

ALLEGORIES FOR THE VOID
Tentative Career Project Overview by Timothy Lavenz
October 10, 2023

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What is the function of literature when it gives voice to “emptiness” or to an “emptying self”? What is expected from such revelations of the void? How do the different modes of this revelation communicate, complicate, contradict each other? Where are their incompatibilities, and how might the negotiation of these lead to further insights into the fundamental problematic of the “voided self”?

In pursuit of these questions, I propose to do comparative work on texts whose common feature is a reflection on the “void-bound” speaker, and on the forms of life, critical thought, and ethical or spiritual advocacy that emerge from that reflection. The chief theoretical issue will pertain to the (non-)relation between the living being and the speaking being (Agamben), or between the psychic system and the communicative system (Luhmann), or again between the subject of desire and language (Lacan), and the ways of inventing *with* this (non)relation.

My goal is to develop concepts and reading strategies both for and from texts (of whatever sort) that address, directly or obliquely, the voided self and related problematics. I plan to use a range of theories in this task: psychoanalytic theories of the barred subject, deconstructionist theories on the deferral of meaning and authorial position, Levinasian considerations on the ‘enucleated’ subject, continental philosophy’s multifarious querying of the “I” and subjectivity, Vedantic and Buddhistic theories of (non)identity, the Judeo-Christian figure of the *kenotic* messiah, and systems-theoretical considerations on second-order observation.

I believe I have a contribution to make where I see many of these theories converging: at a certain limit of language where *the voided self speaks its voidness*. Why is it compelled to do so? What sort of responsibility is involved here? Upon what horizon of meaning are such efforts undertaken? Put otherwise, why at the conclusion of silence does the voice remain? Whose voice is it? For there are delusionary, fanatical, suicidal, egomaniacal, escapist, rosy-eyed, repressive, mystical, and countless other ways to respond here—including through philosophy and literature. What might it mean to *speak the void well*? How might this relate to thinking as such?

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The specific tension I propose to study is that between, on the one hand, a realization of self-voidness and its modes, and on the other, the persistent desire for thought and expression, the speakership that remains in the midst of emptying. I suggest defining this remainder as the *irreducible idiomaticity of a thought*. Is this remainder universality, genericity, omnirelativity? Or is there a constraint of contingent personhood (but of what kind?) that “subjective destitution,” rather than overcoming, helps to realize most robustly?

To tackle this issue, I plan to take stock of various modes of and approaches to self-emptying and to treat these collectively as “allegories for the void.” I wish to assemble a kind of taxonomy of “depersonalization tactics”: as forms of testimony (Agamben), as forms of participating in truth (Badiou), as forms of aesthetic novelty (Eliot, Beckett), and so on. I do not aim to privilege any specific tactic, but to conduct a sort of theoretical metasynthesis, drawing on these modes to write my own allegory of the void’s bounds. Specifically, I am to focus on what these allegories tell us about the altered relationship to language that is forced upon us by insight into the void-reflexivity of the *se**-, namely, insight into the paradox that the self can only be founded in language and yet language denies the self all foundation.

What does it mean that the subject of speech will never find a place in the only medium in which it might have expected to define, clarify, assert, and express itself? Put otherwise, for whom is the labor of speech? Whose idiom is the idiom of thought to be?

Relatedly, I also wish to explore how the paradoxes of self-reflexivity also pose a hard limit to *escaping* the singular, self-speaking being. This is where one confronts the “language bars” (Celan’s *Sprachgitter*) that keep one imprisoned in one’s “own-voice,” *despite* insight into its impossibility. Put otherwise, where “transcendence” is denied *despite* self-preservation’s dissolution. The traversal of this limit—between *void-boundedness* and the *irreducible idiomaticity of a thought*—manifests in forms so various it is hard to keep the common denominator in sight. To handle this, I propose classing these forms as traversal-limits:

- Limits on *splintering*. Denoted as the “Artaudian-schizoid tradition,” for its connections to Deleuze. This tradition goes back at least to the fragmentary imperative of the Romantics who, responding to the Kantian crisis, attempted to recover a henceforth inconsistent subjective sovereignty. Their attempt is inherited variously in Blanchot’s *l’entretien infini* and Beckett’s *“Tout se divise en soi-même.”*
- Limits on *being-multiple*. Denoted as the “Whitmanian-collectivist tradition” for its celebration of plurality and aspiration to speak the Whole. This category could include works ranging from documentary poetics to class-consciousness tracts. Any preoccupation with proliferating descriptions of objects, events, and spaces would also fall here.
- Limits on *speaking for others*. Denoted as the “Olsonian-ecological tradition” in homage to the *Maximus Poems*. This issue is especially pressing in our time, when there is a strong desire to *represent* victims, whether they be oppressed groups, species, or the earth itself. What form of the lyric “I” can avoid both confessionalism of delimited self *and* the inflationary omni-spokesmanship often propped up in its place?
- Limits on *remembering*. Denoted as the “melancholic tradition,” the issue here is the irrecoverability of all experience, the navigation of loss which leads so readily into attachment to lost objects and their continued evocation. But the category resists definition, since in some sense it delimits everything, given that all reality is irrecoverable. Its call is sounded in Trakl’s *“O, wie lange bist, Elis, du verstorben.”*
- Limits on *futurity*. Denoted as the “Nietzschean-prophetic tradition,” its dangers range from the fundamentalist imposition of necessity to the airy vagueness of the indefinitely open. Its solution would lie in taking seriously what Derrida calls the teleiopoetic or messianic sentence, as being telegraphed from its recipient, yet for which we are wholly responsible; Bloom’s work on influence likely falls here.
- Limits on *mysticalization*. Denoted as the “Caronian-devotional tradition” after Maxence Caron who is the most emblematic contemporary figure of this excess that I know of. The rhetoric here develops along the lines of dissolution/absorption into the Other or some form of comm/union with the Other. It believes its void is *funded*, so to speak, by some Beyond of observation. However, the category is broad and not restricted to the explicitly religious. It would include any pretension to have let one’s language be “ventriloquized” by the Voice of Being (Heidegger), or by the triumph of Spirit, or as attuned to the Dao: in sum, whatever would mask or invisibilize the Other’s inconsistency or lack in the Lacanian sense.
- Limits on...

Of course these traversal-limits can overlap with one another, but I believe we can nonetheless tease out where and when certain transgressive directions dominate over others. These classifications are obviously tentative constructions; they are not intended to ‘diagnose’ anything *per se*. Their purpose is to gather, into analytical categories, forms that arise from the traversal of various limits—their pitfalls and their masterful solutions.

In speaking here of limits and excess, therefore, I do not imply anything negative. There is a virtuous way of conducting speech over each of these limits, of conducting the transgression fecundatively. Literature, moreover, is likely where these limits can be transgressed creatively, fictively, imaginally, in a way that sublimates tendencies which would otherwise override the subject and push it into violence, insanity, megalomania, presumption, inanity, etc. Literature is able to experience these limits and—write with them. It is even because the literary writer keeps in contact with the void that these limits—which otherwise bespeak delusion and pointless danger—

can be traversed safely upon the terrain of inappropriable words. The literary adventures that investigate these limits illuminate them as dimensions of speech and tendencies of the human heart, and thus make them workable. We recognize these excesses in great works and are astonished, and in that moment of astonishment-recognition there is a “homecoming in the nowhere” that may itself signify the bliss (*śāntarasa*) of literature.

Part of my work, therefore, will be to show how the tensions caused at these limits are “resolved” in a given tradition. For example, Badiou solves the excesses of being-multiple with his theory of truth procedures, which orders the subject to conduct the multiple toward the construction of eternal truths. Or for example, Sri Aurobindo’s *Savitri* finds epic form for a maximalized mysticism and exorbitant futurity through its exercise of formal restraint, pacing, repetition of themes, porosity of vision, non-egocentrism, conceptual clarity and reimagination of legend, such that while the work rivals scripture in magnitude and scope, it remains poetry. Practically, then, my work will develop ways of observing oversaturation and mastery along each limit-line.

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Of course, it is an open question if it is possible *not* to transgress these limits. As has often been speculated, it is possible that literature is born from this transgression of limits of the singular speaker, as an “experience of limits” (Sollers). And no doubt this is true.

But why then do certain writers, like Paul Celan, *constrain* their speech so strenuously, in order to speak the truly singular and make “language become person”? For I do not believe that Celan should be characterized as transgressing or pushing a limit—at the level of his digging down into language yes, but not at the level of the speaker. On the contrary, it is the discreet/discrete personality, the nearly total *restraint* to speak the singular in search, that marks his work (as it does Emily Dickinson’s, who he translated). I believe that in Pascal Quignard, too, there is the restraint of the singular that attains expansiveness and communication through a solitary continence which has to do, not with representing the autobiographical self, but with writing life.

Abiding by the voidation of the spoken, working it over *sans fin*, the restrained writer does not hallucinate anything extra. He does not fancy his work as anything more than an anthropogenesis recommenced, reintouched with the origin. That is great enough. It is on this frontier that theory must show restraint and, if it can, reintouch the origin too.

To repeat, the excesses named above are only detrimental if they actualize an excessive potentiality *instead of, opposed to*, the unique potentiality of the singular living being (remembering that the latter is not the speaking being but “intended” to linguistic emptying). It is ironically the *desire for the literary* that can jeopardize this living truth; and yet, once harnessed, it is precisely the literary that can best offer it to contemplation.

I believe then that my investigation could lead to a sort of ethics of literature that, counseling restraint (*Verhaltenheit*), guides in how to write in light of the void without falling into the excesses it generates. This demands a delicacy with language that, it too, is all about patienting the signifiers. Voilà the paradox that it is only by not letting language run away with itself that one best gets away with language.

Lacan spoke of restoring a sense of shame in an era of shamelessness. Adorno spoke of modesty as the only cardinal virtue left. I believe that Lacanian psychoanalysis, Adorno’s dialectical reflections, Agamben’s philosophy of use-as-not, Luhmann’s system theory of observers, among many other resources, can help us make good on literature’s promise, nay its imperative, to *seek and speak appropriately one’s own destiny as a voidbound speaker*.