammering shut of the watering can may represent an act that defines *them*. (as a nation) and grants them a kind of agency, as much as tossing the cans defines the ‘nation’ of Farmers. The critique here thus echoes the ideas of the play’s programme notes: we flatter ourselves with the notion of a fenceless world.

Yet the world of *The Fence* does indeed become fenceless. More and more thieves sneak through daily, and their innovative tactic of tossing their newborn babies over the fence into instinctually nurturing arms threatens to dissolve the limit of the frontier entirely. The proliferation of thieves’ babies, housed in a nursery occupying three fields, is a crisis for the State, for each baby is a (Badiouan) singularity obviously present in the situation but as

yet unrepresented by it. This crisis of identification is in turn exploited by Lou, who uses the babies as a platform for a “vengeful moral orthodoxy” and as emblems for an authoritarian ideology that criminalizes and condemns women like Algeria:⁹

LOU: My baby says no
 KIDNEY: Does it no to what?
 LOU: No to sterile women and their dogs
 KIDNEY: It's not a sterile woman it's the Duchess
 LOU: Exactly so [...] All of it to go says baby
(Pause. Their eyes are fixed in antagonism.) [...]
 LOU: Bury the gone says baby I see you digging your own grave you and the rest of
 the gone all digging then we grass you over then we picnic on the grass baby and I
 KIDNEY: Idyllic
 LOU: *(Provoked by his sarcasm.)* WE KNOW WE AND THE THIEVES WE
 KNOW AND THE FATHERS OF THE BABIES OH WE KNOW
(FTY 55-56)

But this ‘knowledge’ is patently false, a product of a radical and collective repression. Was it not Algeria who first committed the transgression Lou and her cohort now celebrate as the freedom of a fenceless society, where miscegenation is encouraged and lauded? As Barker’s play suggests throughout, the fence is dismantled only to be reconstructed somewhere else; and in the very next scene, we find Algeria naked behind “*the perimeter fence of an institution.*” (56).

What, however, accounts for Lou’s staggering amnesia that it was Algeria who first made the impossible (liaison with the excluded other) possible? Paradoxically, it is the very ritualization of Algeria’s Act that destroys it. In front of “*The fence, rotted and thick with clinging litter,*” the women appear without watering cans and mock Algeria’s Act from the opening scene - they fling up their skirts, expose their rears, and, laughing, disperse through the fence or adjacent to it. But Istoria, confidant and friend to Algeria, recognizes the emptiness of their gesture:

You’re a legend but they don’t stoop like you stooped nor need like you needed nor do they have the arses it was the same a hundred years ago when he first threw his watering can that furious farmer that was a perfect gesture I imagine informed by rage and therefore beautiful whereas when we copied it it was altered bit by bit the

meaning we attached to it was not the same as his they think you showed your arse for pity pity you have no pity even for yourself..

(FTY 46).

The lesson here is the simple one of the retroactivity of meaning. For Lou, the foundational act of miscegenation that defines and fixes the coordinates of a new order that celebrates fencelessness is effectively a Hegelian ‘vanishing mediator’ that has to be reconstructed retroactively. Barker’s play, then, seems to suggest that such reconstruction always contains the violent reduction/repression of the *truth* the new situation is predicated upon - in this case, Algeria’s transgressive copulations through the wire, and her incest with the son conceived in that Act. The audience thus cannot but balk in incredulity when Lou describes how

long ago in the days of the fence a peasant woman came here naked she loved one of the Thieves they called them Thieves not one of them was a thief in actual fact and they had a baby they were not discouraged love will always find a...

(FTY 47).

Photo, however, is quick to correct her astounding ignorance:

She was not a peasant she was an aristocrat she loved no one at all the Thieves many of whom were thieves in actual fact slithered in the mud to glimpse her perfect arse

(FTY 47).

The Badiouan lesson here, then, might be that of the problematic positivization of the truth-event. The subject of the event must compete with the subjects of the situation as she works to elaborate the truth into a new, positive discourse. Because they have not endured the ordeal of sublime experience that signals the authenticity of a truth-event, and because they have not suffered the painful exposure to the void of the situation (and of themselves), the subjects who identify with the State (rather than with the event) attempt to *force* the traces of the event into the network of signifiers already at their disposal. The consequence is the necessary eclipse of the truth that emerged in the event, *because to them, the event never really happened* - it is a ‘blank spot’ in the history of the situation that can only

be accounted for after the fact. Hence the dissolution of the frontier and the intermarriage between Thieves and Farmers, the *actual* consequences of Algeria's Act, are attributed to the appallingly banal platitude 'love will always find a way,' instead of being attributed to a radically subversive transgression. Accordingly, Algeria's imprisonment is an explicit metaphor for the State's disavowal of its *real*.

This political interpretation of Barker's *The Fence* is terrifyingly hopeless, and tragic in the purest sense, for it indicates how a society's incessant moral hygiene compels it to deny the true foundation of an order *that it desired in the first place*. When we first encounter Lou, it is clear that she wishes for the destruction of the fence/frontier. Yet while this is precisely what happens (no thanks to her), she denies (and in fact criminalizes) the individual whose Act enabled the decay of the fence, plastering over the new order's violent/transgressive foundation with a morally acceptable myth. In short, Lou wanted 'a revolution without a revolution', without the necessary confrontation with the real and the excesses of revolutionary enjoyment.¹⁰ It is, then, against this backdrop that we must read the emotional extremity of the play's central characters, Photo and Algeria. Here, Barker is doing much more than simply disturbing the sensibilities of the audience in his heretically sympathetic portrayal of an incestuous relationship; he is ambitiously endeavoring to imagine how individual autonomy and freedom can sustain itself beyond (or in the face of?) its radical circumscription by an essentially totalitarian morality (which Barker finds repeatedly to be the fundament of *all* hegemony, and especially in the artistic sphere). Of course, Barker's tool in this endeavor is his own rigorous notion of *tragedy*, which for him is not a vehicle for social criticism (satire is), but a means of *inventing* life.

Algeria and Photo's relationship - obviously tragic - is defined by a continuous stream of invention and reinvention, with the most drastic change of course occurring, as one might

expect, when Photo finally deduces the secret of his mother's identity. Before that revelation, however, Photo must reinvent the terms of his affair with Algeria due to her marriage to Doorway, but also in response to ominous external pressures that the blind Photo is quick to detect. While dining at the fence, a habit of his, Photo is confronted by an anguished Doorway, bent on finding out why Algeria visits the frontier at night. When Doorway asks Photo, "Your aunt comes up here do you know why?" Photo takes the opportunity to cruelly mock him:

PHOTO: My aunt but isn't she your wife?

DOORWAY: She is my wife

PHOTO: (*Cruelly.*) She is your wife but when you talk of her you identify her as my aunt obviously you understand there are priorities in her affections and do not dissent [...] how painful that must be how painful and humiliating

(FTY 17-18)

Importantly, Photo does not seem (at this point) to grasp the emotional extremity of Doorway, so that when he bursts into Algeria's bedroom in the next scene wielding a knife and claiming he has come to murder Photo's aunt, Photo once again taunts him, "The one I call my aunt is that the one you call your wife?" (FTY 23). When Doorway plunges away into the bathroom where Algeria is undressing, however, Photo finally realizes the seriousness of his rival's erotic ordeal:

PHOTO: DON'T

DON'T

DON'T

MY SARCASM OH MY SARCASM DON'T KILL MY DARLING FOR

MY SARCASM

(*Photo shrinks, seized with apprehension.*)

Of course, Doorway cannot do it, and he emerges from Algeria's bathroom defeated and wretched. But what his intrusion had interrupted was a crucial exchange between Algeria and Photo. I mention earlier that Doorway fails because he refuses to accept death as a 'third party', as it were, in his marriage to Algeria. What distinguished Photo, by contrast is his willingness to *embrace* death as the object of his desire for Algeria. It is critical,

therefore, that in the scene directly following Doorway's refusal to be another casualty of Algeria's war, Photo approaches his 'aunt' (for he does not yet know she is his mother) with the subject of their joint suicide:

I know you are reluctant to discuss the subject but how shall we die it would be so pitiful and abject if we were taken unawares and strung up from a lamp-post like slaughtered dictators [...] no let us eschew the conventional in this as in every other instance and create our own deaths in dying beautifully one lives forever so few possess the imagination but I do I think about it all the time
(FTY 21-22).

Thus when the autonomy of his and Algeria's deaths is threatened by the maddened Doorway, Photo becomes ever more insistent on executing his vision: [to Doorway] "Death is something for which one really must prepare of course this does not preclude the possibility of mayhem chaos accident making a mockery of the most fastidious arrangements [...]" (FTY 23). But even *this* is frustrated, for when Doorway delivers a sad soliloquy to Algeria in defense of his irrational actions, Algeria takes pity on her husband, kissing him on the forehead. That kiss places a profound (if only temporary) fissure between Algeria and Photo, and the scene ends with a volatile and agonizing fight between them.

As the fence and the frontier continue to decay, the disintegration of psyches as the characters abut their emotional and spiritual limits corresponds to the disintegration of physical barriers and boundaries; as Photo admonishes Istorina (who caught the first thrown baby and, refusing to throw it back, effected her own puncturing of the frontier), "A fence must stand in the mind as well as in the plain..." (FTY 36). And as the characters find themselves at a loss in terms of their own identifications and allegiances, the scenography on stage begins to reflect such floating indeterminacy. The pasture orphanage where the State houses its adopted Thieves' babies is depicted by the suspension of countless cots from cables secured high in the rafters. Amidst the swinging cots, Photo and Doorway engage in yet another rhetorical battle. Doorway threatens to disclose the identity of Photo's mother,

but smothers his will by shoving cots high into the air, and against his ominous rage Photo summons the bravado to utter the words that have the power to absolutely destroy

Doorway:

PHOTO: Had you murdered my aunt as you intended to...
 (DOORWAY *shakes his head.*)
 Your prediction of my suicide would certainly have come true I should have followed her into death
 (DOORWAY *shakes it more bitterly.*)
 MR DOORWAY SHE MARRIED YOU IN ORDER TO BE KILLED
 (DOORWAY *glares, struggling with his knowledge.*)
 Oh yes
 Oh yes
 We have to die we two and you are what are you
 (DOORWAY *goes close to PHOTO...PHOTO falters...*)
 You are
 (He *senses the menace...*)
 Instrumental...

(FTY 34)

Again, confronted with terrible pain, Doorway refuses to act; he walks away from Photo and offstage, defeated. What I am attempting to point out here is how Photo is spiritually (in Barker's sense of the word) superior to his rival, and "so much cleverer than anybody else" (FTY 35). Barker aestheticizes this in Photo's blindness, which in his plays "has something intensely *of theatre* about it...it has an irresistible moral value, which is nothing to do with pitying blind people, I mean a moral aesthetic" - such as the fact that Photo can never *see* the object of his desire, his loved one, which is climactic when Algeria presents herself naked "to eyes that can never see her beauty".¹¹ But also as "licence to penetrate more deeply than the sighted"¹², Photo's blindness is the marker of a tragic perspicacity: he *knows* he and Algeria must die, and his tragic relationship with her exposes the way into death (recalling Barker's powerful lines from *Death, the One...*):

ALGERIA [to PHOTO]: You so wanted this [their perfectly planned deaths] the inspiration came from you year in year out and not between my legs only in cold daylight too [...]

(FTY 49).

By incessantly imagining his and his loved One's death, Photo chooses to exist in a perpetually sublime state, always on the cusp of oblivion, because for him it is the only locus of freedom and autonomy - 'in dying beautifully one lives forever.' Everything that pushes him closer to death and everything that more completely defines the threshold he yearns to cross is ecstasy for him. Thus when Photo meditates upon the idea that "the fence is not beautiful it is nevertheless the condition of beauty" (*FTY* 17), he touches on more than a political metaphor; it is also a statement on tragic (and sublime) experience. The Fence, the *limit*, is not tragic or sublime, nevertheless, it is the condition of tragedy and sublimity. Were the limits of our desire not capable of being transgressed, the possibility of tragedy and the ecstasy it occasions would vanish. (Were reason not a fence to be gotten through, the possibility of sublime experience and the absolute freedom it occasions would vanish.)

This is why, I think, Photo adores the Fence. We burst through our limits, argues Barker, and brave the death that waits there "as patient as a chauffeur" (*DTOAT* 7), because we are compelled by the *secret*. In *The Fence*, there is an exquisite triangulation between the secret the audience knows and that Photo does not, which reflects the triangulation of Photo's blindness - i.e., the audience both sees and knows what Photo does not: Algeria's immaculate nakedness and her identity as his mother. Photo believes, however, that he knows all there is to know, that there are no secrets left to desire save one: the secret of death itself. This, I believe, is why Photo is ready to die. A tension emerges therefore, because *we* know that there is one more secret for Photo to discover. But what is it that finally compels Algeria to accept Photo's fatal proposal?

Scene 9 of *The Fence* suggests that Algeria desires death precisely because the defining limit of her existence has dissolved, precisely because "whilst it possesses all those elements which constitute a fence the thing we call The Fence has ceased to be one" (*FTY*

36). In this scene, Algeria and Photo meet (for the first time) the ominous blind Thief Youterus³, whom Photo knows immediately to be his father. But Algeria, having met her illegal lover in her own palace, “attempts, and fails, to discover a sexual feeling for him... the fence is all... only the forbidden holds charge...” - “*the ban*-, once removed, concludes the erotic game” (SAIO 80). Barker/Houth’s reflections on *The Fence* echo Photo’s own:

PHOTO: The fence oh shall we ever understand the fence I don’t think...
(He shakes his head, bemused. He regards DOORWAY coolly.)
 Your wife is lost without it where can she go to carry on that harmless
 passion up against the wire her cunt that side of illegality but her heart on
 this...
(He smiles.)

(FTY 41).

Provoked by Photo, Doorway once again wrestles with the act of disclosing the final secret, but at the last possible moment he is checked by Algeria’s “stop there.” When Doorway departs, Algeria surges into desperation, begging Photo to “kill us” (FTY 42). Two concurrent motivations occur to me here. The first and more obvious is the one I suggested above; without the Fence’s limit to violate, Algeria’s desire begins to dissipate, so she turns to death as way to repudiate the world’s fenceless inadequacy. The second is the possibility that she cannot bear Photo’s discovery of the secret of their true relationship unless it is immediately followed by their deaths. Both possibilities are perfectly in line with the reading I have been venturing here: the fenceless world, paradoxically, is one in which freedom cannot truly exist, because without limits to transgress, the very *excess* of desire is lost, and thus the possibility for a truly revolutionary Act is lost along with it. In such bleak circumstances, the only choice for the tragic protagonist is death. Thus there emerges another interesting (and suggestive) paradox: a fenceless or borderless world is paradoxically the best way for the State to suppress the threat posed by the would-be subject of the sublime.

In the next scene, Algeria and Photo rendezvous at the decayed Fence. Ready to kill one another, Algeria seems poised to finally reveal to Photo her secret, but they are interrupted by Lou, who careers onto the stage, late for her appointment with the other girls to fling up her skirts against the fence (this is the scene I describe above in a different context). In response to the interference, Photo idly and coolly threatens Lou with her life, citing how her “timely murder could only enhance the spiritual condition of this miserably fenceless and unsecret place” (48). Ironically, however, Lou’s anodyne portrayal of the (Algeria) ‘legend’ enables Photo to deduce the remaining secret:

PHOTO: Your skin is white your veins are blue what’s white what’s blue the blind
thief was my father I knew it straight away so who

ALGERIA: My little boy

PHOTO: So who

ALGERIA: My little boy blue is rivers white is snow

PHOTO: WHO THEREFORE WAS MY MOTHER WHO

ALGERIA: IF I HAVE NEVER TOLD YOU STILL YOU KNOW

(Her arm is extended.)

Cut deep or the blood won’t flow

(PHOTO is still.)

DEEP NOW DEEP PHOTO

(FTY 48-49)

Having revealed all there is to reveal, Algeria immediately demands her death and her exit from a now *truly* unsecret place; but Photo, enraptured by the discovery, tosses the knife away, preferring to dwell at least a moment on the gravity of what he has just learned. His reflections propel him into an ecstasy on the order of sublime experience:

there is nothing in the world that two can do we have not done my brain splits down
the middle half shouts we should be dead but the other whispers strip your mad and
lovely aunt [...] I ADORE YOUR TERRIBLE LYING I ADORE YOUR
TERRIBLE TRUTH

(FTY 50)

Photo’s emphatic exclamation recalls his lines from the very beginning of the play, where, after taunting the funeral mourners with depictions of his sexual encounters with Algeria, he says, “I exceed my privilege in this as in so many things I shall not apologize however it is in

excess that terrible truths appear I am devoted to excess" (FTY 12). The full meaning of these lines does not actualize itself until Photo learns the identity of his mother; only then do we understand the full weight of *truth* behind them: the excess to which Photo is devoted is *Algeria*, the excess of her desire and passion, the excess of her transgressive sexual compulsions. And it is in Algeria's very excess(es) that *The Fence's* 'terrible truths' appear.

It is not difficult to transpose these statements into the language of the sublime. Sublime experience, too, is an excess - excess of pain, excess of enjoyment (*jouissance*), excess of reality - that announces the appearance of truth. Only the tragic protagonist can recognize that freedom avails itself in these excesses precisely when we are most overwhelmed and launched into extremity by them. The two choices Photo rattles off in his extremity - to die or to make love to Algeria - both possess the same ecstatic potential, though only the latter defers the inevitable consequence of death. Photo's devotion to excess is thus also an emblem of his fundamental fidelity to *the sublime*. Algeria is, as I've suggested above, the figure of this sublimity, a subject not only positioned on the threshold between two worlds¹⁴ but one who *is* this very threshold, a figure experienced as an excess of non-meaning (to her enemies) and of too-much-meaning (to her lovers) simultaneously. Algeria is a symbol of unbounded desire and exquisitely indeterminate, her vortex of desire a 'war' in the fullest sense of the word - and we know, of course, that although wars are fought to define the fence, they must do so by violently reaching through it. That the fence invites its own violation *is not* to deny the value of the fence.

Lou's campaign marches on, and although Algeria finds renewed passion in her marriage to Doorway - which collapses Photo into an incorrigible despair - it is not long before she finds herself imprisoned behind the fence of a mental institution, recalling Barker's hypothesis that the fence is never destroyed but merely moves. I wish to conclude my reading of *The*

Fence by rushing ahead a bit and focusing on its final two scenes. But I want to present, first, and by way of a kind of summary that will form the backdrop for the ideas that remain, Barker/Houth's depiction of *The Fence*'s penultimate scene, for to Barker that scene "was the epitome of his dramatic theory as well as his visual and literary style...":

Algeria, stripped of her authority by a coup and confined to a madhouse, lies on a sordid mattress in a squalid hospital, about to give birth to a child fathered on her by the identical blind foreigner who had fathered her boy lover, Photo, again through a fence, though the fence of the madhouse to which he had traced her... Photo [...] sits in a pram with a rattle, with which he sweetly conducts his mother's pain... as [Algeria] released her deep cries, the rattle twittered and the blind [Youterus], louche and infinitely criminal, edged into the room on a stick to luxuriate in his triumphant paternity... but he did not arrive alone... simultaneously and unseen by him, [Kidney] also insinuated himself into the space and, seizing an opportunity, rushed to [Youterus] and, with the ecstasy of vengeance, proceeded to throttle the old man... but [Youterus] was unwilling to die... as the men struggled, the baby edged towards its birth, beckoned by its mother's cries... [Photo], smiling benignly behind dark glasses shook the rattle... [Algeria] shuddered in her contractions... the men fought a deathly struggle and the baby, a doll and still as a thought, edged into her arms and was comforted into her thighs... all these contrasting actions played out in the jagged soundscape of Ligeti... the child birthed as its father died, and the servant wringing his hands from the strain of strangulation...

(SAIO 81-82)

This is Barker's tragic sublime aesthetic at its purest. The scene is *plethora*, and the audience experiences *too much*: sound, image, movement and voice converge in an overwhelming abundance. And the torsion resides not only in the contrasting actions of the scene but in the relationship between those actions and everything we encounter earlier in the play: Kidney, loyal yet agonized servant to his Duchess, murders the only man who was ever able to overcome Algeria's sterility, an act of political and ethical fidelity but one problematized by Algeria's own desire for motherhood; Photo, once ecstatically committed to all of Algeria's actions, is now critical, regressed, and eerily cold to his mother, even as she offers him the milk from her breast. *The Fence*'s most aesthetically sublime scene shatters the expectations of resolution and requires a renewed engagement with the characters who appear to us both familiar and unfamiliar in the extremes of their emotional lives, but never

recognizable or *identifiable* as ‘real people’ to us. Scene 15 of *The Fence* thus succeeds in releasing meaning into another maelstrom of possibility, but possibilities that are distinctly the protagonists’ own, for “they are self-invented, self-justified and their entire *raison d’être* is their love” (SAIO 82). This love, as I have been suggesting throughout, is none other than a sublime fidelity to their Duchess, Algeria, and the excess of liberating passion and revolutionary desire she embodies.

In the final scene of *The Fence*, Photo speaks his first lines in quite some time; they are metaphysical and wonderfully indeterminate:

PHOTO: In the first instance desire represents itself as freedom [...] The freedom of the vortex [...] Freedom *from* therefore not freedom *to* [...]

Here, Photo alights upon the subtractive power of desire, how it wraps us in the freedom of its vortex, liberating us from the constraints of Being by compelling us toward the secret (of Truth).¹⁵ Photo continues,

Freedom from will freedom from opinion freedom from choice
paradoxically [...]

Indeed, for the subject of truth there is only *one* choice; for the individual in love the only choice is *the One*...

Inevitably this paradox degenerates desire turns inexorably into responsibility the sense of debt the paralysing horror of reciprocity and here is the conundrum surely [...] Is this reciprocity the synonym for the extinction of desire? I don’t know [...] I don’t [...] I don’t know
(FTY 70)

We must accept this necessary ignorance as well, and accept that to follow our desire to its secret casts us into an agonizing solitude; for it is the ordeal of the subject of the sublime to suffer the fact that he may gain nothing back from the sacrifice of his fidelity to the truth. And if our fidelity turns inexorably into responsibility then the final lesson of *The Fence in Its Thousandth Year* is that we must never allow the desire which made our Act possible to

become extinct; because if we do, we will forget the deep need that brought us to our Act against and in sublime rebuke to its ostensible impossibility.

Thus *The Fence*'s final and intensely erotic image - Istoria undresses Algeria, who then stands naked before the dead eyes of Photo - is more than "a supreme rebuke to the forces that overthrew her [Algeria's] regime."¹⁶ It is a *reminder* of what Algeria's nakedness represents, what it is a symbol of: the triumph of human desire, and the authenticity of the secret, its power to always - like Barker's plays - be discovered *differently*.

NOTES

¹ It is interesting enough to mention, also, how Byron utilized a not too dissimilar strategy of distraction in his drama *Manfred* (see Ch. 2), whose ostensible themes of incest and sexual transgression were able to exploit the expectations of a critical readership while ultimately succeeding in defying their facile interpretations.

² Rabey relies here on Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of the *singularity* as that which is "bound up with a sudden appearance" and that implies its own limit whilst presenting that limit as self-consciously "its own," an intrinsic quality and feature of identity, rather than something imposed externally." qtd. in Rabey *Ecstasy* (216). Not only do phrases like 'sudden appearance', intrinsic identity, and self-possession come close to the descriptive language of an event, we find that Badiou also assigns a very precise significance to 'singularity' within his ontology. For Badiou, 'singularity' is that which is presented in the situation but not represented, something that "belongs to the situation - but as a fundamental anomaly, as something or someone strangely out of place, as a violation of the way things should be [...] such a term can no longer be organized as a proper part of the situation." in Hallward, *op.cit.* (99-100). Even more crucial is that the status of singularity applies to the inhabitants of a situation's evental site (100). Later in my discussion of *The Fence*, I propose that the play's frontier fence functions as an evental site, a place where individuals exist in the situation, but soon become invisible and unrecognizable to it. (cf. Kidney's anxiety).

³ Program notes to the 2005 Wrestling School production of *The Fence in Its Thousandth Year*.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ I reproduce some of Doorway's poem for the reader's pleasure:

Let me

(*Pause.*)

At the end of the day let me

(*He is scrupulous.*)

In a room with the window wide let me

(*A beat.*)

With the window wide and the thin gauze moving in the midnight air

(*A beat.*)

See your clothes fall

(*A beat.*)

All the world in pain or riot burning infants killers on the palace stairs so what let me

(*A beat.*)

Lift you my weightless wife streets blazing dying trains and deposit you in sheets so clean but never cleaner than your body let me

(*A beat.*)

For a single hour fix you there [...]

(*TFY 10*)

⁶ Baudrillard, Jean. *Seduction (CultureTexts)*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991. "It is by this sensual, incestuous transaction with our image, our double, and our death, that we gain our power of seduction." (69)

⁷ Žižek, "The Palestinian Question [Part 2]" Lacan.com August 2009.

⁸ And as a brief note, it is Doorway's failure to have not given up his need to ask the question once he commits himself to Algeria's war, to the vortex of her desire. In a particularly rending scene, Doorway asks Photo why Algeria sneaks out to the Fence at night "In high-heeled shoes in new stockings and high-heeled shoes hat gloves and high-heeled shoes?" - he is tortured by the possibilities. Photo, by contrast, is unbothered; and insofar as both he and Doorway are caught in the vortex, Photo trumps his rival by having completely eschewed *the question*.

⁹ Rabey, *Ecstasy* (220)

¹⁰ Žižek, in his *Revolution at the Gates* (London: Verso, 2002), argues that if we 'get rid of' the revolutionary excess (outbursts of violence, sexual promiscuity, the destruction of buildings and monuments, etc.) we destroy the revolution itself. (224)

¹¹ Barker in response to Rabey, in "Barker In Conversation" (32).

¹² *Ibid.* (32)

¹³ Barker's names are typically unusual and always highly suggestive. In *The Fence*, the naming of some of the characters are addressed explicitly; for example, all of the children fathered by Youterus - the only male who can overcome Algeria's sterility, perhaps a 'uterus' for 'you' (Algeria) - are each congenitally blind, and named successively as Photo, who names his sister Camera, who names her sister Film. In *Death, the One...*, Barker contemplates "the essential *agony* of all photography," that "the photograph has the status of a wound, which smarts with its *irresolution*" (13). So one could conclude that Barker draws on these ideas in his naming of Photo. It seems one could speculate endlessly on the names in *The Fence*. If Doorway is 'instrumental' in Photo's and Algeria's deaths, perhaps he is the 'doorway' to death, as well as another threshold to cross? One also recalls the Algerian revolt against French Colonialism in the middle of the twentieth-century, which has interesting resonances with the political themes of the play. At the end of the play, Kidney strangles Youterus. And so on....

¹⁴ Gritzner. "Toward an Aesthetic of the Sublime in Howard Barker's Theatre", *Theatre of Catastrophe* (92).

¹⁵ The 'secret' figures heavily in Barker's philosophy; I cite one particularly relevant example: "The value of *the fence*...the ecstasy of *denial*...where all is accessible, the beauty of *the ban*... where all is revealed, *the secret*..." (*DTOAT* 31). I equate Barker's notion of the secret with Badiou's notion of Truth, as something the subject's desire drives him to reveal.

¹⁶ Barker in response to Rabey, in "Barker In Conversation" (34).