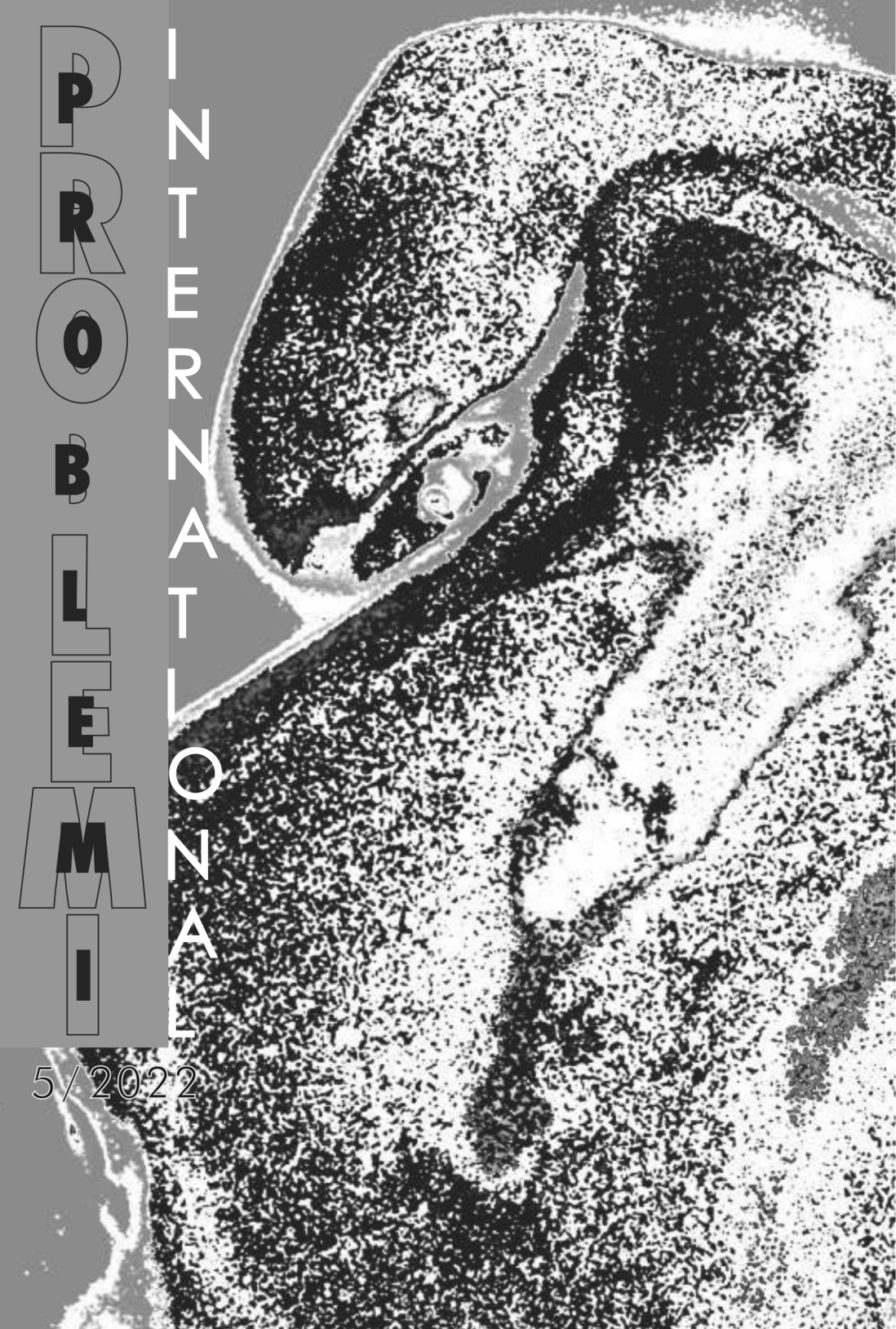


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# Table of Contents

*Slavoj Žižek*

Suicide as a Political Factor: Edith Wharton, Tana French,  
Terblanche Delpont. . . . . 5

*Mirt Komel*

Scarred Tissues: Trauma, Desire, and Class Struggle in Tana  
French's *Dublin Murder Squad Series*. . . . . 21

*Lidija Šumah*

On Man's Right to Be Jealous, and Woman's Duty to  
Induce Her Own Demise . . . . . 65

*Eric Reinhart*

Aesthetics for Hypochondriacs: Kantian Illusions,  
Sex Phobia, and Self-Soothing Philosophy. . . . . 81

*Mladen Dolar*

"Who baptized Marx, Hegel or Kant?"  
On Alfred Sohn-Rethel and Beyond. . . . . 109

*Matthew Flisfeder*

Freedom and Alienation; Or, Humanism of the Non-All . . . . 135

*William Mazzarella*

Holding the Frame/Playing the Game:  
Transference as Political Potentiality . . . . . 171

*Samo Tomšič*

What Does Art Work Through? . . . . . 193

*Mohamed Tal*

A Reading of "Analysis Terminable and Interminable" . . . . 215

Abstracts . . . . . 251

Notes on Contributors . . . . . 256



# Suicide as a Political Factor: Edith Wharton, Tana French, Terblanche Delpont

*Slavoj Žižek*

There is a subspecies of the Hegelian “negation of negation” that is as a rule ignored by even the most perspicuous interpreters: the “negation of negation” as a *failure of negation itself*. Since the ultimate case of self-negation is suicide, we should focus on a failed suicide.

## *Surviving Suicide as the Living Dead*

The masterpiece of the failed suicidal “negation” is Edith Wharton’s *Ethan Frome* (1911), a short novel that takes place against a backdrop of the cold, gray bleakness of a New England winter: in Starkfield (an invented small town), the narrator spots Ethan Frome, “the most striking figure in Starkfield,” “the ruin of a man” with a “careless powerful look [...] in spite of a lameness checking each step like the jerk of a chain.” (Wharton 1995, p. 3) The narrator gradually learns the whole story, reaching decades into the past when Frome was an isolated farmer trying to scrape out a meager living while also tending to his frigid, demanding, and ungrateful wife, Zeena. A ray of hope enters Ethan’s life of despair when, 24 years ago, his wife’s cousin Mattie arrives to help. His life is transformed as he falls in love with Mattie who returns his love. Zeena suspects this and orders Mattie to leave. Since Ethan lacks money to escape with Mattie, he takes her to the train

station. They stop at a hill upon which they had once planned to go sledding and decide to sled together as a way of delaying their sad parting, after which they anticipate never seeing each other again. After their first run, Mattie suggests a suicide pact: that they go down again, and steer the sled directly into a tree, so they will never be parted and so that they may spend their last moments together. Ethan first refuses to go through with the plan, but in his despair that mirrors Mattie's, he ultimately agrees, and they get on the sled, clutching each other. They crash headlong and at high speed into the elm tree. Ethan regains consciousness after the accident, but Mattie lies beside him, "cheeping" in pain like a small wounded animal, while Ethan is left with a permanent limp.

The epilogue returns to the present: while visiting Frome in his house, the narrator hears a complaining female voice, and it is easy to assume that it belongs to the never-happy Zeena, but it emerges that it is Mattie who now lives with the Fromes due to having been paralyzed in the accident. Her misery over her plight and dependence has embittered her, and, with roles reversed, Zeena is now forced to care for her as well as Ethan: she has now found the strength through necessity to be the caregiver rather than being the invalid.<sup>1</sup> In an agonizing irony, the lovers Ethan and Mattie have gotten their wish to stay together, but in mutual unhappiness and discontent, with Zeena as a constant presence between the two of them—the ultimate case of Mladen Dolar's formula of being as a failed non-being.

Is, then, the attempted suicide an authentic act, and the couple's survival a pure contingent accident, or is there an inner truth to the survival that makes the suicide attempt a fake? No wonder that, in spite of the simplicity of its plot, *Ethan Frome* caused such confusion among interpreters. At the level of genre, it was described as a work of brutal realism, a Gothic tale, or an adult fairy tale (the wicked witch wins and the lovers do not live

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<sup>1</sup> See Ethan Frome on Wikipedia.

happily ever after). With regard to the ethical stance implied by *Ethan Frome*, a long line of critics, from Frederic Taber Cooper—who wrote back in 1911 that “It is hard to forgive Mrs. Wharton for the utter remorselessness of her latest volume [...] Art for art’s sake is the one justification of a piece of work as perfect in technique as it is relentless in substance” (Taber Cooper 1995, pp. 120-121)—to Lionel Trilling: “In the context of morality, there is nothing to say about Ethan Frome. It presents no moral issue at all.” (Trilling 1995, p.126) Roger Ebert (in his review of the movie) characterizes the novel as a “cheerless morality tale.” (Ebert 1993) Especially weird is the case of Trilling. In reply to a taunt by Richard Sennett, “‘You have no position; you are always in between,’ Trilling replied, ‘Between is the only honest place to be.’” (Sennett 1999, p. 363) It sounds like those who, today, condemn the Russian attack on Ukraine but show understanding for Russia. In a stance which cannot hide its elitism, Trilling dismisses average people caught in the circle of habitude, as if only a small elite is able to act in a properly ethical way: he suggests that “the story examines what happens to individuals who are hobbled by ‘the morality of inertia.’ The lovers lack both the courage and the conviction to forge a new life for themselves, thanks to their subservience to community standards. Their fear dooms them to the routine, death-in-life existence that they so desperately yearned to transcend. The real moral of *Ethan Frome* is—follow the imperatives of your heart or risk losing your soul.” (Brussat and Brussat n.d.)

Again, there is the opposite reading: “the ending turns *Ethan Frome* into a cautionary tale, a warning to the readers that *not* following your dreams can have serious negative consequences.” (Shmoop Editorial Team 2008) But is this really the case? Ethan abandons his plan to borrow money and escape with Mattie for moral reasons—he is a sensitive moral person. What brings him to self-destruction are class distinctions: the harsh poverty deprives him of choices. In the pre-accident part of the story, Mattie and



Ethan seem to think that the best they can hope for is to be able to continue living together with Zeena, seeing each other as often as possible. This plan comes true in a hideous way: they are forever together, but as two crippled living dead. Ethan and Mattie end up in a desperate situation because they were NOT ready to follow their dreams (and, say, escape together, or at least openly confront Zeena with the fact that they cannot stay away from each other), i.e., in Lacanese, because they compromised their desire... But did they? Here enters the final twist of the story: in the very last pages, Mrs. Ruth Hale tells the narrator something that changes everything:

Mrs. Hale glanced at me tentatively, as though trying to see how much footing my conjectures gave her; and I guessed that if she had kept silence till now it was because she had been waiting, through all the years, for someone who should see what she alone had seen. / I waited to let her trust in me gather strength before I said: "Yes, it's pretty bad, seeing all three of them there together." (Wharton 1995, p. 72)

She drew her mild brows into a frown of pain. "It was just awful from the beginning. I was here in the house when they were carried up—they laid Mattie Silver in the room you're in. She and I were great friends, and she was to have been my bridesmaid in the spring... When she came to I went up to her and stayed all night. They gave her things to quiet her, and she didn't know much till to'rd morning, and then all of a sudden she woke up just like herself, and looked straight at me out of her big eyes, and said... Oh, I don't know why I'm telling you all this," Mrs. Hale broke off, crying.

What exactly did Mattie say to Ruth when she woke up after the accident? Why couldn't Ruth bear to repeat it to the narrator? Whatever it was, it, combined with the change (for the worse) in Mattie's personality (who now acts and even looks like Zeena 24 years ago), leads Ruth to speak the novella's final lines:

There was one day, about a week after the accident, when they all thought Mattie couldn't live. Well, I say it's a pity she did. I said it right out to our minister once, and he was shocked at me. Only he wasn't with me that morning when she first came to... And I say, if she'd ha' died, Ethan might ha' lived; and the way they are now, I don't see there's much difference between the Fromes up at the farm and the Fromes down in the graveyard; 'cept that down there they're all quiet, and the women have got to hold their tongues. (*Ibid.*, pp. 73–74)

Are these last words—“the women have got to hold their tongues”—really anti-feminine, resuscitating the old cliché that women chatter too much? Things are not so simple: to what exactly does “holding tongues” refer? *Not* to general rumors that circulate in a small town but quite specifically to Mattie's words when she awakened after the snow accident—and they were not mere gossip, they possessed almost testimonial value of the last words one says when one is not sure one will survive. Mrs. Hale's last words can thus more appropriately be read as a defense of mere chatter: hold your tongue instead of saying something that is a matter of life and death. Although we never learn what these words were, we can safely presume that they concern what happened between Mattie and Ethan. Since it must have been something really shocking, it can only be that the two had sex and/or then tried to kill themselves. (I follow here the reading by Blacktall 1995, p. 174.) The often-advocated reading according to which the finally revealed truth of the attempted escape and suicide is narrator's fiction into which he projects his own “shadow” (in the Jungian sense of the dark repressed part of his Self) should thus be flatly rejected:

Within *Ethan Frome* the narrator lapses into a vision (the tale of Ethan which is, as we have seen, a terrified expression of the narrator's latent self). [...] The novel focuses on the narrator's problem, the tension between his public self and his shadow self, his terror of a seductive and enveloping void. (Griffin Wolff 1995, p. 145)

Mrs. Hale's final words add an additional twist, they confirm that the narrator's "fiction" did lay a hand on some traumatic Real which is too strong to be directly put into words. Echoing Lacan's dictum "truth has the structure of a fiction," the narrator's fiction touches the Real. In short, Freud wins over Jung.

### *A Failed Suicide in Today's Global Capitalism*

The motif of failed negation can also be a part (or, rather, the final touch) of a more complex plot, as is the case with Tana French's *Broken Harbor* (2013),<sup>2</sup> which depicts a perfect case of how capitalist self-reproduction can drive those who blindly adhere to the predominant ethics to murderous madness. Every theorist who loses time with musings on the complex relationship between the "economic base" and subjective libidinal economy should read her novel; while the liberal-capitalist financial speculations and their brutal consequences for individual lives are the massive background presence of the novel, it focuses on the way the affected individuals react to their economic and social predicament, bringing out all their idiosyncrasies, their unique ways of doing what each of them considers the right thing to do. None of them is dishonest, they are all ready to sacrifice everything, including their own lives, to set things straight, and the novel presents different ways of how "doing the right thing" can go wrong. Therein resides the sad lesson of the novel: it is not simply that the turmoil of global capitalism corrupts individuals, pushing them to betray their basic ethical stance; even when they try to follow their ethical stance, the system insidiously achieves the opposite effect.

Two young kids of the Spain family are found smothered in their beds, while their parents, Pat and Jenny, are stabbed in the

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<sup>2</sup> In my observations on *Broken Harbor*, I rely heavily on Amy Adams's blog (Adams 2012).

kitchen downstairs—against the odds, the mother may survive. These multiple murders happen in “Brianstown,” a Dublin suburb planned as a glamorous multi-purpose, all-inclusive community; things went wrong when the market collapsed in 2008, leaving most of the estate unfinished and uninhabited. Only four families remained on the property, prisoners of a housing market where they owed more than the houses were worth after the developers cut corners and can’t be located. And now the multiple murder of the Spains haunts the eerie location. (Empty apartments and whole apartment blocks are one of the key symptoms of today’s global capitalism, they abound in all big cities from New York to Dubai; in China alone, there are today enough uninhabited apartments to house the entire population of Germany and France.)

The murders are investigated by Mick “Scorcher” Kennedy, the Murder Squad’s star detective whose fundamental belief is that if one toes the line and follows the rules, everything will turn out right. The Spains pose a challenge to this belief because they *did* everything “right,” they invested deeply into the way people are “supposed” to live. The house was beautifully furnished and maintained, they themselves were lovely, they seemed to be doing everything they were supposed to. They met and married young, they adored each other, they had two beautiful children. Pat had a prestigious job that earned enough that Jenny could stay home with the children. They drove the right cars, had the right parties, wore the right clothes, invested in home ownership so they could get onto “the property ladder.” Jenny made herself into the perfect housewife, even switching out scented candles with the seasons. Then the economy collapsed, Pat lost his job and couldn’t find another one, and they ended up dead.

Since Pat was, like Scorcher, also a man who played by the rules, Scorcher resists the evidence that would implicate Pat as the murderer, and insists on pinning the deaths on a loner, Conor, who had loved Jenny since they were teens. Conor had his own personal financial crisis, and had taken to hiding in an empty

building on the estate where he could watch Pat and Jenny enact the kind of perfect life he dreamed of for himself. Early on in the novel, he is arrested and confesses to the murders. However, even as Scorcher celebrates the solve, he can't stop questioning the loose ends. Why were there holes cut into the walls all over the house? Why were there baby monitors scattered around? Who wiped the browser history from the computer and why? Why did the killer use a kitchen knife rather than bringing his own weapon?

At the end we discover it was neither Conor nor Pat who did the killings: it was Jenny, who caved in to the psychological pressure of watching her husband become unmoored. As the months go by, Pat stops searching for work and slowly falls into his own obsession. He becomes convinced that his own worth as a husband and father is inextricably bound up in capturing an animal who lives in the attic. Although they have almost no money left, he starts buying electronic equipment to capture this animal. First, he wants to protect his family, but as the weeks go by with no physical evidence of the animal, he cuts holes and sets up video baby monitors hoping to catch sight of it. He buys live bait (a mouse from a pet store) that he sticks to a glue trap and then places in the attic with the trap door open. The beast haunting the house is a Real that is not part of reality: a pure embodiment of negativity/antagonism, an anamorphic stain that, "looked on as it is, is naught but shadows. Of what it is not" (as Shakespeare put it in *Richard II*).

Jenny never believed in this animal, she just indulged Pat's weird hobby, but when Emma, Pat's and Jenny's daughter, returns home with a picture of her house, and she has drawn a large black animal with glowing eyes in a tree in the yard, Jenny is pushed to act: she goes upstairs and smothers the children to save them from their father's madness. She then goes into the kitchen, where Pat has stuck his own hand into one of the holes he's cut into the walls, using himself as live bait; in his other hand, he has a large kitchen knife. Jenny takes the knife and kills him; however, she's

too exhausted to finish the job, killing herself also. This is when Conor rushes in: he's seen the struggle from his hide-out, and runs to the house to save them. Jenny doesn't want to live, and she asks him to finish her off. He loves her, so he tries, but he's not ruthless enough, and she survives. It is Conor who also tries to save Pat's posthumous reputation by wiping the computer history. His final act is to confess to the murders to save Jenny the horror of realizing what she has done when she awakens.

Curran finds in Conor's apartment a piece of evidence that seems to implicate Jenny, but he doesn't turn it in—he thinks that it might be better to let Pat be blamed for the deaths, and leave Jenny free to take her own life. Because Curran got the evidence tainted, this is the end of his career as a detective. He wanted to act on his own recognizance, his own belief as to the “right” thing to do—but if you do this, the system collapses. Scorcher falls into the same trap: over-identified with Pat as he is he simply cannot allow Pat to be thought of as a murderer, even though Pat is dead, and it wouldn't matter to him to be considered a murderer. So Scorcher manufactures his own evidence in order to put the case back on what he considers the right path: he enlists Jenny's sister in the play of “discovering” a piece of Jenny's jewelry and “remembering” she had picked it up at the crime scene. In this way, Scorcher also destroys his own career.

*Broken Harbor* thus tells the story of the repeated failure of people who desperately want to do the right thing. Pat's case is straight: the father-provider who just wants to maintain a safe haven for his family isolates himself from them and ends up in full paranoia. Conor, who loves Jenny and is ready to ruin his life to save her, bungles things further and enacts a meaningless sacrifice. Curran and Scorcher, the two detectives investigating the case, are both brought by their ethical commitment to violate the rules of police investigation. Jenny's fate is the most desperate—her plan is to obliterate her entire family, but she fails to include herself in the series of corpses, so she survives as a miserable, totally broken

leftover, turning her intended tragic act into a ridiculous, almost comical, performance. We don't know what will happen when/if Jenny awakens from her coma: Will she persist in her miserable depression? Kill herself? Awaken with no memory and thus become able to begin again? Or somehow manage to go through the painful process of mourning? There is a totally crazy, optimistic potential at the margin of the story: What if she awakens and gets together with Conor who truly loves her?

### *Suicide as an Emancipatory Political Act*

But is this the last word on this topic, or can we nonetheless imagine a successful suicide as an emancipatory political act? The first association here is, of course, public suicides as a protest against foreign occupation, from Vietnam to Poland in the 1980s. In the last years, however, a suicidal proposal aroused a wide debate in South Africa. Derek Hook<sup>3</sup> reports how, in March 2016, Terblanche Delpont, a young white academic, sparked outrage at a Johannesburg conference at the University of the Witwatersrand, when he called on white people in South Africa “to commit suicide as an ethical act” — here are Delpont's own words:

The reality [in South Africa] is that most white people spend their whole lives only engaging black people in subservient positions — cleaners, gardeners, etc. My question is then how can a person not be racist if that's the way they live their lives? The only way then for white people to become part of Africa is to not exist as white people anymore. If the goal is to dismantle white supremacy, and white supremacy is white culture and vice versa, then the goal has to be to dismantle white culture and ultimately white people themselves. The total integration into Africa by white people will also

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<sup>3</sup> I owe this reference to Delpont, Hook, and Moss to Stephen Frosh (Birkbeck College, University of London).

automatically then mean the death of white people as white as a concept would not exist anymore. (Quoted in Hook 2020, p. 613)

How, more concretely, are we to imagine the symbolic suicide of the South African whites? Donald Moss proposed a simple but problematic (for me, at least) solution: racist Whiteness is a parasitic formation on whites themselves:

Whiteness is a condition one first acquires and then one *has*—a malignant, parasitic-like condition to which “white” people have a particular susceptibility. The condition is foundational, generating characteristic ways of being in one’s body, in one’s mind, and in one’s world. Parasitic Whiteness renders its hosts’ appetites voracious, insatiable, and perverse. These deformed appetites particularly target nonwhite peoples. Once established, these appetites are nearly impossible to eliminate. (Moss 2021, p. 355)

To get rid of their racist stance, the whites have to get rid of the parasitic whiteness which is not part of their substantial nature but just parasitizes on them, which means that, in getting rid of their racism, they do not lose the substance of their being—they even regain it, obliterating its distortion. I prefer to this easy way out Hook’s comment (inspired by Lacanian theory):

Delpont’s rhetorical and deliberately provocative suggestion is perhaps not as counter-intuitive or crazy as it at first sounds. Arguably, it is the gesture of giving up what one is—the shedding of narcissistic investments, and symbolic and fantasmatic identities—that proves a necessary first step to becoming what one is not, but might become. This is the transformative potential of anxiety that clinicians work so hard to facilitate, and that I think can also be discerned—however fleetingly—in the instances of white anxiety discussed above: the potentiality that a new—and hitherto unthinkable—form of identification is being unconsciously processed and negotiated. (Hook 2020, p. 629)



What I nonetheless find problematic in these lines is the optimist turn: suicide does not mean the actual collective self-killing of the South African whites, it means a symbolic erasure of their identity, which already points towards new forms of identity. I find it much more productive to establish a link between this idea of the whites' collective suicide and the idea of so-called afro-pessimism. Recall Fanon's claim that "the Negro is a zone of non-being, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly declining declivity": is the experience that grounds today's "afro-pessimism" not a similar one? Is the insistence of afro-pessimists that Black subordination is much more radical than that of other underprivileged groups (Asians, LGBT+, women...), i.e., that Blacks should not be put into the series with other forms of "colonization," not grounded in the act of assuming that one belongs to such a "zone of non-being"? This is why Fredric Jameson is right when he insists that one cannot understand class struggle in the US without taking into account anti-Black racism: any talk which equalizes white and Black proletarians is a fake. (A point to be noted here is that, when the young Gandhi protested against the white rule in South Africa, he ignored the plight of the Black majority and just demanded the inclusion of Indians into the privileged white block.)

So what if we turn Delport's suggestion, radical as it may appear, around and propose that it is the Blacks in South Africa who should commit a collective symbolic suicide, to shed their socio-symbolic identity, which is profoundly marked by white domination and resistance to it, and which contains its own fantasies and even narcissistic investments of victimization? (In the US, the Blacks are right in using the term "Victim!" to insult their Black opponents.) One can thus repeat exactly the same words: the Blacks need to perform "the gesture of giving up what one is—the shedding of narcissistic investments, and symbolic and fantasmatic identities—that proves a necessary first step to becoming what one is not, but might become." Consequently, I see afro-

pessimism not just as a recognition of dismal social reality but also and above all as something that announces “the potentiality that a new — and hitherto unthinkable — form of identification is being unconsciously processed and negotiated.” To put it brutally, let’s imagine that, in one way or another, all the whites would disappear from South Africa — the ANC inefficiency and corruption would remain, and the poor Black majority would find itself even more strongly dislocated, lacking the designated cause of its poverty. To revolutionize a system is never equal to just eliminating one of its parts, in the same way that the disappearance of Jews as the disturbing element never restores social harmony.

The key move has to be made by Blacks themselves — was Malcolm X not following this insight when he adopted X as his family name? The point of choosing X as his family name and thereby signaling that the slave traders who brought the enslaved Africans from their homeland brutally deprived them of their family and ethnic roots, of their entire cultural life-world, was not to mobilize the Blacks to fight for the return to some primordial African roots, but precisely to seize the opening provided by X, an unknown new (lack of) identity engendered by the very process of slavery which made the African roots forever lost. The idea is that this X that deprives the Blacks of their particular tradition offers a unique chance to redefine (reinvent) themselves, to freely form a new identity much more universal than white people’s professed universality. (As is well known, Malcolm X found this new identity in the universalism of Islam.) To put it in Hook’s terms, Malcolm X proposes for Blacks themselves to bring to the end their deracination with a gesture of symbolic suicide, the passage through zero-point, in order to free the space for a new identity. Such a gesture would render white domination simply pointless, a solipsist dream, a game missing a partner with whom it can only be played.

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# Scarred Tissues: Trauma, Desire, and Class Struggle in Tana French's *Dublin Murder Squad* Series

*Mirt Komel*

## *1. Introduction*

Detective literature was—and to a certain degree still is—understood as a romance of an enlightened mind walking the path of reason and promising not only justice, but also the defeat of evil in the form of murder. Listing the most famous detective figures from classical detective fiction—from Auguste Dupin and Sherlock Holmes to Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple—seems a redundant point to the case. Nevertheless, all of these figures show in a nutshell that they rely on reason, methodical procedures, and rational thinking in order to heroically solve the crimes and discover the identity of the criminals, who are, conversely and in contrast, pictured as their egoistic, excessive, obsessive—in short, irrational and evil—counterparts.

If we look at the development of the genre we can see how the motives of the murderers significantly shape the structure of the detective story: in the classical detective story (Edgar Allan Poe, Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie) the traumatic kernel is the crime itself, and the role of the detective is to discover the ratio behind the irrational excess of murder in order to put society back on track, while we as readers are put in the shoes of society through the assisting bystander figure that narrates the story. In the *hard-boiled* detective novel (Carroll John

Daly, Dashiell Hammett, James M. Cain, Raymond Chandler), we are immersed in the world of an obsessively irrational detective figure fighting a traumatically corrupted capitalist society, itself murderous at a systematic level. Finally, in the *crime novel* (Boileau-Narcejac, Patricia Highsmith), which is written either from the perspective of the victim or the criminal, the mystery is not in the *whodunit*, but rather in the *why?* and *how?* motivated by the “psychopathologies of everyday-life that are neither traumatic nor irrational, but rather plainly ‘human, all too human’” (LeRoy et al. 2017, pp. 163–166).

This general development of the detective novel—where the structure of each sub-genre excludes the other and where the *classical* is incompatible with the *hard-boiled*, which in turn is incompatible with the *crime novel*—is, arguably, masterfully re-visited and re-incorporated into the classical *whodunit* detective novel form by Tana French with her *Dublin Murder Squad* series.

## 2. Theoretical Framework: Psychoanalysis and Marxism

In the present context, where we will discuss the detective genre in general and Tana French’s series in particular through Lacanian and Marxist lens, it is first and foremost important to note that psychoanalysis and detective literature have not only a long and fruitful history of encounters, but also share—at least to a certain degree—the same method of analysis.<sup>1</sup>

Freud himself paralleled his interpretation of dreams to a rebus solving procedure—similar to the work of detection—where the analyst must decipher the latent meaning hidden behind the manifest content: “Suppose I have a picture-puzzle, a rebus, in front of me. [...] A dream is a picture-puzzle of this sort” (Freud

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed reading of the parallel between Freudian psychoanalysis and the detective fiction genre, see, for instance, Yang 2010, pp. 596–604.

2010, pp. 295–296). The investigation of the relation between the manifest content of dreams and the latent dream-thoughts Freud speaks of is structurally similar to the investigation of a murder, where the detective must look through the manifest evidence of the crime scene and find the hidden meaning that is known only to the perpetrator. Like, for instance, in Agatha Christie's *ABC Murders*, where Poirot must discover that the hidden agenda of the killer is actually to hide one specific target behind an irrational choice of killing by the alphabet.

Moreover, we have Freud's statement that Sophocles' *Oedipus*' search for the murder of his own father functions as a proto-detective story where the detective finds out that he is himself the killer.<sup>2</sup> This approach is recuperated by Lacan in his seminar on *Desire and Its Interpretation* while interpreting Hamlet's desire to investigate his father's murder in order to replace him (Lacan 2013). Or even more directly related to detective fiction we have Lacan's writings on Poe's short story *The Purloined Letter*, where Auguste Dupin scans the "crime scene"—the minister's apartment—not as a compact imaginary framework of clues, as the police would, but rather as a network of signifiers among which he finds the absent one in the form of the blackmail letter (Lacan 1999, pp. 11–61). And it is in the same vein that Slavoj Žižek demonstrates this thesis in *The Indivisible Remainder* through an interpretation of a classical detective story, Doyle's *Silver Blaze*, by making a detour into the Hegelian concept of determinate negation, that is "a Nothingness which none the less possesses a series of proprieties." Determinate negation functions in accordance with the "differential logic of the signifier in which the very absence of a feature can function as a positive feature, as in the well-known Sherlock

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed reading of Freud's theory of *Oedipus* as a detective story see especially the chapter entitled "Oedipus and Aristotle; Freud and *The Moonstone*" in *Detective Fiction and Literature* (Priestman 1991, pp. 16–35).



Holmes story in which the ‘curious incident’ with the dog consists in the fact that the dog *did not* bark” (Žižek 1996, p. 229). In short, the absence of a signifier is a signifier in itself, and this is one of the most distinctive features of the detective figure in literature: he, or she—in more modern times—can read not only the most evident evidence, but also the absence of it precisely because the murder scene is scanned as a network of signifiers.

The main Lacanian development of Freud’s psychoanalysis is most definitely his definition of the “unconscious structured like a language”: the subject is, due to the intervention of the symbolic, subdued to a fundamental ontological schism, a schism between his sensory apparatus and the language it is immersed in, or between the imaginary and the symbolic, where the third register, the real, binds both together and is at the same time the point where both can be torn apart.<sup>3</sup>

In terms of detective fiction one could say in this instance that not only the murderer’s desire for killing but also the detective’s own desire to solve the murder are intrinsically bound together through the chain of signifiers, and even more, that the two desires depend on each other: on the imaginary level the contrast between the detective and the murderer cannot be sharper. But nevertheless they are knotted together on the symbolic level: every murderer wants to be caught in the sense that he or she wants symbolic recognition (and that is why the murderer always leaves his or her idiosyncratic “signature” at the crime scene), and the detective is nothing without his counterpart and a murder to solve (Sherlock Holmes is, without a worthy opponent and any puzzle to solve, a mere eccentric drug addict).

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<sup>3</sup> Lacan developed the mathematical *RSI* model in order to describe how every human experience is structured through three registers: symbolic (language), imaginary (senses), and real (Lacan 2005, pp. 9–10). Lacan uses the famous Borromean knot in order to point out that human or social reality is not simply imaginary in the sense of fiction, but rather a reality interwoven with the symbolic texture in such a way that it is fundamentally inaccessible to the subject.

And it is also in this sense that a murder can be read not only as the traumatic real that risks to tear society apart, but also and at the same time as the element binding society together: until the murder is solved everybody is a suspect, because literally anybody could have done it, and society melts away in mutual suspicion and individual self-preservation, while the task of the detective, the only citizen above suspicion, is to find who really did it in order to reconstitute society—in short: everybody is guilty until one is found that can take the blame for everyone.

This social aspect of detective fiction leads us directly to Marxism, which has no apparent direct link to detective literature as psychoanalysis has, despite the fact of the curious historical coincidence of the beginnings of both.<sup>4</sup> Marxist theories of the genre (Žižek and Močnik 1982), as most prominently developed by Brecht and Bloch, dismissed it as “quintessential bourgeois literature,” or worse, not even literature but “an entertaining mental exercise for the bourgeois class,” etc. (Brecht 1967; Bloch 1961). However, while Marxism was, at least initially, dismissive of detective fiction, the genre itself managed, step-by-step, to incorporate critical social themes and topics in its own texture. Thus, the common ground where both the Marxist and the Detective can and do meet is the issue of violence in capitalist society.

Greeks and Romans never concealed the violent beginnings of their own civilizations, as poetic mythology from Homer to Vergil and historiography from Herodotus to Titus Livy explic-

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<sup>4</sup> The publishing year of Poe's *Murders in the Rue Morgue*, which marks the beginning of the genre, featuring an orangutan as the murderer, curiously coincides with the year of Marx's doctoral dissertation on *The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*; the next year, 1842, Poe published *The Mystery of Marie Roget*, based on a real crime extensively covered by *The New York Times* and other American journals, while Marx published his *The Freedom of the Press*; finally, in 1844 when Poe published his *Purloined Letter* Marx wrote his famous *Paris Manuscripts*.

itly show. Medieval times, however, brought a decisive turn: the many theories of the social contract tried to demonstrate that society was founded by contract and through rational discourse in opposition to natural violence and irrational barbarism (Gough 1936). The theories of a nonviolent social contract were later on employed by the first theoreticians of political economy in order to develop the myth of the previous accumulation of capital, most prominently promoted by Adam Smith in his *The Wealth of Nations* (Smith 1987, pp. 142–151): the myth of the previous accumulation supposedly explains how it came to be that the few had accumulated wealth while the many ended up in poverty.<sup>5</sup> According to Marx the “previous accumulation plays in political economy about the same part as original sin in theology,” for “its origin is supposed to be explained when it is told as an anecdote of the past” and this “insipid childishness is every day preached to us in the defense of property” (Marx 1877, p. 500). The story has its “moral,” for the industriousness of one group is seen as morally superior to the laziness of the other, this opposition coinciding with the moral opposition between “good and evil.”

Detective fiction, at least the classical tradition from Doyle to Christie, faithfully reproduced this moral binary distinction. Let’s take a look, for instance, at the social structure in Christie’s classic *Death on the Nile*: the main plot revolves around the murder of the rich, beautiful and successful Linnet Doyle, who inherited her fortune from her American grandfather and thus is morally innocent in terms of “previous accumulation,” except that we learn how her family business ruined many a life. This fact provides a motive for a list of suspects, among which one can find Mr. Ferguson, a caricature of an outspoken communist. As Hercule Poirot,

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<sup>5</sup> This part of Smith is satirically resumed by Marx as: “In times long gone by there were two sorts of people; one, the diligent, intelligent, and, above all, frugal elite; the other, lazy rascals, spending their substance, and more, in riotous living. [...] Thus it came to pass that the former sort accumulated wealth, and the latter sort had at last nothing to sell except their own skins” (1877, p. 500).

the bourgeois *par excellence*, soon discovers, the murderers are a lazy, easy-going, pathologically lying, but most importantly a low-class couple: Jacqueline de Bellefort and her lover Simon Doyle, who both faked a break-up in order to allow him to marry Linnet, murder her and steal her money. From a Marxist perspective *Death on the Nile* could be thus read as *Death on Denial*, since the question of the “previous accumulation,” as well as the “current” distribution of money, is never addressed.

In contrast to social contract theories and classical political economy, many philosophers (from Pascal to Kant and from Benjamin to Žižek) developed the concept of a “constitutional violence.” After society is constituted, violence does not simply disappear, but must be monopolized by the state in order for society itself to survive, and that is why Walter Benjamin distinguishes between *law-keeping* [*rechtserhaltende*] and *law-giving* [*rechtsetzende*] violence (Benjamin 1996), retaining the more ambivalent German original term *Gewalt*, which—as Jacques Derrida interpreted—means power and violence at the same time (Derrida 1992, p. 44). Nowhere is this ambivalence of *Gewalt* more beautifully reflected than in the “hard-boiled” detective genre, emblematically embodied by Hammett and Chandler. On first sight it might seem that Hammett is more artistically elaborate than Chandler due to the fact that the former has a more wide cosmic view of evil, while Chandler locates it in the godless, corrupt, indifferent society itself (Cawelti 1977), but both authors do describe a developed capitalist society, when one murder through the logic of “follow the money” intrinsically links both “good” (politicians, businessmen, the police, etc.) and “evil” (the underground in form of criminals and criminal associations) parts of society together, so that murder, the “original sin,” structurally reproduces the violent “previous accumulation.”

Žižek exemplifies this point: the act of establishment of a given order of law is outside the law itself, for this fundamental act of violence must remain concealed as it is “the positive

condition of the functioning of law: it functions insofar as its subjects are deceived, insofar as they experience the authority of law as authentic and eternal” (Žižek 1991, p. 204). The structure of this concealment can be described in Lacanian terms as a fantasy, the “primordial form of narrative, which serves to occult some original deadlock” (Žižek, 1997, p. 10). The fantasy is—similar to the functioning of ideology—the imaginary deformation governing the relation between the subject and its trauma, or as in our case, the relation between a group of people and their collective trauma, be it the general violence of the “previous accumulation” that stratified society, or the particular murder that reproduces this stratification on the more theological or moral level as the fight between “good and evil.”

### 3. *Development of the Detective Genre*

The detective story had its honorable predecessors in the earlier mystery, gothic, and crime stories, and even ancient tales.<sup>6</sup> In the list of the usual suspects one can thus find various authors and their work, from Sophocles’ *King Oedipus* to Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, none of them being detective stories properly speaking, but each anticipating certain trends that followed: *Oedipus* by providing the possibility that the murderer turns out to be the detective himself; *Hamlet* by enacting the detective not simply as a rational being, but rather as an irrational “madman”; *Crime and Punishment* by

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<sup>6</sup> Richard Alewyn, in *Anatomie des Detektivromans*, even goes as far as the Biblical story of Cain and Abel in order to make a distinction between the more general *crime story* that can cover any story about a murder(er), and the *detective story* as a crime detection narrative: the tale about Cain and Abel is told as a *crime story*, but if told in reverse, starting with the corpse, listing the suspects and their motives, one can make a *whodunit* out of it (Alewyn 1968, pp. 52–72).

telling the story from the perspective of the murderer. *Oedipus*—the detective who discovers himself to be the murderer—necessarily implies *Crime and Punishment* as the story told from the murderer's perspective, but the latter does not necessarily imply the former, since the role of the murderer Rodion Raskolnikov—from the perspective of whom the story is told—differs from that of detective Porfiry Petrovich.<sup>7</sup>

In order to have a detective genre properly speaking, a proper detective had to arise in the modern age, which saw the development of natural sciences (biology, physics, chemistry), which was soon integrated in police work, from fingerprints to ballistics, blood types, and all the iron repertoire that led to present-day DNA analysis (Thorwald 1965; 1966). It is on this basis that modern detective fiction could be born, but, curiously enough, first as a philosophical exercise of speculative thinking.<sup>8</sup>

Classical detective fiction started with E.A. Poe's short mystery stories with Auguste Dupin as protagonist in the role of the amateur detective, or "analyst," as he was labelled in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*. In *The Mystery of Marie Rogêt* Poe dealt with an actual case, rebaptizing the original case of Mary Rogers who was killed in New York and relocating the case to Paris. Dupin with his extraordinary speculative skills of deduction, which culminated in the "Purloined Letter," was then the model for the most famous detective of them all.

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<sup>7</sup> One of the possible solutions to the detective story puzzle, namely, that the murderer might be the detective himself, was, on the one hand forbidden by the most dogmatic representatives of the genre, like, for instance, S.S. Van Dine and in his *20 Rules* (1928), while on the other it was promoted as one possible emancipation of the genre in order to render a more faithful picture of the human condition inhabiting a world of contradictions (See Seeßlen 1981), as seen figuring prominently in the novel by Stanley Ellin, *The Eighth Circle* (1958), or later on in the movie *Angel Heart* (1987).

<sup>8</sup> For a brief recapitulation of the history of the detective novel, see Julian Symons' (1972) *Bloody Murder*; while for a most extensive study, see Peter Nusser's (1980) *Der Kriminalroman*.

Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* combined speculative deductive abilities to work on hypotheses or "theories" (logical reasoning) with inductive skills employed to analyze empirical clues (forensic science), thus allowing him to "guess" from which part of the city a visitor came by observing the soil on his or her shoes, or even directly identifying someone by the type of tobacco smoked. Another important feature and genre-defining narrative strategy that Doyle took from Dupin was the figure of Watson, the protagonist's side-kick and the narrator of the story that allowed the reader to compete with the detective in solving the mystery: for the narrator the detective functions as the ultimate *subject supposed to know* (*sujet supposé savoir*), to which Lacan adds the function of transference that makes the whole relationship always marked with a certain eroticism.<sup>9</sup>

The adventures of Sherlock Holmes in turn became the springboard for a whole genre. It was developed further by Agatha Christie, who consolidated the distinctively "English" character of the genre by moving the murders from the city and its proletarian/bourgeois context into the aristocratic countryside where the most notable and respected parts of society are scrutinized by the elegant bourgeois Hercule Poirot (33 novels and 54 short stories) and Miss Marple (12 novels and 20 short stories) respectively.<sup>10</sup> The title "Queen of Crime" befits her

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<sup>9</sup> Note the peculiar way in which Poe describes the narrator's relationship with Dupin, their living in a secluded way, or walking hand under hand, and similar, or the many homoerotic exchanges of words between Holmes and Watson, itself ironically reflected recently by the TV-series *Sherlock* (2010–), and rendered explicit in *Elementary* (2012–) since Watson is transformed into a woman (Lucy Liu) with whom Sherlock (Jonny Lee Miller) could now flirt free of puritan morals.

<sup>10</sup> Especially Miss Marple was an important influence on the further development on the genre, since the detectives were traditionally male, while women were victims. Case(s) in point: among the many heirs to Dupin and Holmes one can find mostly male detectives: inspector French, lord Peter Wimsey, dr. Gideon Fell, Albert Campion, inspector Alleyn, Nigel Strangeways, professor Gervas Fen, Roger Crammond, Nero Wolfe, dr. Martin Buell, Commisar Maigret, etc.

especially due to the classical structure she invented: a dead body is discovered, all the suspects are concealing secrets, and the detective proceeds to investigate. At the end she gathers the surviving suspects into one room, explains the deductive reasoning behind the solution, and reveals the culprit, who is usually the least suspected since the list includes children, policemen, narrators, already deceased individuals, sometimes even no known suspects (*And Then There Were None*) or all of the suspects at once (*Murder on the Orient Express*), and sometimes the question remains unresolved of whether formal justice will ever be delivered (*Five Little Pigs* and *Endless Night*).

By moving from Europe to the U.S. the classical detective novel became *hard-boiled*, meaning that it significantly changed its structure by transforming one of its main features, namely, a shift in the method employed by the detective from thinking to violence (Heissenbuttel 1963). To be sure, no clear cut can be made between thinking and violence: one can think of Sherlock Holmes's boxing and fencing skills, and even a soft-skinned detective such as Hercule Poirot wields a gun sometimes, while conversely no hard-boiled detective can solve the crime without thinking. Moreover, in this kind of detective novel—already bordering on the crime novel, as best exemplified, arguably, by the work of Raymond Chandler and his Philip Marlow or Dashiell Hammett's Samuel Spade and Nick Charles—we are immersed into a deeply corrupted capitalist society, against which the detective fights as one of the last standing fallen angels of justice: here the moment of class-struggle, which was latent in the classical detective novel, becomes predominant due to the role played by power and capital and the power of capital.

It is in this capitalist context that detective fiction retreats from an objectively “fucked-up” world into a subjective “fucked-up” psyche, thus transforming into the psychological *crime novel* with Boileau-Narcejac and Patricia Highsmith, and in present times most notably Donna Tart and Gillian Flynn.



Against the background of classical detective novels, where the characters were more or less flat and facile, and where the art of storytelling was reduced to its logical minimum in order to deliver the maximum impact of resolution of the murder mystery, here we can find psychologically refined characters, artfully depicted situations, and masterful story-telling. Moreover, the structural shift of the genre is enacted through a significant shift in perspective: the murder mystery is not insomuch in the *whodunit* anymore, but rather in the *why* and *how*, which regularly proves to be motivated by “everyday life psychopathologies” that are neither traumatic nor irrational, but rather just plain “human, all too human” motives.

Finally, the current trend set by “Nordic noir” literature (also known as “Scandinavian” or “Scandi noir”) with writers such as Stieg Larsson, Henning Mankell, Maj Svalle, Per Wahlöö, and Jo Nesbø—not to mention their many emulators in other countries and languages—can be attributed to the fact that it manages to deliver a thorough social critique of an otherwise much too idealized Scandinavian society. This is achieved through a return to the *whodunit* structure, with stylistic minimum and moody maximum, featuring a realistic depiction of monotonous police work with no excessive deductions.

It is therefore at this point of the historical and structural development of the detective genre—as well as through the theoretical framework we laid down—that we will now analyze Tana French’s *Dublin Murder Squad* Series as a creative re-elaboration of the detective genre.

#### 4. The Dublin Murder Squad Series

Let’s now start our own analytical investigation with a most general assumption that Vermont-born American-Irish actress-turned-author Tana French with her *Dublin Murder Squad* Series

took the lessons of Marxism and psychoanalysis seriously, as well as the history of the development of the detective fiction genre.

The three main characteristics of her work can be summed up as follows: first, in terms of genre she retained the classical structure of the “English” detective novel while at the same time incorporating the style and mannerism of its “American” *hard-boiled* counterpart, painting the whole on a “Scandi-noir” background in terms of coloring Dublin and its countryside; second, the context of each murder is a realistically depicted Dublin and/or its surrounding towns and countryside, ravaged by the traumatic collapse of the “Celtic Tiger” while at the same time always linking a most modern present with this or that past theme from Irish folklore and tradition; third, just as Ireland has its own trauma to deal with, so does the figure of the *garda* detective where the imperative desire to solve the murder is paralleled with an existential drive of searching for one’s most intimate desires, thus shifting our interest from the *whodunit* mystery towards the more existentially oriented *whosolvedit*.

These three main characteristics are also, arguably, the reasons why Tana French was baptized as the “First Lady of Irish Crime” and compared to Agatha Christie on the one side and Patricia Highsmith on the other side of the Atlantic (Deignam 2012). Rightfully so, since if there is something distinctively “Frenchian” about her novels it is precisely this link, or rather, overlapping between the substantial, objective structure of classical detective fiction—together with its actual police work modernization—and its subjective, psychological, thrilling, dramatic counterpoint, where at the end, as Laura Miller elegantly put it, “the search for the killer becomes entangled in a search for self” (Miller 2016). Another additional distinctive feature that French employs is the relinquishing of the idealized central detective figure: each novel of the series presents not only a new murder to be solved, but also a new detective—from whose perspective the story is told—to redeem.

The stories are told from first-person perspective, thus enabling a vivid subjective immersion into the mind of a detective, who always works in a pair, not only to guarantee impartiality of the investigation (as real police work demands), but also to show the inter-subjective process of detection, since one can see everything but the blind spots of one's own idiosyncratic subjectivity that are discernible only for the other (as in real-life partnerships). Each novel features the by-standing sidekick from the previous one as the narrating protagonist, thus connecting the whole series in a subjective chain of otherwise unconnected murder cases. As for the murders themselves, they are generally structured as per classical detective *whodunit* rules. There is a limited list of suspects who are all known to the reader; a series of red-herring clues and allusions among which the key-ones are hidden; and most importantly, the reader has a fair amount of time to solve the crime before the end.

#### 4.1 In the Woods (2007)

*In the Woods* (2007), Tana French's first and most original novel, the first of the *Dublin Murder Squad* series, provides us with what will become the structural framework within which each successive novel will offer its own twist while simultaneously consolidating the rules of the game.

The story of *In the Woods* opens with a prelude: a reminiscence of a summer in the life of three twelve-year-olds who got lost in an ancient forest near the town of Knocknaree: "They are running into legend, into sleepover stories and nightmares parents never hear" (French 2007, p. 3). Three kids get lost in the woods, but only one returns, without any memory of what happened. This kid turns out to be detective Adam "Rob" Ryan, the protagonist and narrator of the story, who describes his own relation to truth with what is perhaps one of the best openings in the history of detective fiction: "What I warn you to remember

is that I am a detective. Our relationship with truth is fundamental, but cracked, refracting confusingly like fragmented glass. It is the core of our careers, the endgame of every move we make, and we pursue it with strategies painstakingly constructed of lies and concealment and every variation on deception" (*ibid.*, p. 5). The detective is here far from being the knight in shining armor who comes to save the day, but rather is presented as a skillful psychological manipulator, not unlike an actor—or writer, for that matter (both being professions that the author herself pursued): "Don't let me fool you into seeing us as a bunch of *parfit gentil* knights galloping off in doublets after Lady Truth on her white palfrey. What we do is crude, crass and nasty" (*ibid.*). But it is this metaphor that is most telling, since it foreshadows how this quest for truth, in the name of which every and all means are permitted, will eventually be Ryan's downfall: "Truth is the most desirable woman in the world and we are the most jealous lovers, reflexively denying anyone else the slightest glimpse of her. We betray her routinely, spending hours and days stupor-deep in lies, and then turn back to her holding out the lover's ultimate Mobius strip: But I only did it because I love you so much" (*ibid.*). The Mobius strip, embodying the detective's ultimate paradox—"I crave truth. And I lie."—was one of Lacan's favorite topological figures since it showed how two different surfaces ultimately merge into one, like, for instance, the conscious and the unconscious, which are not separated, but rather one in the subject. And the same goes for Ryan: his conscious activities in solving the murder at hand slowly merge with his unconscious trauma, resulting in a driving desire to know what happened long ago back in the woods. As if referring to the meta-scope of the detective novel itself that wants to disentangle from its own structure, Ryan says: "This is what I read in the file, the day after I made detective. I will come back to this story again and again, in any number of different ways. A poor thing, possibly, but mine own: this is the only story in the world that nobody but

me will ever be able to tell" (*ibid.*, p. 6). Murders happen all the time, as do *whodunit* puzzles for the readers of detective novels, but Ryan's story, this *whosolvedit* part is something unique, with its own logic, that parallels and runs now above and now below the case he will be dealing with, precisely as the ants on the Möbius strip as pictured by M. C. Escher in 1963.

The novel presents the mystery of the woods first, and only after being gradually introduced to the Garda Síochána's murder squad that is fictitiously residing in Dublin Castle, and how Ryan became friends with Cassie Maddox ("because of her moped, a cream 1981 Vespa"), we move to the murder-case: "We caught the Devlin case"—the investigation to be baptized "operation Vestal" by the cops—"on a Wednesday morning in August. It was, according to my notes, 11.48, so everyone else was out getting coffee. Cassie and I were playing Worms on my computer" (*ibid.*, p. 27). O'Kelly, the superintendent of the murder squad, rushes in: "Bunch of archaeologists found a body. Who's up?" (*ibid.*). And since there is nobody else more experienced around, Ryan and Maddox take the case. The death of twelve-year-old Katy Devlin will lead us to an archaeological site that is blocking the construction of a new highway near Knocknaree: "The field was where the wood had been, twenty years ago. The strip of trees was what was left of it. I had lived in one of the houses beyond the wall" (*ibid.*, p. 30).

Various investigative lines are pursued, most of them red herrings. The first one is that the murder might be related to the deceased's father, Jonathan Devlin, himself the suspect of child abuse and murder (as a connection to a gang rape in 1984 suggests), and perhaps the target of revenge due to his opposition to the highway. The second line of inquiry pursues the mother, Margaret Devlin, who is suspected of making her daughter sick due to a "Munchausen by proxy" syndrome (a homage to *Sharp Objects* by Gillian Flynn). Another suspect is attested by the two other Devlin girls, Jessica and Rosalinda, namely, a mysterious

man in a tracksuit, the typical “outsider” figure who disrupts an apparently harmonious community (not unlike Bob from *Twin Peaks*). Since the body was found on an archaeological site, some of the archaeologists are also listed as suspects with possible motives, means, and occasions: Dr. Ian Hunt, the site director; Sean, who lost his trowel that turns out to be connected to the murder; Mel, the unassumingly attractive female of the group; and Mark Hanly, the idealist who camps in the wild, pours wine in rituals of worship, and protests against capitalism and the construction company. Last but not least, there is the line that only Ryan is able to track since it links the present-day murder with the past disappearance of his friends.

All these investigative lines and the related clues hidden within the red herrings eventually lead to the discovery that the psychopathic mastermind behind the murder, which was actually committed by the least suspicious of them all (let's put his name in brackets where he belongs: Damien)—an unoriginal “Agatha-Christian” element to hide the real culprit as the most innocent one in the midst of more viable candidates that French will be re-playing three more times in her sequels and that many readers will resent her for—was no one but Rosalind. She fakes tears in the rain when her sister Katy was found murdered. She wants to know everything regarding the investigation. She seduces Ryan with teenage charms in order to obtain the details and give him false clues. She publicly implores Ryan to find out who murdered her sister. She even lies about her age earlier in the story in order to make her final narcissistic confession to Cassie inadmissible: how it was actually her, and not her father or mother, abusing her sister by giving her medicine, and, when she stopped taking it, how she manipulated her boyfriend Damien into killing her, and made him think it was his own idea.

So, in short, the *whodunit* mystery is pretty complex but easily solvable, but it is nothing compared to the *whosolvedit* mystery pertaining to Ryan and his traumatic past that structured his main

blind spots regarding the investigation. Rob says at the very beginning while self-describing his tastes that he likes “girlie girls,” a seemingly unimportant detail that nonetheless paves the way to the success of Rosalind’s manipulations afterwards. More generally speaking, Rob likes “girlie girls” so that he could not fall in love and form such attachments as those formed in his youth, which he was so violently severed from in the woods. By contrast, what he likes about Cassie is something completely different: “I am usually well out of the loop, but the Cassie Maddox buzz was loud enough that even I picked up on it. [...] She wasn’t my type [...] but there was something about her: maybe the way she stood, weight on one hip, straight and easy as a gymnast; maybe just the mystery” (French 2007, pp. 12–15). Since it is a mystery that defines who he is—he goes by “Rob” and not “Adam”—it is only logical that what he unconsciously desires is a mystery. But since he can fuck only women he does not respect, the exact reverse happens with Cassie when he breaks down while he tries to spend the night in the woods and remember what actually happened back then: at the point where he becomes most vulnerable, he sleeps with the one woman he has genuine feelings about, but, conversely, since she sleeps with him, she ultimately loses his respect. Instead of coming together or at least pretending nothing happened and continuing as friends and partners like before, he alienates her rudely while at the same time and at the very end seeing her as his only chance at a normal life (the last pathetic phone call).

As it turns out, however, Cassie has a lot of problems of her own, and not only those indirectly connected to the case since part of the intuition about the solution of the case was connected to an early experience with a psychopathic boyfriend that Rosalind reminded her of (“No conscience, no empathy, pathological liar, manipulative, charming, intuitive, attention-seeking, easily bored, narcissistic”). Ryan was, in contrast, without such experience and with his own biased view, unable to see what Cassie saw. In the same vein that Ryan’s trauma biased his ability to

solve the case, Cassie's trauma functioned in the opposite direction since it allowed her to pursue an otherwise invisible line of investigation.

However, this intimate detail about detective Maddox's private life is perhaps a good point to stop and walk out of *In the Woods* to the next novelistic suspect of our own investigation, namely, *The Likeness*.

#### 4.2 The Likeness (2008)

*The Likeness* opens—in a similar yet contrasting style to its predecessor—with an uncanny post festum epiphany of the protagonist's past experiences: "Some nights, if I'm sleeping on my own, I still dream about Whitethorn House [...]. The house is always empty [...]. The others aren't gone, I got it wrong somehow. They're only hiding; they're still here, for ever and ever," and as the house and its residents are introduced through foreshadowing, so is the novel's central motif: "The tip of a giggle, instantly muffled; a creak of wood. I leave wardrobe doors swinging open, I take steps three at a time, I swing round the newel post at the top and catch a flash of movement in the corner of my eye: the spotted old mirror at the end of the corridor, my face reflected in it, laughing" (French 2008, pp. 1–2).

*The Likeness* builds a mysterious story on top of the murder mystery—much as *In the Woods*—this time telling the tale from Cassie Maddox's perspective, who runs into a murder-victim by the name of Alexandra "Lexie" Madison, who is not only one of her previous undercover aliases, but also looks just like her. The question of *whosolvedit* is again at least as, if not even more, important than the *whodunit*, and, furthermore, this time it is intrinsically connected to the victim, since the detective and the victim were sharing a face as well as an alias.

At the end of the previous novel detective Maddox was stripped of her rank and dislodged to the domestic violence



department after the fiasco of “operation Vestal,” but while her professional life suffered, her personal life prospered with Sam O’Neil, one of the side-characters from the previous novel who was investigating the case together with the two main protagonists (thus forming one of the echoes for Ryan reminiscing about his two childhood friends). However, conforming to the modernist tradition of protagonists who can’t bear happiness, Cassie also decides to ruin her personal life in search of misfortunes that came knocking on her door in the form of her former undercover boss Frank Mackey. This takes her to a crime scene in the countryside of Dublin, to a cottage close to Glenskehy, a village housing Whitethorn House’s servants for the aristocratic family that once occupied the mansion. The face of the dead girl resembles Maddox so closely that Mackey, who is introduced to us as a “tightrope artist with no net,” devises a plan to revive the dead girl in order to investigate the residing suspects, under the name “Operation Mirror.”

The *whosolvedit* is here doubled by the motif of the doppelgänger in the measure in which both Cassie and Lexie are linked, or rather, “sewed together”: “This is Lexie Madison’s story, not mine. I’d love to tell you one without getting into the other, but it doesn’t work that way.” (*ibid.*, p. 3) To be sure, the romantic motif of the double is as old as modern literature, and spans from E. T. A. Hoffman’s *Die Elixiere des Teufels* (1815), Dostoevsky’s *Dvoynik* (1846), and Poe’s *William Wilson* (1839) up to the present artistic reworking of the apparently still extremely popular theme that keeps reappearing not only in literature, theatre, and opera, but also in cinema, TV-series, and video-games. Truth be told, what French does here is nothing new in terms of the development of the motif: the novelty of her detective novel lays rather in the way she sewed the motif of the double to the classic detective story.

Without the element of the doppelgänger, combined with the mysterious appeal of Whitethorn house and its strange, yet

lovable inhabitants, the detective story alone would lose much of its appeal, as a short glance at its plot and resolution shows. After an intensive *Schnellkurs* under her former boss's guidance and against her lover's disapproval, Cassie now becomes Lexie, a graduate student at Trinity College, and moves into Whitethorn House. Her four former roommates apparently accept her story, namely, that she survived the encounter with the murderer only by paying the price of losing her memory of that evening. However, the otherwise cynical, tough and much guarded detective, who was orphaned at an early age and recently detached herself from her lover due to this case, finds an unforeseen sense of belonging to this group and their most intimate, weird, and academically ideal way of life. Despite this going native, the investigation proceeds and a list of suspects slowly builds up, including the four inhabitants of the house: Daniel March, the alpha leader of the pack; Raphael Hyland, the handsome and passionate beta; Justin Mannering, the emotional drama-queen gama; and Abigail Stone, the only other girl in the house. Other suspects include, again, the figure of the "outsider" (the man with whom Lexie secretly met in order to make a deal regarding the house), and one step short of nothing less than the whole town of Glenskehy (which seems to harbor a historical hatred for the house and its aristocratic inhabitants, past and present). During the investigation Cassie slowly starts to question herself by sliding into the Lexie her former tenant was playing, and due to her own childhood trauma of abandonment she responds with a desire to belong to the group of students. Eventually, it is precisely this genuine attachment, incarnated in the kiss she gave to Daniel, that blows her cover (since the Lexie he and they knew was more superficial and liked to flirt without consequences). Moreover, the original Lexie planned to abandon them and sell her share in the house, and this was why all four of them somehow participated in her murder during a drunken frenzy, making the one actually holding the knife, discovered by Frank at

the end, a quite irrelevant discovery (it was, if you really want to know, again the least suspicious one: Justin). The architect of the masterfully conceived cover-up operation? Daniel, who made them play cards and drink for the whole evening while carefully checking the clock in order to make the elaborate collective alibi more plausible (as Cassie puts it: “The guy was wasted on academia”).

However, the existential crisis Cassie undergoes due to her specular, narcissistic, obsessive identification with Lexie, and the desires motivated by her early childhood trauma tying her to the group, are only half of the story that makes *The Likeness* so interesting. The other half is linked to the group of students themselves, who wanted nothing more than to live in an idealistically constructed academic utopia of pure *scholé*, which is itself reminiscent of Donna Tartt’s first novel, *The Secret History*. The same anti-capitalist moment of an academic ideal of life dedicated to the “unproductive” and “unprofitable” study of humanities (“How many jobs do you think there are for students of literature?”) that inspired Richard Papen to join the closed study group gravitating around professor Julian Morrow in the inverted murder mystery of *The Secret History* is here transposed from New England to Ireland, from one colonized country to another (“The English came and transformed the Irish from owners to tenants”). Through the history of Whitethorn House and its current state of affairs, we see the birth of capitalism from feudalism as if in a shadow theatre, where the relation of the former servants from Glenskehy towards the old non-working, pleasure-seeking aristocracy, is now replaced by the inherited antipathy of the proletarian-class townspeople towards the non-working, pleasure-seeking academic group living in the same house. The question of property ownership is the very material basis and link between both past and present aristocracies (since the moment of exploitation is obviously missing in the current relation of the students towards the townsfolk). Moreover, the

shared property of the house, besides providing a motive for the murder, was directed against capitalist society and its demands that they so profoundly despise, since their decision to live apart and build a future that is free from the constraints of labor and capital was implicitly guided by the communist ideal of collective property. This is apparent in Daniel's lengthy lecture on "Take what you want and pay for it" when he stated his reason for sharing the house ownership (*ibid.*, pp. 396–401): "You asked me what I wanted. I spent a lot of time asking myself the same thing. By a year or two ago, I had come to the conclusion that I truly wanted only two things in this world: the company of my friends, and the opportunity for unfettered thought" (*ibid.*, p. 399). Looking at the same detective story from this point of view one could say that their communist ideal got shattered not simply by Lexie's death when they found out she wanted to sell her share, but also by the very capitalist structure that does not allow such ideals.

In short, *The Likeness* has a very strong connection to *In the Woods* in terms of its *whosolvedit* existential search for one's own self that is interwoven with the main *whodunit* detective story (both demonstrating, in a way, how a traumatic past, if left unresolved, governs our future). But at the same time, it has an even stronger connection to the next suspect in line, *Faithful Place*, which adds even more Marxist undertones, thus continuing and developing the class-struggle moment towards which its immediate predecessor leant.

#### 4.3. Faithful Place (2010)

*Faithful Place* is atypical in terms of detective novels and is more of a murder mystery in the style of its predecessor, especially because the protagonist is now undercover detective Frank Mackey, who makes this novel the most "Irish" of the series alongside other characters and their idiomatic speech, and also due to the

insight we get into a poor working-class area inside the Liberties in Dublin.

In *The Likeness* we got used to Frank as the cynical, badass, sharp-tongued, bullet-proof head of “Operation Mirror,” which got former agent Maddox involved to such a degree that we see her most intimate fears and desires. In *Faithful Place* the same happens to Frank. In the Prologue we learn about how when he was nineteen—“old enough to take on the world and young enough to be a dozen kinds of stupid”—he slid one night out of his home, a den of toxic relations, to leave everything behind and go over to England. Rosie, the love of his life, had the tickets and should have been waiting for him, but instead he found a note in the abandoned house Number 16: “I didn’t take the note with me. By the time I left Number 16 I knew it by heart, and I had the rest of my life to try to believe it. I left it where it was and went back to the end of the road,” and by the end of the night “I was still waiting for Rosie Daly at the top of Faithful Place” (French 2010, p. 2). And as we soon see, she did not let him wait in vain for all those 22 years when a phone call reaches him in his chic “Twin Peaks” apartment in the Quays.

This is the psychological center of the novel, the defining trauma that made that romantic runaway teenager become “Frank Mackey”: first the decision that Rosie was the one thing he was willing to die for (“If you don’t know that...what are you worth? Nothing. You are no man at all,” said his father to him when he was thirteen); and second, the conviction that she left without him, which broke his heart and made him the suspicious, distrustful, cynical undercover agent that manipulates others and fabricates lies for a living (the ultimate embodiment of Ryan’s philosophy of truth from the opening paragraph of *In the Woods*). However, there is a third step in the development of the protagonist’s trauma: when they find Rosie’s suitcase with her clothes, birth-certificate, and the ferry-tickets, the body is not far from discovery either, and the realization that she had

not left him but was murdered performs a sudden twist in all his convictions that shakes him down to the bone:

Here's the real risk in Undercover, in the field and out: you create illusions for long enough, you start thinking you're in control. [...] No matter how good you are, this world is always going to be better at this game. It's more cunning than you are, it's faster and it's a whole lot more ruthless. All you can do is try to keep up, know your weak spots and never stop expecting the sucker punch. (*Ibid.*, p. 5)

The problem being, of course, that a sucker punch is by definition something that you cannot prepare for, and even when you prepare for the worst, it manages to slip past your defenses as an even worse one that makes a Möbius strip out of your intestines: in Frank's case the worst being that Rosie abandoned him, the sucker punch coming in the form of the even worse scenario that she was killed, which gives, somehow, at least a certain resolution for his trauma, since she did not abandon him after all. The desire to solve the murder thus drives him from this traumatic triple sucker-punch.

As we learn at the very beginning of the novel, Frank has other cracks in his armor apart from Rosie, like his ex-wife Olivia (a few social steps higher than his own humble origins), his young daughter Holly (who we will re-meet later on in her teenage years), and his ex-family, which he managed to keep at a distance until the case takes him back to "the bubbling cauldron of crazy that is the Mackeys at their finest." The Mackeys include the abusive alcoholic "da," the manipulatively hysterical "ma," his three siblings (his younger brother Kevin; the "dark and wiry and restless" Shay; and their sister Jackie), and the extended community of family and friends that attends the wake, when Frank realizes that the murderer is among them.

The official investigation is led by superstar detective Mick "Scorcher" Kennedy, whom Frank defines as a "pompous, rule-bound, boring git," and his sidekick junior detective Stephen

Moran, in whom Frank sees someone that can be easily manipulated into working with him on his own private “undercover” investigation. Interviews follow, theories pop-up, and as the events turn out, one evening Kevin unsuccessfully calls Frank several times, and the next morning turns up dead at the same abandoned Number 16 where Rosie’s body was found. Frank doesn’t give an inch to the theory that his little brother killed himself out of guilt over having killed Rosie, and is convinced that he was killed by the same person who killed his girlfriend. Led by intuition more than evidence, he suspects Shay, but has no proof and therefore visits his family one more time, taking his daughter Holly with him, thus breaking his own rule that she should not have contact with the Mackeys. A final showdown ensues in which Shay takes Holly to his room upstairs where Frank overhears the conversation between the two indicating that Holly had seen a note that made her deduce that her own uncle was the killer. After Frank enters the room and confronts his brother, Shay confesses, convinced that the evidence won’t hold up in a court of law — miscalculating Holly’s testimony that eventually nails him down.

The immediate motive of the murder was Shay’s resentment towards Frank when he found out that he wanted to leave him with his poor family, burdening him even more with an alcoholic, abusive father, and a broken-down, manipulative mother. When Shay confronted Rosie, trying desperately to make her change their plans, he killed her in a wave of rage. However, such a family condition cannot be attributed merely to personal psychological characteristics (abusiveness, manipulateness, resentment), but must also take into account the wider social context of capitalism and the specific economic conditions that the Mackeys, as all the other families of the poor neighborhood, live in. Thus, the reason for the motive itself is motivated not only by personal, psychological elements, but also by social, economic factors that define and at the same time escape the

subject, the true unconscious content being not any repressed desire for violence, but rather the violent socio-economic conditions themselves. One important lesson of psychoanalysis is that it always already takes social reality not as something on the outside, but rather something that is an integral part of the subject's psyche, which is itself the subjective bearer of objective social relations (like the infamous "Oedipus complex" demonstrates). Thus, Rosie's murder can be seen not only as personal revenge motivated by resentment and enacted in rage, but also as a symptom of class-struggle and capitalism that the family as a whole is subject to: "Nobody in the world can make you crazy like your family can," says Frank. Nobody but society, I add.

And it is from this same perspective of class-struggle in a capitalist society that another symptomatic link between social- and psychopathologies must be mentioned before proceeding: at the crucial moment of Shay's confession, Frank does not pull the trigger but rather calls in the detective. But it is not lead-detective Scorcher, the protagonist of *Broken Harbour* (the next novel here in line for inspection), but rather the over-ambitious junior detective Moran, who takes the credit for the arrest (as promised by Frank), thus going behind his boss's back in order to make a name for himself—a shadow that will follow him as the protagonist of *The Secret Place* (in which he is followed by Holly too), and as the side-kick in *The Trespasser* (the very last novel of the series).

#### 4.4 Broken Harbour (2012)

*Broken Harbour* moves away from the traumatic subjective perspective of the first three books and explicitly develops the class-struggle substance that was implicit in its predecessors—especially in *Faithful Place*—to its limit.

It is, from this perspective, a telling fact that this novel is the only one in the whole series that does not begin with a prologue recalling any past events (reminiscences come later on as they



should, piece by piece, fragmented, and not as a completely furnished narrative), but rather *in medias res* with the protagonist telling us directly: “Let’s get one thing straight: I was the perfect man for this case. You’d be amazed how many of the lads would have run a mile, given the choice—and I had a choice, at least at the start” (French 2012, p. 1). Michael “Scorcher” Kennedy is a narcissistic, self-aggrandizing, careerist, fame-seeking, proto-capitalist subject who is able to get things done regardless of the situation, victims, choices, or costs: “Because let’s get another thing clear, while we’re at it: I am bloody good at my job. I still believe that. I’ve been on the murder squad for ten years, and for seven of those, ever since I found my feet, I’ve had the highest solve rate in the place” (*ibid.*). And the second the case “hit the floor, I knew it was a big one”—meaning it will attract a lot of media attention: “It’s one of those new places; up the coast, past Balbriggan. Used to be called Broken Bay, something. ‘Broken Harbour’ I said. ‘Yeah. I know Broken Harbour.’ ‘It’s Briarstown now. And by tonight the whole country will have heard of it” (*ibid.*, p. 3). The case itself consists of a family found dead at their new home: “The victims were Patrick Spain, his wife Jennifer, and their kids, Emma and Jack. [...] It’s a family. Father, mother and two kids. The wife might make it. The rest are gone” (*ibid.*, pp. 5, 9). Regardless of the fact that the parents were stabbed with a knife and the children found smothered in their beds, he states his “Rule Number One, and you write this down: no emotions on scene. Count to ten, say the rosary, make sick jokes, do whatever you need to do” (*ibid.*, p. 9). Scorcher immediately wants it in his hands, confident that he can solve it in a blink: “Here’s what I’m trying to tell you: this case should have gone like clockwork. It should have ended up in the textbooks as a shining example of how to get everything right. By every rule in the book, this should have been the dream case” (*ibid.*, p. 2). However, what eventually ruins the case are elements that intrude into this clock-like mechanism that is his *modus operandi* not from the outside, but rather from the inside-out.

Superstar detective “Scorcher” Kennedy gets a whole team for this operation, together with Richie Curran, a “rookie on probation,” but this does not initially concern Scorcher a lot: “He’ll do fine. I’ll make sure he does.” (*Ibid.*, p. 5.) Ocean View is a housing estate in Bristow built during the height of the boom years when real estate appeared as the surest capitalist bet, now turned into a half-finished, semi-inhabited ghost-town, decaying, morbid, horrific in its broken-dream atmosphere. An allegory of post-capitalism and its end-of-the-world aesthetics, Ocean View is a character in itself: “At first glance, Ocean View looked pretty tasty: big detached houses that gave you something substantial for your money [...]. Second glance, the grass needed weeding and there were gaps in the footpaths. Third glance, something was wrong.” (*Ibid.*, p. 15.) Inside one of these houses lived the Spains; their living quarters were impeccable from top to bottom, from bedrooms to kitchen, except for one horrific detail: its walls are full of baby monitors and mysterious holes that are the object of various speculations—from plain irrational craziness to a drug-deal gone wrong—before we learn the truth that helps unravel the whole crime. A creature that is at the same time symbolic, imaginary, and real (much like in Doyle’s *Hound of the Baskervilles*) invaded the lives of this picture-perfect family and nested inside the very walls of their home. After investigating the home in detail—patiently, slowly, voyeuristically—the creature, supposedly a mink, was not the only one invading the family’s privacy, we learn. The neighbors were listening to the Spains via their radio, and in an unfinished building they find an improvised camp set up by a stranger who turns out to be not the “outsider” (a now already traditional suspect of the series), but rather an old friend of the Spains who gradually became over-concerned with their post-capitalist fate. Now, the solution to this murder mystery is that Patrick, the *pater familias* who lost his job due to the crisis, became so obsessed with getting rid of the creature in order to make everything

perfect again that he drove his wife Jennifer crazy to the point where she saw no other option than to kill her own children, husband, and herself—only that the next day she awoke in the hospital alive, forced to bear her unbearable life, and eventually confessing to the crime.

The intersubjective trauma of the Spains is mirrored by the detective's own trauma, which indirectly affects the whole investigation. Already before the two detectives arrive at their destination we learn that Scorcher has a personal link to Broken Harbour (not unlike Ryan to the woods of the first novel): as we learn from the man himself "Broken" derives from the Gaelic word for dawn, *breacadh*, and at the dawn of society as Kennedy remembers it, as well as at the dawn of his own subjectivity, everything was sunny and perfect. The place was his family's seaside resort where they spent some weeks every summer; but, as the economic boom, followed by the crisis, first modernized and then transformed "Broken Harbour" into "Brianstown," so Broken Harbour broke the subject—it was there that his mother committed suicide, driving his sister Dina crazy to the point that she invades the story when learning that her brother is investigating the traumatic locus. The detective's trauma is here not so much subjectively constitutive, but rather intersubjectively deconstructive, in the sense that it is more his sister's trauma than his own. Caring for her as she relapses into her worst state of mind takes him away from the investigation, but never too near his own traumatic past that he could not perform his duty, and only the unhappiest of coincidences (his sister's sleeping with his partner and taking a piece of evidence on the way out), combined with his co-detective's sloppiness (withholding the same piece of evidence from him due to his own ambition), ultimately obstructs the investigation, but does not prove to be conclusive in itself.

Structurally speaking, looking at the novel as a whole, the subjective element of trauma, and the desire that follows it as a

shadow running after shadows—for Kennedy “murder is chaos,” while the detective “stands against that, for order,” a desire that sprang from the early childhood trauma of his mother’s suicide, foreshadowing another mother’s homicide and attempted suicide at the same location—is not as constitutive as the much more substantial element of class-struggle in an objectively traumatic post-crash capitalist society. Regardless of the fact that it was Jennifer who did it, one still has the feeling that a murder out of compassion for her children due to Patrick’s craziness begs the question of *whodunit* not towards *whosolvedit* (as the first two books of the series do) but rather towards *whatcausedit* (as the third book did), thus re-asking the question of who or what is really responsible for driving the Spains crazy. The immediate answer—the creature inside the walls—is of course far too short: the creature is itself just the symptom of the shattered desires of the Spains for a normal, successful, happy life as promoted by capitalist ideology and as materialized in their pretty house. If there is a true cause for the murder it must be identified with the whole structural chain of signifiers that links the Spain’s home, understood materially as real estate, with the imaginary capitalist desire for a happy life, drilled through and through by the crash, which left a void in this very desire (in much the same vein that the house was full of holes due to the strange creature that thus metaphorically embodies the whole trauma and its desire).

And it is in this sense that *capitalism and schizophrenia*, the subtitle of *A Thousand Plateaus*, could perhaps most emblematically be applied precisely to the solution of this murder mystery that is *Broken Harbour*.

#### 4.5 The Secret Place (2014)

*The Secret Place* is a very singular installment of the series for various reasons that I will deal with in detail, but in broad strokes could be defined as a double movement of moving away from

the class-struggle perspective while at the same time exploring it further, focusing on the constitutive moment of trauma.

The novel begins with a reminiscence of Holly Mackey, and her friends from the elite St. Kilda boarding school for girls, before the murder of 16-year-old Chris Harper, from the equally elite Colm school for boys. The narrative follows-up this side of the story through in-between flash-back chapters, mainly following the teenage feud for survival and domination between two rival girl-gang groups. On the one hand, the roommates composed of Holly, who takes the initiative in solving the murder; Julia, the leader of the group who keeps the girls together; Becca, the sweet, naive, and over-emotional girl of the group; Selina, the beautiful and introverted one, who dated Chris before the murder and sees his ghost afterwards. On the other hand, there is their nemesis Joanne, the dominant alpha female of the "Daleks" pack of she-wolves, who also dated Chris; Gemma, her coquettish beta side-kick; Alison, the timid and easily frightened gamma; and Orla, the not-so-smart omega of the pack.

The novel proper begins years after the unsolved murder, when Holly brings a photo of Chris together with a note stating "I know who killed him," found at the eponymous "Secret Place" (a noticeboard where the girls can anonymously pin their innermost secrets), to Stephen Moran, now in Cold Cases (due to the back-stabbing of detective Kennedy, and due to Mackey putting in a good word for him):

She came looking for me [...] I didn't recognize her [...] I don't know if she recognized me. Maybe not. It had been six years, she'd been just a little kid [...] She let our admin say, "Detective Moran, there's someone to see you," pen pointing at the sofa, "Miss Holly Mackey." [...] A teenage girl, you watch yourself. A detective's kid, you watch twice as hard. But Holly Mackey: bring someone she doesn't want, and you're done for the day. (French 2014, pp. 5–6)

Moran knows, of course, that she is Frank's daughter from the past investigation at "Faithful Place." What he doesn't know (yet) is that he will intervene later in this one too in his distinctive style: "I know Holly's da, a bit. Frank Mackey, Undercover. You go at him straight, he'll dodge and come in sideways; you go at him sideways, he'll charge head down" (*ibid.*, p. 9). Moran, the persistent, career-oriented, social-ladder climber, sees in Holly's card a gift straight from heaven, and smells the possibility of moving forward ("Cold Cases is good. Murder is better"): "One thing about me: I've got plans. First thing I did, once I'd waved bye-bye to Holly and the social worker, I looked up the Harper case on the system. Lead detective Antoinette Conway" (*ibid.*, p. 13). Skillfully navigating his way by presenting the card and himself as a potential break-through in this cold-case now gone warm, Moran teams up with the abrasive detective Conway, both embarking on an intense investigation that will last one full day—every breath taken, word uttered, bone unearthed and ghost appearing described in detail.

The two detectives pick the most appropriate car for the job and drive to St. Kilda. There they first visit the head teacher Miss McKenna, who thought the whole thing that did so much damage to her elite bastion of education in the past was over, but now finds herself compelled to allow a series of interviews through which we get two-times-four suspects from both girl cliques that mutually accuse each other. Through these interviews that are a mix of detection and deception, and especially the flashbacks from the past that give us an insight into the rooms, the groove, the field, and the mall where the teens of both schools hang out—combined with hearing the girls talk their teen-speak, learning all the aspects of their mutual relationships, discovering their most intimate problems—it becomes apparent that French takes seriously Freud's scandalous lesson that childhood is far from innocent.

So, who is at the end discovered to be the killer among the list of eight suspects (plus the obligatory "outsider" figure)? Well,

this is, arguably, the weakest part of the novel since the author repeats the standard solution of picking the least obvious suspect (making it, again, the most obvious choice): namely, Becca, motivated by her friend Selina's suffering (Chris is messing with her heart and head), her other friend Julia's sexual sacrifice (she sleeps with Chris to steer him away from Selina), empowered by the magic power they discovered together (allowing them to manipulate electricity and make things flow), and armed with a sickle (stolen from the gardening storeroom). The process of detection that leads to the discovery is also somehow flawed, and in comparison to the other novels of the series, is not linked to any of the detective's trauma or even personal story, but rather enabled by the girls themselves where most of the traumas reside.

Still, the most interesting part is the contrast between the two detectives, both of humble working-class origins and each struggling in their own way, and the two groups of girls attending the elite boarding school. This aspect is not only beautifully depicted through the different styles pertaining to the main detective-story narrative and the teenage flashbacks into the past, respectively, but also conceptually well-crafted in terms of trauma, desire, and class-struggle. Conway, struggling with her career as a bad-ass feminist who does not conform to the patriarchic rules of the game yet still desiring recognition from the men she so deeply despises, and Moran, the ideal, capitalistic, careerist male who is prepared to do anything in order to obtain everything he desires, both eventually collide. Or almost do, when astute Frank intervenes in order to save his daughter Holly from the two detectives by trying to play one against the other—warning Conway about Moran's ambitions (as his past with detective Kennedy clearly demonstrates), and, vice versa, warning Moran about Conway's precarious status in the murder squad's boy's club. Eventually, they both decide not to throw the other under the bus to save themselves, and what both Conway and Moran experience as genuine adult dilemmas is also most

intensely present in the background of the two groups of girls and their somehow solipsistic and yet very much real problems: not only issues of first loves, emerging sexuality, questions of loyalty, popularity, and friendship, but also the over-arching fact that they are at school in order to become part of this grown-up world that seems so distant, unreachable, and alien to their own most intimate feelings and convictions. However, cause and effect should switch place here: it is not that the girls are alienated from the world because they are so self-absorbed, but rather that they are so self-absorbed because the world itself is so alien to them. The two groups take two opposite strategies to deal with it: the first one by secluding themselves from the outside world through forming a strong bond of closed-circle friendship that leads them together even to the practice of magic, the other group by swimming with the superficial mainstream that drags them deep into the catatonic, consumerist, cut-throat capital ideology.

The logic of alienation from social reality is embodied in Seline, one of the novel's most lovable characters. Experiencing the traumatic death of her beloved Chris—for whom she betrays the sacred bond of friendship—she gradually closes herself off not only from the outside world, but also from her friends, until Holly decides to take action by anonymously posting the card that she herself eventually takes to detective Moran (the last twist of the novel, which ends at the precise moment it begins with). And her bet is correct: discovering the killer not only solves Selena's subjective trauma, but also closes the case in objective social reality, where it also helps Moran's career and consolidates Conway's position in the murder squad.

An unlikely happy ending that never happened before in the series? Perhaps. Moran and Conway, who became partners for this cold case gone warm and from there to hot and burning, also star as colleagues in the last novel of the series, *The Trespasser*, which this time gives us a detailed insight into our thin red line



sewing together trauma, desire, and class-struggle at work in the Dublin murder squad itself.

#### 4.6 The Trespasser (2016)

*The Trespasser* returns to the style of the previous novels of the series, thus consolidating the relation between trauma, desire, and class-struggle that figure prominently in this last instalment of the series.

The novel begins like most of them begin, with fragmented reminiscences from the past detective Conway left behind, although not without consequences, since her father left and her mother “used to tell me stories about my da” (French 2016, p. 1)—invented stories, that is—thus making her wary of humans in general and males in particular. The characteristic of acute wariness towards fellow human beings, together with fearlessness in face of danger and a big mouth in front of authority, definitely makes Conway the “female Mackey” of the series. She stands in sharp contrast to her partner Moran, whom we already got used to as the guy who would do anything for his career, and who found himself in the middle of the murder squad trying to make a good impression: “At first I didn’t like him—everyone else did, and I don’t trust people who everyone likes, plus he smiled too much—but that changed fast” (*ibid.*, p. 10). The two detectives both joined the squad from different units—Conway from Missing Persons ahead of Moran from Cold Cases. Despite different stances toward a masculine, power-play working environment, and despite the fact that they had been partners for only four months when the murder case of *The Trespasser* hits them, they start to grow fond of each other, as partners in crime-solving often do.

Since they are both class-struggling in the murder squad, regarded by both as the highest career point one can reach (none of French’s characters fail to remind us that “Murder is where you

want to be”; “Give me murder any time”, etc.), they take whatever they can: “There is no other murder squad to transfer to; this is the one and only. If you want it, and both of us do, you take whatever it throws at you” (*ibid.*, p. 4). And when this case came in, the two of them took it without knowing that it was meant for them in a more profound and planned way than it seemed at first. Namely, what at first looked like a simple case of domestic violence—a girl named Aisslin found with her head smashed either by someone or by accident at the fireplace in her apartment, where dinner was set for two and the boyfriend was on his way—turns out to be connected to the murder squad itself, and that is why the superintendent O’Kelly, who in this novel demonstrates why he is the boss, gave the case to the least popular pair—precisely because he suspected a possible cover-up.

Everything about this case starts to stink, starting with Conway’s closet at the station into which one of her dick-headed colleagues pissed, apparently to have some sophomoric fun, only one of the many indecent incidents that Conway had to endure because she didn’t want to “play ball” (at the very first day on the squad someone grabbed her by the ass for fun but got his arm broken instead). Then there is the imposing figure of detective Breslin, who is attached to them as senior supervisor and is overly zealous to nail the very first suspect that is thrown at them, Aisslin’s boyfriend and bookstore owner Rory Fallon. As it turns out, there are no gangsters involved, but rather another boyfriend Aisslin was dating before meeting Rory, namely detective McCann, who once upon a time made the wrong call at the right turn of events. Conway and Aisslin shared the same trauma, since the victim’s dad was also missing and suspected dead for some time, when eventually McCann located him settled happily with another woman and decided not to tell his former wife or their daughter about what really happened out of a misplaced feeling of compassion. Aisslin, whom Conway at a certain point remembers from her own time at Missing Persons,

and who unlike herself did persist in the search of her father through the years until the point that she remade herself as a naive Barbie Doll in order to seduce detective McCann and get to the truth about her father. Which she eventually did and started to plan her *vendetta* against the man who decided to withhold the truth from her, the problem now being that at a certain point while working the clueless detective she met this great guy from the bookstore, Rory, whom she started dating and who genuinely liked her. But McCann was not only sexually seduced, but also fell in love with the beautiful girl that so admired him and his work, even to the point of leaving his wife and children—at which point Aisslin would have dumped him in order to get her revenge. In the end McCann sobs out in his confession during an interview led by O’Kelly, who takes the reins of the case from Conway and Moran. The night she was planning to have dinner with Rory, and already gave up her plan of ruining McCann’s life, McCann shows up at her door, learns that she is leaving him, begs for an explanation, saying “I cannot live without knowing why,” the irony of which makes her burst into laughter, lost on the poor wannabe lover, who smashes her head.

Conceptually speaking, we can see how Conway’s paternal trauma links her to the victim in a very personal way—although the two of them had two very distinctive ways of dealing with this trauma. Conway was already working at missing persons, where Aisslin kept returning in search of an answer—thus motivating further the desire to finish the investigation, as well as preventing her from seeing the solution of the murder mystery until the very end. The main detective’s gaze on the murder victim and the case functions as what in Lacanian psychoanalysis is known as *méconnaissance*, which in French denotes two different things: both ignorance (as if saying for something that you weren’t able to see: “I missed that!”) and knowledge (like, for example, when you exclaim in surprise: “I get it now!”). Conway’s moment of *méconnaissance* is precisely the moment when

she realizes how much alike the two of them were, and at the same time with two very different Oedipal stories to tell. The subject's desire of (re-)meeting the missing father—whose disappearance functions as trauma—which motivates Aisslin's camouflage into the spitting image of her mother in order to seduce the surrogate father-figure of detective McCann, is enacted as fantasy when Conway herself is visited by her longtime missing father. What happens? Reconciliation? No, nothing of the sort: Conway politely listens to what he has to say, and then chases him out never to see him again, thus repeating the trauma—only that this time she is in control of the traumatic event.

As for the resolution of the class-struggle part of this feminist story, it is noteworthy that it is also connected to Conway's patriarchal trauma, only that this time the fantasy is a complete change of the toxic environment that is the murder squad in which the female detective is completely surrounded by male enemies. However, in one of the final un-twists of the story, Moran turns out to be the moron that Conway always suspected him to be: instead of telling her that it was only one guy who pissed in her locker and some other similarly childish acts—and not the whole squad as she thought in her paranoid mind—he decided to keep it silent, apparently to motivate her to leave an environment she hated anyway, but in fact making room for himself, who was a lesser detective, yes, but still “a boy in a boy's club.” The patriarchal fantasy that she created can now be put to rest too—at least subjectively for her own peace of mind, if not in a socially objective way that would, however, need much more than a single struggling subject.

As we have seen, the *Trespasser's* distinctive feature is that it manages to merge both aspects we were dealing with thus far through the other novels of the series: through a feminist critique of patriarchal society, it directly linked the subjective trauma on the one hand and the social one on the other, thus demonstrating that psychoanalysis and Marxism in the final analysis address

the same issue of inequality from two different perspectives—and precisely from the perspective of both one cannot doubt the other side of inequality, namely, the quality of equality.

## 5. Conclusion

If there is one sentence that sums up the whole *Dublin Murder Squad* series, then it is this one from *In the Woods*: “It was these arcana I craved, these near-invisible textures like Braille, legible only to the initiated” (French 2007, pp. 11–12). Indeed, after reading all six books one becomes initiated into the near-invisible textures that French’s novels employ in order to crawl under our skins, where they stay at least until the moment when one is able to discern the recurring structural elements that the whole series builds around. As we have seen, the central element is that of trauma: the past and present, collective traumas of Irish society, from its fairy and feudal Celtic tradition to the class-struggle pertinent to the modern Celtic Tiger, as well as the individual traumas of the detectives, which motivate their subjective, personal desire to solve the murders while at the same time preventing them from seeing the solution to the case—or at least not without a dialectical, intersubjective relation with their partners in crime-solving. Each murder—violent, traumatic, but also aestheticized, well-crafted—thus functions in the novels not merely as the enigma driving the narrative forward, but also as a structural intersection between the many levels of the individual, intersubjective, and collective. The murders also stand in meta-textual relation to the reader, who is the only one able to connect all the dots. However, what was fresh and novel, especially early in the series, becomes obsolete through repetition. As if the author herself noticed that as she tried to cut the knot of the series by writing two stand-alone novels—*The Witch Elm* (2018) and, most recently, *The Searcher* (2020)—in

which she re-employed the same structural elements used before in order to create something new outside the milieu of the Dublin's murder squad. However, what both novels did was merely a deconstruction of the texture with which the whole series was interwoven—which will, perhaps in the future, allow for something new to happen in detective fiction—thus confirming the old Beckettian adage: “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”

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# On Man's Right to Be Jealous, and Woman's Duty to Induce Her Own Demise

*Lidija Šumah*

## *On the Right to Be Jealous*

Jealousy is commonly discussed as a problem. However, with Kant, jealousy becomes a solution. In his commentary on Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Michel Foucault writes that

as [a] violent form of interaction which objectifies a woman to the point where she can simply be destroyed, [jealousy] is also a recognition of her value; indeed, only the absence of jealousy could reduce a woman to a piece of merchandise, where she would be interchangeable with any another. The right to be jealous—to the point of murder—is an acknowledgement of a woman's moral freedom. (Foucault 2008, p. 43)

The quote captures the passage from feudal model of ownership prevalent within the juridical thought in the 16th century to the forms of ownership between individuals that started to preoccupy juridical, as well as philosophical, discussions in the second half of the 18th century. The juridical thought of the 16th century focused on defining the relationship between an individual and the state or between an individual and “the thing in the abstract form of property,” whereas 18th-century discussions place the focus on forms of ownership amongst individuals “in the concrete and particular forms of the couple, the family group,

the home, and the household” (*ibid.*, p. 40). The inquiry into the forms of ownership amongst individuals led Kant to formulate his own doctrine on matrimonial law that was soon to become, and continues to be, one of the most discussed and problematic theories of marriage, giving way to fierce criticism.

One of these criticisms was directed against Kant’s conception of sexual union (*commercium sexuelle*) as a reciprocal use of sexual organs and capacities (*usus membrorum et facultatum sexualium alterius*) that Kant based on the distinction between conceptions of natural and unnatural union. In his *Lectures on Ethics*, Kant writes:

I give the other person ... a right over my whole person, and this happens only in marriage. Matrimonium signifies a contract between two persons, in which they mutually accord equal rights to one another, and submit to the condition that each transfers his whole person entirely to the other, so that each has a complete right to the other’s whole person. (Kant 1997, p. 388)

For Kant, sexual union is considered natural only insofar as it is a union between persons of two different sexes (capable of procreation). The sexual union is further understood as a special type of contract (marriage) based on a mutual promise. With marriage, one promises the other an exclusive right not just over the use of one’s sexual organs but over one’s entire body. It is from this premise that man’s right of possessing the woman’s entire body extends to the point of its full destruction.

Kant provides the most condensed presentation of his doctrine in the section “On Rights to Persons Akin to Rights to Things” of his *Metaphysics of Morals*, where he defines this right as “that of possession of an external object *as a thing* and use of it *as a person*” (Kant 1996, p. 95). Already in Kant’s lifetime, the idea spurred accusations of inapt legalism (see, for instance, Vorländer 1893, 1904). Similarly, in his *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel argued that Kant’s contractual view of marriage cannot be

seen as premised on “a right over a person, but only over something external to the person or something which the person can dispose of, i.e. always a thing.” (Hegel 2003, p. 72)<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in another critical approach, Christian Gottfried Schütz’s reading of *Metaphysics of Morals* resulted in an exchange of letters with Kant at a time when he was finishing his *Anthropology* (Kant 1999, pp. 520–522). For Schütz, the doctrine had quite a few problematical points, which Kant then addressed in a letter dated 10 July 1797. The main objection involved the problem of subordination and objectification of woman by man that reduces her to a mere thing or an exchangeable good (*res fungibilis*).<sup>2</sup> Out of this follows a special type of satisfaction (which finds its model in cannibalism) that man gains from his—to use Kant’s term—acquisition. Kant rejects Schütz’s objection by asserting that marriage cannot be seen as a mere “mutual subordinatum” (*mutuum adiutorium*), but rather on the contrary, mutual subordination is “the necessary legal consequence of marriage, whose possibility and condition must first be investigated.” (*Ibid.*, p. 521)

Here, Kant’s views (as already underscored by Hegel) still belong to and hinge upon the feudal model of ownership. However, what is key here is Foucault’s insight that it is only and precisely by the absence of jealousy that the woman is reduced to an exchangeable piece of merchandise. If man’s right to be jealous extends to

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<sup>1</sup> “For Kant, personal rights are those rights which arise out of a contract whereby I give something or perform a service—in Roman law, the *ius ad rem* which arises out of *obligatio*. Admittedly, only a person is obliged to implement the provisions of a contract, just as it is only a person who acquires the right to have them implemented. But such a right cannot therefore be called a personal right; rights of *every* kind can belong only to a person, and seen objectively, a right based on contract is not a right over a person, but only over something external to the person or something which the person can dispose of, i.e. always a thing.” (*Ibid.*, pp. 71–72)

<sup>2</sup> Schütz to Kant: “You cannot really believe that a man makes an object out of a woman just by engaging in marital cohabitation with her, and vice versa.” (Kant 1999, p. 521)

the point of murder, then, following Foucault, it is precisely her expendability that makes the woman unexpendable. Here, Kant's idea of marriage, complemented by Foucault's insightful suggestion, shows a striking similarity with the conceptions of marital jealousy as proposed by structural anthropology (Lévi-Strauss) and (Lacanian) psychoanalysis.

### *The Art of Producing Nothing, or Two Types of Nothing*

In psychoanalysis, the relation between subject and object is never symmetrical. Despite the fact of their internal intertwining, the object and the subject cannot form a harmonious union, nor can they be in a conjunctive relationship, but rather are placed in a relation of radical disjunction. However, what is radical about this relation is the reversal of its (traditional philosophical) understanding. The psychoanalytic object is an internalized exteriority; however, the object's internalized nature does not make it reducible to the subject. An unbridgeable gap is created between them, which is precisely the result of their (non)relation. In this regard, Jacques Lacan puts forth two contexts in which the object appears in relation to this irreducible gap.

For the purpose of this article, suffice it to focus only on one of these two contexts, namely on the possibility of closing this gap in which the object appears as the object-cause of desire. Here, the subject is completely absorbed such that no room is left for subjectivization. In its place the fantasy emerges, representing a specific mode by which this gap between the subject and the object is closed or, more precisely, neutralized. The fantasy is there so that the constitutive gap could be (at least) ostensibly covered; the fantasy bridges the fissure that arises from the constitutively asymmetrical relationship between the subject and the object of desire. But could we not also say that the fantasy is not only there to cover the gap between subject and object, but that it also serves

to fill the void of the object itself? The true nature of the object-cause of desire is that it is an originally lost object that coincides with its own loss and hence is nothing but this loss itself. In other words, for Lacan, the object first appears only through the search for the lost object. Thus, the object is always a re-found, or re-discovered, object, i.e., an object that is itself caught up in the search for it (see Lacan 2020, pp. 18-32, p. 52).

If the void of this object, which arises from it being always-already lost, can only be filled by fantasy-construction, are we then led to positing two forms of fantasy? One that serves to fill the void of the object *and* another that neutralizes the gap between the subject and the object, thus placing them in an unproblematic relation? To avoid a possible misunderstanding (or, worse, conceptual nonsense), we must add the following: the subject fills the void of the object by itself becoming this void since the void of the object depends not so much on the object itself, but rather is a matter of the subject, its own subject-matter. This mechanism does not posit an unconditioned action on the part of a supposedly autonomous subject. It presupposes a subject which does not create its object, neither does it simply rediscover the lost object. Rather, the loss of the object is the consequence of the subject's refinding of it:

It is precisely in this field that we should situate something that Freud presents, on the other hand, as necessarily corresponding to the find itself, as necessarily being the *wiedergefundene* or re-found object. Such is for Freud the fundamental definition of the object in its guiding function, the paradox of which I have already demonstrated, for it is not affirmed that this object was really lost. The object is by nature a re-found object. That it was lost is a consequence of that—but after the fact. It is thus re-found without our knowing, except through the refinding, that it was ever lost. (Lacan 1992, p. 118)

Thus, what is re-found as object is nothing but the void of the subject. The refinding of the lost object is only possible through

the “medium” of fantasy, which serves a protective function, guarding the subject against its own negativity. The logic is exemplified by pottery. Pottery is a complex process entailing, and dependent upon, a generative power. The process begins with the absence of the object-pottery and ends with the establishment of an enigmatic symbolic bond which, by way of identification, transforms the (female) potter into the object. When analyzing the relation between potter and pottery, Claude Lévi-Strauss maintains that the potter is not merely “the cause of the pottery,” adding that if “[b]efore it was physically external to it, it is now ... integrated into the pottery.” (Lévi-Strauss 1988, p. 181)

The quote from *The Jealous Potter* perfectly indicates the point where Lévi-Strauss’ potter meets Lacan’s subject. The two are tied together by their relation to the object. Lacan’s subject comes to terms with the primordial loss by way of searching for the lost object. It does so by becoming this void, just like the potter “presentifies” the absence of pottery by herself *becoming* this absence. The skill of pottery requires not only deliberate and correct movements, attention to the smallest mistakes in the process itself, but, first and foremost, for the pottery to come as close as possible to its model—i.e., to *the model, which is there precisely as absent/lost*. A clay vase, for example, must be modeled after the original, otherwise it is not a vase. But the original is problematic because it is absent/lost. The problem with the original, which the potter must carefully imitate, is hence precisely the problem of emptiness that confronts Lacan’s subject. Both the subject and the potter must make do and content themselves with copies—the subject with a phantasmatic object, the potter with a copy of the original vase. They must make do with copies of structurally lost originals, which can only be thought against the backdrop of this primordial loss.

By forming pottery around its constituting absence, the potter simultaneously produces something else and something more than a mere empirical circumference, which fails to satisfy her creativity. The potter is precisely the producer of nothing that was not

there prior to the potting process and that emerges simultaneously with the circumferential, empirical object. Nothing emerges at the exact moment when the potter begins to model the clay rim and is a by-product of the pottery-making process. Thus, the potter does not simply outline the object, which would be nothing but the effect of a change in the physical state of the clay mass. By producing the physical object, the potter simultaneously produces nothing that wasn't there before. Pottery is productive of a *surplus scarcity* (see Santner 2022, p. 143, *passim*) indicative of a surplus-knowledge inherent in the art of pottery.

Such would be the classic schema, which, however, considers only one side of the story. The quote from Lacan unequivocally states that the loss of the object is a consequence of the finding of it. The object is —not found, but rather—lost through the subject's finding of it. To better understand this point, *nothing* (inherent in the logic of finding, as well as creating of the object) must be considered more closely.

*First*, we must presuppose nothing, which is surrounded by nothing and which, prior to the intervention of the potter *qua* subject, has no positivity. This nothing is precisely the emptiness or absence of the object highlighted by Lacan and Lévi-Strauss. Then there is the undifferentiated clay-mass, the Platonic Khôra, i.e., the formless stuff that, prior to the mediation by the demiurge/subject/potter, contains no positive qualities. And then there is nothing that serves as a model or idea of the original pottery, the ideal model of the primordial object. If clay is bare undifferentiated matter, then the original is a bare undifferentiated form. This nothingness does not exist prior to a concrete product that couples and thus actualizes the undifferentiated couple. Just like there is no object prior to fantasy, there is nothing prior to the act of creation. The nothing at issue here is a product of creation and hence a pre-ontological nothing preceding any ontological positivity.

*And second*, there is the ontological nothing, which —unlike the pre-ontological nothing of the *creatio ex nihilo*—pertains to



*creatio nihil*, or the creation of nothing itself. It is this nothing that the potter must bring closer to the original. The process is extremely tricky: for the art of pottery to bear fruit, the producer must rely on the elusive *comparison of nothing with nothing*. The differentiated nothing is precisely the *form* of absence of pottery itself, i.e., the nothing created together with its enclosing boundary, attaching itself to the previously non-existent form. Thus, nothing is redoubled and split into two: there is nothing inherent in the positive absence of pottery, and then there is nothing inherent to its enclosing boundary, or: nothing as the primordial void of the object, and nothing as pertaining to the subject's fantasy-object. This duality of nothing(s) forms a necessary (historically antecedent) presupposition, but the two modes do not emerge in sequence. The negative precursor to nothing, which would be subsequently followed by its positivization, is the effect of this positivization itself, such that talking about the first (primordial) and second (derived) nothing amounts to a rationalization of this duality. Rather, the emphasis should be on the fact that prior to finding the object the subject could not have known anything of the object-void which emerges only with the emergence of the enclosing boundary/fantasy. Put differently: we would know nothing of the preceding absence had the potter not given it its material form. Without the positive nothing of the *creatio nihil* there is no negative *ex nihilo*.

Let us stop for a moment to consider the object characterized by Lacan in *Seminar VII* as occupying a tricky intermediate position between barely being and not yet being an object. Lacan's introduction of this mysterious object (*das Ding*) appears somewhat abruptly in his theory, however, what seems truly abrupt is his swift abandonment of it. The concept provides us with a peculiar solution to the conundrum of the subject's relation to the object. The *irreal* nature of the Thing seems to highlight the aforementioned central paradox of the lost object as something not actually lost. Herein lies the necessary and decisive shift, as

well as the true conceptual value, of Lacan's *Ethics*. *Das Ding* is conceived of as an undifferentiated object, which simultaneously *is* and *is not yet* an object. As such, it remains irreducible to the status of the object discussed above. *Das Ding* is neither a phantasmatic object, nor can it be equated with the void of the object but is rather something pulsating in-between the subject and the object-void. *Das Ding*, we could say, is a false harbinger of a past, or primordial, loss. As such, it relates to the Real in a way that escapes us, which prompts Lacan to conclude that the "question of *das Ding* is still attached to whatever is open, lacking, or gaping at the center of our desire." (Lacan 1992, p. 84)

So far, only one aspect of the subject's relationship with the object has been addressed. Let us now see how this bond manifests itself in relation to affect. The love-object and pottery share a paradigmatic relation to jealousy. In what follows, I will highlight this minimal relation to jealousy in two distinct ways. In the first step, I will focus on the exchange economy of the love-object and pottery: love is essentially exclusive ("When I love, I am exclusive!" Freud says in a slightly more private tone) and hence, at least in principle, is not a matter of exchange. Rather, love pertains to gift-economy, the paradoxes of which were convincingly defined by Marcel Mauss. The love-object is exempt from exchange and is therefore essentially an object without exchange-value (or without an equivalent). In the second step I will focus on jealousy by providing its formula while defending the thesis that — within the framework of affect-theory — the logic of the subject's relation to the primordially lost object is precisely that of jealousy.

In *The Jealous Potter*, Lévi-Strauss's emphasis on the jealous nature of pottery as evidenced in South American myths strikes the reader as only tangentially touching on the key premise indicated in the book's title. Lévi-Strauss does provide a series of descriptive examples, referring to various myths and their convergences, but stops short of providing a more general definition. Thus, the conclusion of Lévi-Strauss' book seems to refer the

reader back to its initial question: “Is there a connection between pottery and jealousy?” Though often neglected, it is precisely the loving relationship tying the potter to her final product that seems best suited to guide us in answering this key question. The pottery-making process creates a bond between potter and pottery-in-the-making—a bond determined by the circumferential fantasy, i.e., with the potter’s imaginary representation of the object, which will ultimately give the product its final form while also bringing it into a thwarted and problematic relationship with the original. During the process, the potter’s fantasy relating to the finished image of pottery literally “sticks to” matter in giving it its shape. The decisive problem, however, that introduces the topic of affectivity only enters the process after the fact, i.e., when the product is finished and the potter has to part with it.

As long as pottery is being made, the potter is not separated from it; but the moment the product is finished—taking on, for instance, the shape of a vase—the potter-producer must separate herself from it so that her product may enter exchange. The product thus becomes a useful object for others satisfying the others’ needs. The key problem at issue here is not so much that the potter loses her product, but that her product, once it has taken on its final shape, is *socially reshaped* as a mere utilitarian object, thus losing its surplus-value, or aura, granted to it by its phantasmatic character. And it is precisely at the point of this social recasting of the object that jealousy enters the picture. The potter is jealous because she feels robbed not of her pottery but rather of its phantasmatic surplus scarcity. There is a flipside to this process: since the aura of the object results from its place within the subject’s fantasy, the melting away of the aura brought about by the social reshaping of the object is correlative with the dissipation, *aphanisis*, of the subject.

*The Right to Be Jealous and the Duty to Induce Jealousy*

In his analysis of the Dora case, Freud shows how Dora becomes an object of exchange. At the core of all of Dora's jealous impulses lied a tacit agreement between Mr. K. and Dora's father who had, Dora was convinced, handed her off to Mr. K. as a kind of reward for patiently putting up with his own relationship with Mrs. K. Dora's father could not simply have handed Dora over to someone else without her ceasing to figure as his love-object. Here, we once again come across a split introduced into the love relationship by the logic of symbolic economy. For the father to be able to put her surplus-object into circulation, he first had to annihilate it; by allowing that her agalma be used by another, the father effectively reduced Dora to a mere object of exchange. Mediated by her father's gesture, Dora (like the potter) passes from the order of "being" (the agalma) to the order of "having" (the agalma), insofar as we understand this change as the direct result of these two oppositions. This transition draws love into symbolic relationships and thus into the economy of exchange. Put differently: we are dealing with two positions that mark the relation of the subject to the object. But the opposition is not only one between two heterogeneous orders, but is inherent to both and can be further defined by two questions: "Am I or am I not the object-cause of the Other's desire?" and "Do I possess or not the object for the Other?" In the first case, the object arises as agalma, in the second, it arises as a phallic object that introduces the logic of exception or, in economic terms, of competition.

Both positions entail their specific internal ambivalences, or intrinsic fluctuations, which, in affective terms, point toward two types of jealousy differentiated in accordance with the masculine/feminine divide. This is clearly evidenced by the example of the potter which entails the subject's imaginary, and hence narcissistic, relation to the object preceding their symbolic separation ("If before it was physically external to her, now [...] she is integrated into the pottery," writes Lévi-Strauss in the already

quoted passage). The ambivalence of the second type is not the result of the transition to the always-already operative symbolic economy, but rather is the result of the uncertain relationship between “have” and “have not”, which defines the logic of *envy* as it relates to the problem of possession.

By entering the order of exchange, Dora is reduced to a useful object, or mere property. The Lévi-Straussian example showed that this is a double reduction of pottery *and* the potter to the status of a use-object. The potter is reduced to a mere *producer* of useful objects and therefore deprived of her status as the object’s *creator*. In the order of “being”, the image of the potter relates to the idea that the object is solely hers, while in the order of “having” this image dissolves in the idea that the object-subject can and is possessed by others. The transition from the order of “being” to the order of “having” entails a further moment. Affectively speaking, this transition entails a move from the field of love to that of hatred. It entails the move from feminine to masculine jealousy, or, more specifically, a transition from jealousy to envy.

The effects of jealousy thus arise from a discrepancy between two fundamental positions — “to have or not to have” and “to be or not to be.” The oppositional elements entailed in each of the two positions are inherently variable, or unstable, and can easily turn into their opposite. A subject previously registering under one position can easily pass into the opposing register, such that nothing guarantees the subject’s existence in its desired place. Jealousy is the affective indicator of the uncertainty of this process. It is situated within at border region separating the opposing terms, occupying their very edge. A similar thesis can be found in Lévi-Strauss, when he writes that “jealousy tends to create or support a state of conjunction when there is a state of threat of disjunction” (Lévi-Strauss 1988, p. 173). Jealousy, in this respect, arises from the desire to be attached to someone or something that has been taken away from you, but it can also be understood as a desire for someone or something that the subject structurally does not

and cannot possess. Accordingly, could we not say that jealousy is not merely a sign of suspicion regarding the love-object, but first and foremost an eminent sign of the subject's asymmetrical relationship with the originally/primordially lost object? Jealousy tends toward unity with the object—unity provoked by the threat of separation.

From here, let us return to the basic dichotomy of love and hatred so fundamental to jealousy. Jealousy is always a stranger within the field of love, but a stranger that is not simply external to the sphere of love, but rather inherent to it. Oriented by an image of an external imposter disturbing the love-relation, jealousy is itself the native imposter in the sphere of love. Hatred—which, in jealousy, represents an internal threat to love—is fueled by love itself, such that we can describe it in Hegelian terms as love in its oppositional determination. In jealousy, hatred emerges as the Real core of love, distinguishing the latter from its supposedly isolated polar opposite. This ambivalence, therefore, does not point to an external dissonance, where hate would impose upon and hinder love from the outside. Rather, it accentuates their internal intertwining, or the inherent/primordial nature of the ambivalent conflict:

And in fact such a protracted survival of two opposites is only possible under quite peculiar psychological conditions and with the co-operation of the state of affairs in the unconscious. The love has not succeeded in extinguishing the hatred but only in driving it down into the unconscious; and in the unconscious the hatred, safe from the danger of being destroyed by the operations of consciousness, is able to persist and even to grow. (Freud 1955, p. 239)

Jealous hatred stands for the *becoming unconscious* of hatred as inherent to love.<sup>3</sup> The ambivalence between love and hate that

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<sup>3</sup> I borrow this turn of phrase from Santner: “*we never cease becoming unconscious of what has no part in the field of knowledge.*” (Santner 2020, p. 65)

manifests itself at the level of jealousy is its structural feature and must be related back to the discussed disjunctive threat that pertains to the subject's relationship with its primordially lost object. In every love-object, the subject finds the originally lost object, with the latter effectively defining the very essence of the object of love. The specificity of the originally lost object is precisely that the subject does not possess it, that it is, so to speak, originally separated from it. But since the loss is primordial, love itself is essentially characterized by an ambivalent conflict, or jealousy. Love is either jealous or else it is not love at all. The subject of jealousy tends toward bridging this original disjunction to establish a conjunctive relationship with its object. The affect that accompanies this representation signals the elimination of the original disjunction. That which has been originally lost thus arises as a result of the find. Thus, strictly speaking, the loss is not Real; what is Real is the threat of it.

This brings us back to Kant's doctrine of matrimonial law. In his *Anthropology*, Kant associates the end of pain of love with the end of love itself. He thus connects the presence of jealous impulses to the very essence of love, suggesting that love inherently involves feelings of jealousy. Though abstractly referring to the fear or apprehension of losing the affection or attention of a loved one to someone or something else, for Kant, jealousy is inherently *gendered*, but in a very specific way. On first approach, it may seem that, for Kant (and Foucault), there is no other jealousy except for masculine jealousy. However, I want to conclude with a slightly more nuanced and critical point.

It is not jealousy as such that is reserved for the husband, but rather the *right* to be jealous. We've already pointed out the paradoxical status of this right: jealousy signals simultaneously the woman's reduction *and* the impossibility of her reduction to a mere object of utility. I take Foucault's point regarding this "right to be jealous—to the point of murder—[as] an acknowledgement of a woman's moral freedom." However, such an understanding

of moral freedom entails a suicidal consequence. Is man's *right* to be jealous not matched, or complimented, by woman's *duty* to induce jealousy in man? And does this duty not entail the double meaning of "demise" in the sense of, firstly, transferring of the woman *qua* property to another man (thus prompting her husband to exercise his right to be jealous) by which, secondly and consequently, the woman brings on her own demise (is, ultimately, murdered)? Is this duty to induce jealousy not the problematic consequence of Schütz's and Foucault's assertion of the woman's freedom, or moral subjectivity? Can the false heroism of the freedom to dutifully orchestrate one's own murder truly be praised as a liberating effect of matrimony?

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# Aesthetics for Hypochondriacs: Kantian Illusions, Sex Phobia, and Self-Soothing Philosophy

*Eric Reinhart*

On the whole, the more civilized human beings are, the more they are actors. They adopt the illusion of affection, of respect for others, of modesty, and of unselfishness without deceiving anyone at all, because it is understood by everyone that nothing is meant sincerely by this. And it is also very good that this happens in the world. For when human beings play these roles, eventually the virtues, whose illusion they have merely affected for a considerable length of time, will gradually really be aroused and merge into the disposition. But to deceive the deceiver in ourselves, the inclinations, is a return again to obedience under the law of virtue and is not a deception, but rather an innocent illusion of ourselves. / An example of this is the disgust with one's own existence, which arises when the mind is empty of the sensations toward which it incessantly strives. This is boredom, in which one nevertheless at the same time feels a weight of inertia, that is, of weariness with regard to all occupation that could be called work and could drive away disgust because it is associated with hardships, and it is a highly contrary feeling whose cause is none other than the natural inclination toward ease (toward rest, before weariness even precedes). But this inclination is deceptive, even with regard to the ends that reason makes into a law for the human being, it makes him content with himself when he is doing nothing at all (vegetating aimlessly), because he at least is not doing anything bad. To deceive it in return (which can be done by playing with the fine arts, but most of all through social conversation) is called passing time (*tempus fallere*), where the expression already indicates the intention, namely to

deceive even the inclination toward idle rest. We are passing time when we keep the mind at play by the fine arts, and even in a game that is aimless in itself within a peaceful rivalry at least the culture of the mind is brought about—otherwise it would be called killing time. Nothing is accomplished by using force against sensibility in the inclinations; one must outwit them and, as Swift says, to surrender a barrel for the whale to play with, in order to save the ship. (Kant 2006, pp. 42–43)

Time is everything, man is nothing; he is, at most, time's carcass. (Marx 1956, p. 59)

The original task of a genuine revolution . . . is never merely to “change the world,” but also—and first of all—to “change time.” Modern political thought has concentrated its attention on history, and has not elaborated a corresponding conception of time. Even historical materialism has until now neglected to elaborate a concept of time that compares with its concept of history. Because of this omission it has been unwittingly compelled to have recourse to a concept of time dominant in Western culture for centuries, and so to harbor, side by side, a revolutionary concept of history and a traditional experience of time. The vulgar representation of time as a precise and homogeneous continuum has thus diluted the Marxist concept of history: it has become the hidden breach through which ideology has crept into the citadel of historical materialism. (Agamben 2007, p. 91)

In the wake of the co-constitutive advent of European Enlightenment, capitalism, and colonialism, ‘experience’ has been widely structured—the world over—by epistemological systems formulated by European philosophers and the normative regimes of subjectivity, economy, and government with which they have been entwined.<sup>1</sup> The work of Immanuel Kant, and particularly his

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<sup>1</sup> For key references on the entwinement of European philosophy, colonialism, and capitalism and its consequences for the scaffolding of subjectivity beyond Europe, see Robert C. Young's *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (Young 1990); Gayatri Spivak's *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*:

transcendental aesthetic, is central to this ideological formation within which contemporary being and politics remain largely subsumed. It is with the hope of unsettling this subsumption that I return below to Kant's concept of time in *Critique of Pure Reason* and consider it alongside his uses of time in the management of his own self-diagnosed hypochondriasis, sexual desire, and fear of insanity. By bringing the philosopher's psychic needs and the work of philosophy into explicit interrelation, I attempt to read the latent desire and its phobic inversions embedded in modern epistemology and to trace their persistent operation in subsequent Hegelian and Marxist theorizations of history and revolutionary form.

How much of contemporary theory, political thought, and everyday experience is ultimately an indirect product of a sex-phobic hypochondriac's defenses against desire? What is the relation between transcendental philosophy—with its *a priori* delimitation of experience—and psychic structure as we might understand it through theorizations of obsessional neurosis and psychosis? And what possibility might there be for cultivating subversive possibilities through the very traditions of thought that now supply the means of our own subjectification and domination? These are among the questions motivating what follows.



Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* has marked time—in philosophical discourse, normative practices of being under capitalism, and state apparatuses—since its publication. Its Introduction famously opens with the declaration that experience is the basis of all knowledge:

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*Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Spivak 1999); Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Chakrabarty 2000); and Sylvia Wynter's "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument." (Wynter 2003)

There is no doubt whatever that all our cognition begins with experience; for how else should the cognitive faculty be awakened into exercise if not through objects that stimulate our senses and in part themselves produce representations, in part bring the activity of our understanding into motion to compare these, to connect or separate them, and thus to work up the raw material of sensible impressions into a cognition of objects that is called experience? As far as time is concerned, then, no cognition in us precedes experience, and with experience every cognition begins. (Kant 1998, p. 136)

Kant insists upon the tethering of truth to experience, even as the above statement already suggests two disparate uses of experience that complicate its claim.<sup>2</sup> Kant distinguishes between 1) the process by which we “work up the raw material of sensible impressions”—that is, cognitive elements that condition our reception of stimuli; and 2) “a cognition of objects that is called experience,” which pertains to our perception of objects themselves following their processing by the mind. His theory of time places it in the first of these frames: it is a property belonging to the workings of the mind rather than to the world external to us. Time cannot be identified as an object. It exists prior to and beneath the object. Time, then, as the counterpart of space, is said by Kant to belong to the transcendental aesthetic—his foundational formulation that both escapes and subtends knowledge as necessarily arising from experience of the phenomenal world.

Time and space are conditions of possibility for Kant’s epistemology. They are pure, pre-empirical forms of intuition that provide the conditions upon which our perception of the empirical world reach our cognitive faculties. As Kant writes in the first part

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<sup>2</sup> There is an equivocation between two uses of “experience” in the quoted two sentences: the first is that of unmediated sensible impression before interpretation and the second that of knowledge of objects after the transformation of impressions into conceptual, categorical meanings. This is a more complicated issue than I am able to take up here. For a discussion of this point, see Beck 1998, pp. 103–116.

of *Critique of Pure Reason* devoted to the transcendental aesthetic, space and time are not entities that subsist in and of themselves but rather are non-empirical forms of intuition that depend upon the subjective constitution of the mind and are transcendently ideal—that is, unitary and universal.<sup>3</sup> Time is the precondition for our encounter with the phenomenal:

Time is not an empirical concept that is somehow drawn from an experience. For simultaneity or succession would not themselves come into perception if the representation of time did not ground them *a priori*. Only under its presupposition can one represent that several things exist at one and the same time (simultaneously) or in different times (successively). (Kant 1998, p. 162)

In order for two different people to be able to share a common experience—or even for one person to have consistent experience at two different points in time—and thus for the possibility of scientific knowledge and rational social organization, there must be a shared pre-empirical basis for processing the material of sensible impressions into knowledge of objects. Time is for Kant the crux of the *a priori* mental apparatus upon which the possibility of common knowledge depends. And he proceeds to erect his critical, moral, and political philosophy on this basis.

Structurally, within the architecture of Kant's critical philosophy, *a priori* time could be said to function as a strategy for

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<sup>3</sup> With this theory of time, Kant resolves a long-standing debate between Newtonians and Leibnizians. The former held that time and space are self-subsisting entities that exist outside of objects; the latter explained time and space as properties inhering in objects themselves. Kant refuses both positions, maintaining that time is neither a self-subsisting thing-in-itself nor simply a property of objects; instead, time is a transcendental form of sensibility that underwrites the mind's experience and representation of objects. Thus, as a transcendental ideal, Kant can assign stable, universal characteristics to time that hold across objects and persons without needing to consider time as a thing-in-itself. For further elaboration of Kant's intervention in the Newton-Leibniz debate, see Guyer and Wood 1998 see also Shabel 2010.

outwitting the mind's irrational inclinations and sensibilities. By dismissing the varieties of felt time and non-linearity in being as incompatible with what Kant accords the value of "experience," *a priori* time is, to invoke the above epigraph from Kant's anthropology, a tool by which he "deceives the deceiver" of sensuous existence and produces "an innocent illusions of ourselves" as governable by pure reason.

In this construct of time that is meant to be conducive to Enlightened self-governance and social order, time is a single continuous line. It has only one dimension. It has a single direction and exists as successive instants that move 'forward' at a constant pace, infinitely. All apparent times are in fact part of the same time; there are no simultaneous times. All times are reducible to the dictates of a single line, except that time-points exist only as distinct, successive moments rather than simultaneously as in a visually represented line.

And just because this inner intuition yields no shape we also attempt to remedy this lack through analogies, and represent the temporal sequence through a line progressing to infinity, in which the manifold constitutes a series that is of only one dimension, and infer from the properties of this line to all the properties of time, with the sole difference that the parts of the former are simultaneous but those of the latter always exist successively. (*Ibid.*, p. 163)

It is this time—unitary, universal Time—upon which scientific knowledge of cause and effect, of the commitment to deliberative reason and stepwise processuality, is predicated. It is this time that arises *at* (historically) and *as* (logically) the basis of a commitment to a certain notion of Enlightenment rationality that will become interwoven with the philosophy of history—a crucial link between time and the political—as it comes through Kant, Hegel, and Marx. It is this time that will underwrite the interwoven emergence of ideologies of the nation-state, law, economy, and social order, and the subordination of interruptive

experience and practice in liberal political theory. It is the time we are still negotiating as a shared default time as we continue to ‘make sense’ today.

The biographical is no substitute for exegesis, but it can clarify and put into useful relief what is already present—if latent—in a text. And if one takes seriously the notion that time, like all concepts (including those for which their authors claim universal status), always comes from someone situated sometime and somewhere, then a consideration of the character of Kant’s own psychic and social relation to his theorization of time may reveal something useful in this foundational moment for post-Enlightenment thought.

Kant wrote towards the end of his life, in one of his last publications, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, of his life-long “natural disposition towards hypochondria” (Kant 1979, p. 189). Hypochondria, a specific kind of paranoia which regards one’s own body and feelings as the continual site of threat, operates by continuously constructing phobic objects from which a distance can be marked and maintained. The hypochondriac might be understood as banishing desire and manifesting an obsession with the phobic in its place—phobia as symptom of repressed desire and of the damming up of libidinal energy (Freud 1957). The phobic object protects the subject against the intolerable abyss of desire. This cursory outline of the structure of hypochondria offers us a means of putting into critical relief Kant’s own descriptions of how he negotiated his “oppression,” and also for examining how this implicates his need for a very particular concept of time.

Kant explains that it is with reason alone that the hypochondriac can “discipline the play of his thoughts, can put an end to these harassing notions that arise involuntarily.” He writes:

A reasonable man vetoes any such hypochondria; if uneasiness comes over him and threatens to develop into melancholia—that is, self-devised illness—he asks himself whether his anxiety has an



object. If he finds nothing that could furnish a valid reason for his anxiety, or if he sees that, were there really such a reason, nothing could be done to prevent its effect, he goes on, despite this claim of his inner feeling, to his agenda for the day—in other words, he leaves his oppression (which is then merely local) in its proper place (as if it had nothing to do with him), and turns his attention to the business at hand. (Kant 1979, p. 189)

If reasoning from a position of objective distance—one here explicitly subtended by a logic of cause and effect—reveals no “object” or “valid reason” for anxiety or other such affect, then such a feeling is to be disregarded and to be pushed past and left behind “as if it had nothing to do with him.” To overcome this “weakness of abandoning oneself despondently to general morbid feelings that have no definite object,” Kant asserts the need to “master them by reason.” Kant achieves “mind’s self-mastery” or the mastery of feeling by reason, he explains, by applying himself to the “agenda for the day.”

The daily agenda offers a self-stabilizing tool via the rigid mechanization of activity and thought through micro-calendrics, the confinement of oneself to “the business at hand” in order to leave behind the feelings that persistently threaten to surface if they are given time. Recall that intense regularity attached to Kant: his neighbors are said to have set their clocks by his daily walks. In this attachment to time as the mechanical *tick tick tick* that moves singularly forward, Kant finds a medium to which he can attach himself in order to repress “this feeling [of anxiety], as if it had nothing to do with me.” (*Ibid.*)

As he describes his negotiation of hypochondria by force of reason, Kant returns repeatedly to time and to the subordination of affect by regimen.<sup>4</sup> It becomes clear that the concept of time as

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<sup>4</sup> Kant’s uses of time as means of affective regulation and aesthetic suppression resonate with his reflections on distraction (*Zerstreuung*) as a means of self-control in his *Anthropology*, particularly what he identifies as “voluntary

developed in *Critique of Pure Reason* offers him the possibility of a self-soothing treatment for his phobic obsessions—a condition he explains, despite his extensive familiarity with the emergent field of psychology, as mechanical in origin. He repeatedly insists that his hypochondria has a physiological etiology: a “flat and narrow chest, which leaves little room for the movement of my heart and lungs ... this oppression of the heart was purely mechanical ... the oppression has remained with me, for its cause lies in my physical constitution” (*ibid.*). Of note, this etiological account of hypochondria is symptomatic of hypochondria itself, as it insists upon physical cause for psychic states while conceding only that medical knowledge at present is unable to discern their interrelation.<sup>5</sup>

Such repetition marks this brief section on hypochondria in the chapter “The Philosophy Faculty versus the Faculty of Medicine.” Throughout, repetition and negation are utilized in

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distraction” as means of “dissipation.” This is a means of “diverting attention away from certain ruling representations by dispersing it among other, dissimilar ones.” As Marijana Vujošević explains, “This involves intentionally taking our minds off some things, whereby, as Kant explains, we create a diversion from our ‘involuntary reproductive power of imagination.’ This happens, for instance, when we try to get ‘rid of the object’ that makes us feel sad by diverting attention from the representations that our recalcitrant power of imagination continuously reproduces (by associating different sensible impressions). In this case, we try to make certain representations disappear by ‘dispersing’ attention to other objects—for instance, by occupying ourselves ‘fleetingly with diverse objects in society’... Kant held that being capable of being voluntarily distracted is a precondition of mental health. He often addresses hypochondria as an example of mental illness and argues that hypochondriacs are fantasists who cannot be talked out of their imaginings... This is why Kant writes that hypochondriacs have a diseased imagination (*Einbildungskrankheit*).” (Vujošević 2020, pp. 115–116) See section 3.1 (“Voluntary Distraction: The Rudimentary Level of Self-Control”) in Vujošević (2020).

<sup>5</sup> A scene from Woody Allen’s film *Whatever Works* (2009) illustrates this point. When Allen’s alter ego (Larry David) complains to his girlfriend about an ulcer, she reminds him he doesn’t have an ulcer, to which he replies, “I didn’t say I don’t have an ulcer; I said they haven’t found one yet.”

Kant's efforts to separate himself from hypochondria and its threat to the rational integrity and autonomy of the "reasonable man." For example, Kant repeats the phrase—"nothing to do with him/me"—twice to describe his relation to the feelings of anxiety associated with hypochondria. Such language provokes thoughts of Freud's short essay "On Negation," in which a patient describes a dream and, unprompted, declares that a figure in it is *not* his mother, leading Freud to conclude that it *is* in fact his mother and to go on to analyze the use of negation as an instrument of unconscious resistance (Freud 1957). Kant's repetitive declarations that his hypochondria and feelings without a definite object have "nothing to do with me" and that they are manifestations only of a bodily defect that by sheer resolution of the rational mind can be left behind echo Freud's analysis of negation. Heard in this way, they suggest that Kant's hypochondriacal anxiety cannot be altogether divorced from the philosophical workings of his mind.

Such a reading of this text, brought into conversation with Kant's broader philosophy, brings attention particularly to the character of his theory of time, which, as Kant acknowledges, is core to his ability to negotiate and subordinate his own 'irrational' feelings. Kant's writings on hypochondria, in which he prescribes means of mastering the condition, show that in his daily life and thought Kant relies at a foundational level upon his transcendently ideal concept of time as unidimensional, linear succession. It is this constrained, infinitely constant notion of time that makes it possible for Kant to instrumentalize the transcendental aesthetic as *a priori* alibi for the bracketing of all but "definite objects"—as indefinite being, for Kant, is bound up with a loss of mastery and control. Put in terms closer to Kant's own, the transcendental aesthetic offers insurance against the threat to self and certainty posed by the thing-in-itself.

We might read Kant's time, then, as the hypochondriac's temporality. Captive to a fear of the disintegration of the body and self—or, what psychoanalysis theorizes as castration anxiety—it cannot allow for experience in the registers of what Kant derides as

“the deceiver in ourselves, the inclinations”: desire, affect, dreams, madness—all that which escapes scientific calculation of cause and effect, linearity and sequentiality. It is the time with which, as Kant writes, one can “discipline the play of his thoughts ... [and] can put an end to these *harassing notions* that arise *involuntarily*” (Kant 1979, p. 187). To what degree was modern time formulated to meet a hypochondriacal man’s need for self-discipline, mastery, and control? What was it to guard against that the assurance of linear time was so psychically vital for Kant?

Various fragments in his writings and marginal notes to himself suggest that Kant was wary of his felt psychic vulnerability and very deliberately avoided engagement with scenes of ‘irrationality’ that might threaten his psychic integrity. For example, Kant reflects on the hazards of proximity to irrationality and affective expression in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*:

...it is not advisable for weak-nerved people (hypochondriacs) to visit lunatic asylums out of curiosity. For the most part, they avoid them of their own accord, because they fear for their sanity. One also finds that when someone explains something in affect to vivacious people, especially something that may have caused anger to him, their attention is so aroused that they make faces and are involuntarily moved to a play of expression corresponding to this affect. (Kant 2006, p. 72)

And in a marginal note he made alongside this text, Kant is even more direct in his warning, clearly directing it at himself: “Do not visit lunatic asylums” (*ibid.*, p. 75).

Freud suggests in “On Narcissism” that hypochondria is tied to the repression of desire via displacement from an external object and re-inscription as inversion into one’s own body as phobic object. Within this frame, Kant’s own relationship to sexual desire further suggests a connection between his transcendently ideal philosophy of time and an attempt at systematic repression of desire and its temporal entailments. Kant’s writings on the ethics of sexuality, marriage, and masturbation, for example,

unequivocally condemn as immoral any sexual pleasure outside the confines of marriage and any sexual pleasure—even within marriage—that does not conform to “nature’s end,” which he understands as “the preservation of the species.” Not only does Kant judge that a sexual relation outside of the bounds of marriage violates morality, but so too does autoeroticism. In fact, he condemns masturbation as “contrary to morality in the highest degree,” and as an activity that “debases him [the masturbator] beneath the beasts.” In an addition to the second edition of *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant expressed his views on pleasure and sexuality even more plainly: “carnal enjoyment is *cannibalistic* in principle (even if not always in effect).”<sup>6</sup>

Given Kant’s intensely committed positions against pleasure alongside his status as a life-long bachelor devoted to personal practices of rigid time-keeping as a daily defense against the vices of irrationality and affect, might we read his philosophical formulations of time as in part self-soothing exercises responsive to his “oppression” by hypochondriacal paranoia and sexual desire? Did he need, for the most intimately self-interested of reasons, to affirm a philosophy of time in which indiscrete, non-linear temporalities of desire, jouissance, trauma, fantasy, aggression, and dreams are wholly erased? Might it be that the concept of time upon which Kant’s philosophy, including his notion of freedom, is built is in fact a symptomatic response to his own deeply felt unfreedom?<sup>7</sup>

With Kant—as with many other thinkers who have followed him—we find philosophy serving in a disavowed role as self-therapeutic aid to an ego felt to be under threat by its irrational

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<sup>6</sup> This statement is contained in Remark 3 in the appendix to *The Doctrine of Right*, which, alongside *The Doctrine of Virtue*, comprises one-half of the *The Metaphysics of Morals*. For further discussion of this passage and Kant’s conceptualization of the sexual relation, see Jean-Claud Milner’s essay “Reflections on the Me Too Movement and Its Philosophy” (Milner 2019).

<sup>7</sup> For some of Kant’s writings on sexuality, marriage, and masturbation, see “The Moral Use of Sexuality” (Kant 1980); and “Marriage Right” and “On Defiling Oneself by Lust” (Kant 1999).

oppressor: affect, sexuality, and castration anxiety that provokes fears of descent into detachment from a stably known reality. Kant's hypochondriacal time—as agenda, regimen—emerges as a repressive means of regulating body and mind, militating against “natural dispositions” and supposed psychopathologies, and effecting a closure of feeling in favor of productivity and constant activity.

If time for Kant was an essential means by which to suppress his hypochondriacal fears, to what structure of thought might hypochondria—and the transcendental philosophy upon which Kant relied as a defense against it—testify? Hypochondriasis, which manifests in association with both obsessional neurosis and psychosis, has long presented a nosological problem for psychopathology. With respect to Kant, on the one hand, his uses of time for the management of hypochondria resemble the reliance on sequentiality, regimen, and ritual that appear in classic cases of obsessional neurosis, such as in Freud's patient known as the “Rat Man” (Freud 1957c). Kant's transcendental philosophy could thus be seen as a tool with which to constrain the wandering of an unruly mind that threatens to veer into territory in which intolerable desires might lurk and by which a lack in the other might be exposed—a portrait consistent with an obsessional-neurotic structure. On the other hand, hypochondriasis can represent a psychotic break from shared reality in which the object—typically the body—loses its stability and the symbolic structure by which the subject is propped up crumbles.<sup>8</sup> With Kant, his hypochondria

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<sup>8</sup> Another of Freud's patients, the Wolf Man (Sergei Pankejeff), offers an illustration of the possibility for movement from what initially appears as obsessional neurosis into psychosis, with an intervening space of “ordinary psychosis” or prodrome. See (Grigg 2013: 8698) for related reflections on Pankejeff's passage into psychosis. If we approach neurosis and psychosis dimensionally rather than through strictly categorical logics, we might read Kant's hypochondriacal fear of insanity as the psychic terrain on which he sought to deepen his obsessionalism and associated straitjacketing of experience so to defend against slippage towards psychotic instability.

repeatedly implicates fears of his own mind: an anxiety that he has either already lost it or soon will. A psychotic fear of psychosis appears to propel Kant towards the elaboration of a philosophy with which to defend against his own reason's dissolution.

In the end, the distinction is largely a matter only of direction: is Kant's war against madness waged from just within the abyss in an attempt to avoid falling deeper into it or from above it as he peers over reason's edge into an unfathomable space?

### *History's Straitjacket*

The time of a sexless hypochondriac has shaped not only modern epistemology and rationality but has also been interwoven with philosophies of history around which contemporary theorization of the political continues to be organized. The rest of this essay traces this imprint from Kant's own philosophy of history and political form, and points to its subsequent imbrication in the thought of Hegel and Marx.<sup>9</sup>

Never directly the subject of his major works, Kant's philosophy of history is developed mostly through several essays, notably "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose" (1784), "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?" (1784), "Conjectural Beginning of Human History" (1786), and "Is the human race constantly progressing?" in *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798). As proponent of the Enlightenment, Kant is committed to the capacity for continual progress through a growing capacity for reason—the ability to subject oneself and the

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<sup>9</sup> With the use of "imbrication" I mean to invoke the medical resonance of this term: an overlapping of successive layers of tissue to effect a surgical closure. Kant's philosophy of time is a means of closure, of tying up and sealing off experience in a herme(neu)tically sealed *cogito/ego* intent on maintaining itself against threat of destabilizing self-doubt.

world to rational analysis. As he writes in answer to the question “whether we at present live in an *enlightened* age, the answer is: No, but we do live in an age of *enlightenment* ... the obstacles to universal enlightenment, to man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity, are gradually becoming fewer” (Kant 1991, p. 58). Man is progressing towards a *telos*: from immaturity to maturity, self-awareness, and reason. But, Kant warns,

a public can only achieve enlightenment slowly. A revolution may well put an end to autocratic despotism and to rapacious or power-seeking oppression, but it will never produce a true reform in ways of thinking. Instead, new prejudices, like the ones they replaced, will serve as a leash to control the great unthinking masses. (*Ibid.*)

Kant not only promotes a belief in intellectual and moral progress—as is clear, for example, in “Is the human race constantly progressing?”—but, like many other thinkers of the Enlightenment, he also believes that politics can be subjected to rational analysis and constructed according to rational principles. He rejects politics as statecraft or the Machiavellian expression of egotism. The role of political philosophy is, for Kant, to develop universal principles by which justice and right can be established in any given circumstance. For Kant, political justice must be universal; it can and must be established through legal order.

This emphasis on law is foundational to Kant’s political philosophy. Recall his praise of Frederick the Great: “Only one ruler in the world says: *Argue* as much as you like and about whatever you like, *but obey!*” (*Ibid.*) This emphasis on obedience to universal laws and to authority is tied to Kant’s deep suspicion of “the great unthinking masses” whose rational immaturity—that is, their inadequate subordination of instinct or feeling to rational analysis and deliberation—threatens social and political order. The role of the state authority then is to subdue this anti-social character through law and to facilitate the moral-rational



development of its people. As Hans Reiss writes of Kant's political philosophy, "Political action and legislation ought thus to be based on such rules as will *allow of no exception*" (Reiss 1991, p. 21; my emphasis).<sup>10</sup> It is under such conditions, subtended by state and law, that the history of reason—the basis of Kant's philosophy of history—can find its fulfillment through progression along its teleological arc towards full maturity.

Yirmiahu Yovel's reconstruction of Kant's philosophy of history presents it as driven by Kant's commitment to a history of reason, according to which history is the process of "reason becoming known and explicated to *itself*" (Yovel 1980, p. 6). For Kant, reason is not transhistorical and already formed; it is constituted by the thinking human subject, who carries reason's progression forward through historical development. History has a rational significance as the embodiment of reason and reason's own self-realization. But if reason is not *a priori* itself, in this sense, but depends upon man and history for its own elaboration, it still depends on a transcendently ideal, *a priori* theory of time. Cause and effect, accumulation of knowledge, the definiteness and specificity of objects and human experience of them—all these elements of Enlightenment reason depend upon time as unidimensional, linear, sequential. Time, like space, is given and wholly without contingency or variability. A temporal order predicated on this time sits as a necessary foundation for

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<sup>10</sup> In relation to Reiss' (1991) interpretation and that which I pursue in this essay, Hannah Arendt's reading of Kant's political philosophy provides a counterpoint to an emphasis on the close relation between Kant's emphasis on rational calculus built upon his philosophy of time and political form. Arendt regards Kant's *Critique of Judgment* with its emphasis on aesthetic judgment—on a matter that eludes an objective calculability—as holding the key to his political philosophy. Arendt's argument, although compelling and offering a means of beginning to bridge Kant's stark division between instinct and reason, stands in tension with Kant's explicit emphasis on the universal principles (rather than a structure akin to aesthetic judgment) that are to underwrite law and political form. See Arendt 1982.

reason and its self-directed historical unfolding. Kantian time thus systematically subverts reason and allows its elevation to the organizing principle of history.

On Yovel's reading, Hegel's philosophy of history is not fundamentally a departure from Kant's own but is instead only an elaboration of ideas already present from *Critique of Pure Reason* to Kant's late essays on political philosophy. For Hegel, as for Kant, reason is constituted by the thinking subject. The growth of rationality constitutes the aim of reason, and thus the proper aim of man and history. Reason is thus subject to a process of becoming by which it is moving through time—Kant's time—toward an endpoint of its absolute, eternally true form. Within this frame, rationalism and historicism are resolved into a single frame whereby reason is history and history is reason. As in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, the universal is constituted through the particular and the particular through the universal. By this account, Kant's concept of time is carried through as the line along which Hegel's concept of the dialectic moves as the propelling force of his philosophy of history.<sup>11</sup>

The question of revolution is a thematic that further brings out the nature of time and its relation to the philosophy of history and the political for both Kant and Hegel. It also marks a point of difference for Marx in relation to Kant and Hegel. For Kant, revolution is impermissible. Despite his sympathies for the French revolutionaries as carriers of certain principles of Enlightenment thought, Kant falls back on his insistence upon law and incrementalism. History for Kant is the "steadily advancing but slow

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<sup>11</sup> The basic interpretation I have presented here is consistent with that articulated by Heidegger, who understands Hegel's time as a linear sequence of successive nows in line with Kant's philosophy of time, which he derides as a "vulgar concept of time" and "vulgar interpretation of the temporal character of history." See Chapters V and VI of Division II of *Being and Time* (Heidegger 1962). Kojève, by contrast, suggests that Hegel's understanding of time displaces the now in favor of the future. See Lecture 5 of Kojève 1969.

developing of man's original capacities" (Kant 1991, p. 41) that can only be realized *as a species*, such that this end "will require a long, perhaps incalculable series of generations, each passing on its enlightenment to the next, before the germs implanted by nature in our species can be developed to that degree which corresponds with man's intention" (*ibid.*, p. 44). To circumvent this slow process of enlightenment through revolution is both bound to fail and also undercuts the universal principles upon which Kant's philosophy is built.

Enlightenment—the progress of reason through time—must develop gradually through a linear process of slow accumulation and dissemination of knowledge and rationality. The state features centrally in this as the means by which the conditions for sociality and enlightenment are made possible as well as an expression of reason itself. Although Kant makes room for "unsocial sociability" as an antagonism that spurs the development of man's innate capacities (*ibid.*), he rejects in absolute terms its formulation as political revolution:

the power of the state to put the law into effect is also *irresistible*, and no rightfully established commonwealth can exist without a force of this kind to suppress all internal resistance. For such resistance would be dictated by a maxim which, if it became general, would destroy the whole civil constitution and put an end to the only state in which men can possess rights. It thus follows that all resistance against the supreme legislative power, all incitement of the subjects to violent expressions of discontent, all defiance which breaks out into rebellion, is the greatest and most punishable crime in a commonwealth, for it destroys its very foundations. This prohibition is *absolute*. And even if the power of the state or its agent, the head of state, has violated the original contract by authorizing the government to act tyrannically, and has thereby, in the eyes of the subject, forfeited the right to legislate, the subject is still not entitled to offer counter-resistance. (Kant 1991, p. 81)

Kant's rejection of revolution is unequivocal. In a footnote to this passage, Kant stresses that the preservation of the state is an absolute duty while the preservation of the individual is only a relative duty and applies only insofar as it is compatible with law. To disturb the stability of the state would threaten to unsettle the ground of social order upon which well-ordered lives, such as Kant's own with his daily walks, depend. For Kant, revolution is the lunatic asylum of history—the place we must never visit lest desire, uncertainty, and indefinite being threaten to overcome reason's ever-fragile defenses against its others.

Hegel's position on revolution is no less condemning. In the section "Absolute Freedom and Terror" in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel regards the French revolution, "absolute freedom," as having "removed the antithesis between the universal and the individual will" (Hegel 1977, p. 363). This suspension of the dialectic "is the death that is without meaning, the sheer terror of the negative that contains nothing positive, nothing that fills it with a content" (*ibid.*, p. 362). The sole work of the revolution then is "*unmediated* pure negation... *death*, a death too which has no inner significance... the coldest and meanest of all deaths, with no more significance than cutting off the head of a cabbage or swallowing a mouthful of water" (*ibid.*, p. 360). Hegel's opposition to the revolution stems from his commitment to the state as the vehicle of the Spirit—that is, of reason. The revolution, as he understands it, produces a purely destructive tumult out of which "Spirit would be thrown back to its starting point" (*ibid.*, p. 361).<sup>12</sup>

Hegel's perspective on the French revolution derives from his commitment to the state as vehicle of the world Spirit—the driving

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<sup>12</sup> Of note, in *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel's opposition to revolution derives from a different—and less temporally-oriented—concern: ensuring the coexistence of the particular (i.e., abstract, unbounded freedom in civil society) alongside the universal (i.e., the state). Revolution, for Hegel, threatens to subsume the apolitical particular under a totalizing political universal. For a related and far more in-depth discussion of time in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, see Kobe 2020.

force of history. For Kant, the state is both that which conditions and expresses the progression of reason, which exists as the meaning of history. Hegel continues this Kantian prioritization of the state. As Hegel states in his lectures on the philosophy of history:

It was *Chronos* (Time) who ruled first ... and what was produced, the children of Time, were devoured by time. Only Zeus ... conquered Time and set a goal to its passing. Zeus is the political God who produced an ethical work, the state. / The universality of a work is itself entailed in its element, as a determinate dimension, the dimension of thought. The highest point in the culture of a people, then, is this thought—the thought of its life and condition, its laws, its system of rights and its ethical way of life, all seen in a scientific light. For in this unity ... there is that inner-most unity in which Spirit can be at home with itself. The concern of Spirit in its work is to have itself as its own object. But it is only by thinking itself that Spirit has itself as object in its most essential nature. (Hegel 1988, p. 79)

For Hegel, time, the state, Spirit, and reason are intertwined: the state operates through time as time's goal in that the state serves as the vehicle of world Spirit and its unfolding in its most essential nature, rational thought. This interrelation in Hegel is struck through with ambiguity, as each of these terms—time, state, Spirit, reason—is constituted through its relation to the others. Even as Time “ruled first,” it was conquered and redefined through its setting to a goal—the state, carrying forth Spirit as rational thought. Revolution, for Hegel, threatens to disrupt each of the four terms, but none more directly than the state—the most empirically identifiable formulation of the overlapping terms. It is for this reason that Hegel condemns the revolution in *The Phenomenology* as “merely the *fury* of destruction” (Hegel 1977, p. 359).

The contrast between Marx and Hegel on the question of revolution could not be starker. For Hegel, who follows Kant in this respect, the revolution represents the throwing back of the Spirit—of reason, which must be carried through the state—to

begin from a place of nothing, of pure destructive negativity that is without positive content. For Marx, on the other hand, the revolution represents the culmination of self-awareness and rational thought as carried not by the state but by the proletariat. Marx's revolution represents not a threat to historical development but a necessary step in its progression towards the rational organization of a communist society; the revolution inaugurates rather than disrupts the proper flow of history as the movement of time towards the realization of rationality.<sup>13</sup> Marx maintains commitment, then, to a *telos* and to a process associated with Hegel's stagist theory of historical development. The build-up, the historical process out of which the revolution will occur, for Marx also remains caught up in the Kantian-Hegelian notion of time as the successive procession of presents upon which a calculus of scientific knowledge can be built. As Marx and Engels wrote in a draft of *The German Ideology*,

We know only a single science, the science of history. One can look at history from two sides and divide it into the history of nature and the history of men. The two sides are, however, inseparable; the history of nature and the history of men are dependent on each other so long as men exist. (Marx and Engels 1976, p. 28)

For Marx, history is scientific. It is inseparable from natural science, which is predicated on a specific concept of time. This time, which permits the accumulation of knowledge, technology, and the capacity for prediction and production, is central to Marx's project and associated philosophy of history. Although Marx examines time in multiple registers beyond those present in *The Poverty of Philosophy* and the first volume of *Capital* in relation to the labor hour, as Marx's treatment of time grows

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<sup>13</sup> Famously, within Marx's historical materialism, history is the history of class struggle such that disruption, or discontinuity, lies at the core of the continuity of history, which thus inheres in continuous discontinuity.

more complex, he remains committed throughout to a concept of historical-material truth that implicates the time of Kant: a unitary, universal time of linearity, sequence, and progress.<sup>14</sup> Thus, when Marxists begin to play with time in the wake of the revolution's delayed arrival, the still-linear concept of acceleration becomes the focus of the Italian accelerationists (Marinetti 1971) or, in more recent emphases by David Harvey (1989) and Frederic Jameson (1991), for example, the concept of compression that implicates an increasing pace paired with spatial considerations. In such cases, the basic elements of Kantian time as taken up by Marx remain intact.

We can read the inheritance of Kant's time—a time born of psychic demand for the repression of indefinite being—in Marx. Kant's time, I have argued, is tied to a hypochondriacal fear of his own "body"—its dreaded "inclinations" and tendency towards unreason and desire—and the need to avoid a reckoning with it via perpetual deferral through a notion of time as regimen, agenda, and constant movement without pause or return. Similarly, in relation to Marx's time, Jacques Derrida suggests that Marx's temporality is also inflected by a certain fear—not of his own body but of the specter:

the logic of the ghost [... that] points toward a thinking of the event that necessarily exceeds a binary or dialectical logic, a logic that distinguishes or opposes *effectivity* or *actuality* (either present, empirical, living—or not) and *ideality* (regulating or absolute non-presence). (Derrida 1994, p. 78)

Marx, in his formulation of a scientific history in line with natural science, must banish the ghost that would undermine the possibility of linear temporal sequence and calculability. As Derrida observes:

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<sup>14</sup> As just two of many more extensive accounts of the multiple uses of time in Marx's work, see Postone 1993 as well as Osborne 2008.

Marx thought, to be sure, on his side, from the other side, that the dividing line between the ghost and actuality ought to be crossed, like utopia itself, by a realization, that is, by a revolution; but *he too* will have continued to believe, to try to believe in the existence of this dividing line as a real limit and conceptual distinction. He too? No, someone in him. Who? The “Marxist” who will engender what for a long time is going to prevail under the name of “Marxism.” And which was also haunted by what it attempted to foreclose. (*Ibid.*, p. 47)

Marx (or if we are to soften criticism of Marx as Derrida does, “Marxism”), much like Kant, seeks to banish that which would threaten the certainty and fixity—the “actuality”—of definite being and its objects. To this end, although they differ on the question of revolution in the realization of history, both Kant and Marx embrace a confinement of time to that which insists upon forward movement and progress towards the realization of reason—a common *telos*—with which to tie off its outsides: affect, inclination, drive.

### *An Other Universal*

Emily Apter has observed that in contemporary theory, “it’s time’s time.” Theory from queer and trans theory to work on the anthropocene and afropessimism has been renewing critical attention to the question of time. Still, as Achille Mbembe writes in the introduction to *On the Postcolony*: “Social theory has failed also to account for time as lived, not synchronically or diachronically, but in its multiplicity and simultaneities, its presence and absences, beyond the lazy categories of permanence and change beloved of so many historians” (Mbembe 2002, p. 8). By returning to Kant’s key inflections in the history of time, I’ve sought to show how this failure of social theory has been conditioned by a certain paranoia hellbent on keeping threats to ego stability and universalistic knowledge claims at bay.



In so doing, I hope to join with many others seeking to widen openings for the elaboration of felt time in terms that do not seek refuge against contradiction, singularity, and the potential—for the subject’s subversion, collectivity through difference, and abolitionist political possibility—of time untethered from subordination to inherited false universals. Rather than contributing to simple denunciations of universality, however, my motivating desire is that we might together formulate a new universalism oriented around difference rather than identity. In this universality that would, in turn, provide a means by which to articulate our responsibility to the other, history would be understood not as homogenizing progress nor as accumulation but as the infinite potentiation of singular forms of being. Our ethical responsibility within this universality would be not to reason, the state, nor to class struggle directly but rather to ensuring that each one is ensured the means—including whatever time they require—to both invent and realize their fullest life possibilities.

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# “Who baptized Marx, Hegel or Kant?” On Alfred Sohn-Rethel and Beyond

*Mladen Dolar*

Alfred Sohn-Rethel<sup>1</sup> was, most remarkably, a man of one insight, and to that insight he devoted his whole career, a very long career at that. As he put it himself shortly before his death in 1990:

The work of my whole intellectual life until my 90th birthday was necessary in order to clarify and explain a semi-intuition that I had in 1921 during my university studies in Heidelberg: the discovery of the transcendental subject in the commodity-form, a guiding principle of historical materialism. I could obtain a satisfying explanation of this principle only as the result of ever-renewed ‘attacks’, which took the name of Exposés. (Quoted in Toscano 2008, p. 280)

One spectacular insight, at the age of 22, and then almost seven decades to spin it out. The exposés were never really published until 1970, but they circulated and exerted influence. One of them was a long letter addressed to Adorno in 1936, and Adorno himself emphasized the fulgurating effect it had on him: “Your letter has meant the greatest intellectual upheaval that I have experienced in the philosophical field since my first encounter with Benjamin” (quoted in Toscano: *ibid.*). Sohn-Rethel’s incisive insight is put on the par with that of Benjamin, another of

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<sup>1</sup> The present paper is a revised version of my presentation at the conference devoted to Alfred Sohn-Rethel at the University of Chicago in May 2021, organized by Noah Zeldin and Daniel Burnfin.

Sohn-Rethel's interlocutors (whom he met in 1921 in Italy), and one can see how much this insight—the inherent tie between the commodity form and the form of thought—also stands at the core of Adorno's work (Adorno expanding it to the form of culture at large). Adorno, however, didn't really pursue this exchange and Sohn-Rethel, despite an occasional gesture of praise, remained an outsider, tellingly (precisely and literally) till after Adorno's death<sup>2</sup>—but an outsider nevertheless at the core.

The insight is very simple and striking, it can be encapsulated in one sentence, as indeed in the above quote, and then relentlessly repeated throughout his oeuvre. To give just another striking declaration in the "Preface" to the English version of *Intellectual and Manual Labor*: "And finally, with an effort of concentration bordering on madness, it came upon me that in the innermost core of the commodity structure there was to be found the 'transcendental subject'" (1978, p. xiii). Bordering on madness—the passage goes on to tell how this was indeed generally perceived as madness at the time. "Sohn-Rethel is mad!" was the verdict of his tutor Manfred Weber (the brother of Max Weber). Insisting on this madness, not willing to give up on this initial insight, precluded any academic career: "I remained an outsider all my life with my *idée fixe*" (*ibid.*). Sohn-Rethel has the makings of a romantic hero of Marxism. His moment of glory came with a huge delay, as if after the death of Adorno and Horkheimer he was called upon to carry on the torch and to present the gist of the Frankfurt school classical endeavor in the 1970s and 1980s.

Slavoj Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, the book that made him instantly famous, was published in 1989, and one should be reminded that the book that established his reputation actually starts with a discussion of Sohn-Rethel, with an argument

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<sup>2</sup> A remarkable anecdote has it that it was at Adorno's funeral, in August 1969, that Sohn-Rethel met Siegfried Unseld, the head of Suhrkamp Verlag, who encouraged him to publish his manuscript *Die geistige und körperliche Arbeit*, which then appeared in 1970 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1972, English version 1978).

that links the critique of political economy to the question of the unconscious, something that would become one of Žižek's signature topics. Let me just quote a few key passages, concerning this short-circuit (or infinite judgment), and briefly make four points, as the best short introduction into Sohn-Rethel.

"Before thought could arrive at pure abstraction, the abstraction was already at work in the social effectivity of the market" (Žižek 1989, p. 10). First point: there is thought before thought, thought outside of thought, already realized, actualized, embodied, articulated in externality, thought prior to thought; in Kantian parlance, a heteronomous thought, showing the structural heteronomy of 'pure reason', the impurity of pure reason, the preceding and material a priori of its a priori, the historic presupposition of its supposed trans-historical validity. Sohn-Rethel proposed the formulation "Exchange abstraction *is not* thought, but it has the *form* of thought" (Sohn-Rethel 1972, p. 99)—it is the *form* that thought and 'pre-thought' ('ex-thought') have in common. This form is both external and at the core—shall one say *extimate*, to use Lacan's excellent neologism? There is like a meta-transcendental level conditioning the Kantian transcendental, the condition of possibility of the condition of possibility, yet it is not beyond (meta-), but rather extimate, in a short-circuit of the external and the intimate.

[I]f we look closely at the ontological status of what Sohn-Rethel calls the 'real abstraction' (that is, the act of abstraction at work in the very active process of the exchange of commodities), the homology between its status and that of the unconscious, this signifying chain which persists on 'another Scene', is striking: *the 'real abstraction' is the Unconscious of the transcendental subject*, the support of objective-universal scientific knowledge. (Žižek 1989, p. 12; my emphasis)

Second point: the central role played by form offers a striking homology between Marx and Freud. Marx and Freud have equally



insisted that the ultimate secret—of value, the commodity, etc., and of dreams, the mechanisms of the unconscious, etc.—has to be sought not in the particular content that one must disentangle and unearth under the appearances, but in the form, which is the form pertaining to appearance itself (*Erscheinungsform*, a term constantly used by Marx). Hence, the access to abstract thought in its autonomy (epistemology, cognition, science, etc.) is only possible by suppressing this external origin. What is suppressed is not the wealth of concrete determinations that one casts aside by abstracting from them, what is suppressed is *abstraction itself qua real abstraction*, pre-existing out there. What thought-abstraction represses in order to be established is real abstraction. There is an unconscious structurally involved—but is this the Freudian repression, *Verdrängung*? How far does this homology stretch?

Third point: there is a criticism of Althusser, and beyond Althusser of all those (that is, the vast majority) who conceive abstraction as a mental process, pertaining to mind alone, as the realm of thought vs. the hard external reality. The concept of real abstraction dismantles and disrupts this quasi-spontaneous assumption about the division into the mental and the real.

The 'real abstraction' is unthinkable in the frame of the fundamental Althusserian epistemological distinction between the 'real object' and the 'object of knowledge' in so far as it introduces a third element which subverts the very field of this distinction: the form of the thought previous and external to the thought [...]. (Sohn-Rethel 1972, pp. 13–14)

Fourth point: there is a structural blindness, a deception involved. Sohn-Rethel proposes a brilliant formulation: *Verblendung ohne Erblindung*, delusion without loss of sight (*ibid.*, p. 34), which pertains *both* to the commodity exchange and to abstract thought. There is an absence of conscious awareness, but which is essential for both sides to exist at all:

‘[T]his non-knowledge of the reality is part of its very essence’: the social effectivity of the exchange process is a kind of reality which is possible only on condition that the individuals partaking in it are not aware of its proper logic; that is, a kind of reality whose very ontological consistence implies a certain non-knowledge of its participants—if we come to ‘know too much’ [...] this reality would dissolve itself. (Žižek 1989, p. 15)

Real abstraction, central to Sohn-Rethel’s argument, is at the core of both exchange abstraction and thought abstraction and can only function unwittingly, implying Marx’s notorious *sie wissen es nicht, aber sie tun es*, “they don’t know it, but they are nevertheless doing it.” There is a necessary ‘unconsciousness’ at the core of our activity, both in practice and in theory, and particularly in what secretly binds them together. Not being conscious of it is the condition for these entities to exist at all, their condition of possibility. One can note a curious divergence with Althusser: in Althusser deception-blindness pertains to ideology, it has to be dissipated by the epistemological break, whereas with Sohn-Rethel it equally pertains to the very break instituting epistemology, pure cognition, science, etc. In Althusser the epistemological break dispels deception, in Sohn-Rethel it is the very expression of a structural deception.

Let me now address the way that Sohn-Rethel addresses our title question. The English version of *Intellectual and Manual Labor* (1978) is not a faithful translation of the German original (1970, second edition 1972), although, to be sure, the argument is basically the same, yet with quite a few differing twists, nuances, additions, and omissions. The title question stems from the German second edition and doesn’t appear in English: “Who baptized Marx, Hegel or Kant?” “Wer war nun aber Marxens Täufer, Hegel oder Kant?” (Sohn-Rethel 1972, p. 35) Sohn-Rethel poses this question at a crucial point in the first section of the first part, the entire section bearing the title “Kritische Anknüpfung an Hegel oder an Kant?,” roughly “Shall we seek critical support in Hegel

or in Kant?” In both cases, the section title and the quote, there is the form of question, both sentences don’t affirm anything, on the face of it, but end with a question mark—they ‘merely’ ask. Do they? Is there such a thing as merely asking, can one just innocently ask a question? (In principle, any question.)<sup>3</sup> Hegel appears as the first part of the alternative, given that the majority of Marxist tradition took Hegel as the key reference point, not surprisingly, taking the cue from Marx himself, who started his career in the young-Hegelian circle and then kept critically engaging with Hegel throughout his life. One can hardly make such a case for Kant, who is rarely mentioned by Marx (if so, only in passing or with rare harsh criticism, cf. *The German Ideology*). Conspicuously, there is not a single mention of Kant in the *Capital* (vol. 1), Sohn-Rethel’s key text.<sup>4</sup> So is there a question? The rhetorical question implicitly proposes the non-obvious choice, which would be the choice of Kant in the proposed alternative, and the non-obvious answer is of course more intriguing and provoking reflection.

The first thing to be said, the first impression of even a superficial reading: Sohn-Rethel can hardly hide his animosity toward Hegel. The English version is on the whole even harsher in this respect, so we can read:

[Hegel] discarded the epistemological approach altogether and outstripped the limitations of the critical standards of thinking observed by Kant [...] in order to lift himself to the height of ‘speculative and absolute idealism’. (Sohn-Rethel 1978, p. 14)

Sohn-Rethel immediately admits to the “apparently disparaging treatment of Hegel” (*ibid.*). The road from Kant to Marx, he

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<sup>3</sup> I must refer to the wonderful book by Aron R. Bodenheimer, *Warum? Von der Obszönität des Fragens*, 1983 (second edition 2011). Its aim is to dismantle the very form of questioning as a form of disavowal.

<sup>4</sup> As far as I can see there is no mention in vols. 2 and 3 either. Curiously, Kant is more frequently mentioned by Engels, although still very sporadically.

says, shouldn't necessarily lead via Hegel, there has to be a direct route connecting the two, where one could avoid the damaging Hegelian sidetrack and by-pass Hegel.

There is a strange oscillation in Sohn-Rethel's treatment of Hegel, disparaging judgments cohabit with high appraisal, the latter pronounced as if against his will. There is something of the 'I know very well, but nevertheless' argument. Most conspicuously, there is a clear and repeated criticism of Kant on account of his dualism—dualism is singled out as Kant's fundamental fallacy, but a fallacy that nevertheless presents a true reflection of the bourgeois society that has to be addressed: "For the unyielding dualism of this philosophy is surely a more faithful reflection of the realities of capitalism than can be found in the efforts of the illustrious post-Kantians [...]" (*ibid.*, p. 15). By not diluting the dualism Kant offers a clear case, a test case for what is at stake in abstraction, and by extension in the division intellectual/manual highlighted in the title of the book. The dualism is ultimately that of "thinking and being, ideal and reality/actuality, essence and appearance, form and matter, etc." (Sohn-Rethel 1972, p. 32) (to which one can add intuition and understanding, and furthermore Kant's treatment of unresolvable antinomies, etc.). Now the great advantage of Hegel over Kant is the intervention of dialectics, i.e., the insight into the unity of those dualities, the interconnection of the seemingly irreducible dichotomies and antitheses—to start with, the duality of thinking and being. "Their unity is their truth," and this is truth as a process, truth in becoming, truth historically evolving. Quite incredibly, Sohn-Rethel is thereby led to declare: "Nevertheless I admit that the dialectic as evolved by Hegel affords a way of thinking which is infinitely superior to the fixed dualism of Kant" (*ibid.*). If dialectics is the superior way of thought, why then the return to Kant?

The trouble with the Hegelian dialectics, in Sohn-Rethel's reading, despite its insight into the unity of dualities and contradictions, is that it ultimately proposes a false unity, an ideal

unity, not a real unity — it is ultimately the unity of thought which sublates being as an inner moment of the movement and deployment of spirit. It thus reduces alterity and objectivity to an internal moment of self-deployment of thought/spirit, turning it ultimately into the process “of the mind within the mind” (Sohn-Rethel 1978, p. 16), reducing it to the immanence of spirit. The unity of thought and being is achieved merely under the auspices of thought which swallows its other. Furthermore, considering Hegel’s stance toward history, despite his enthusiasm for the French revolution he nevertheless envisaged history as a history of ideas, revolution was for him a “philosophical event” under “the domination of thought” (Sohn-Rethel 1972, p. 31). As a consequence, he was incapable of thinking the reality of capitalism that it instituted — how society became prey to being gobbled by capital, *zum Fressen des Kapitals* (*ibid.*). Ideal unity instead of real unity — a right step in the wrong direction? The implication seems to be that in face of the ‘imagined’ unity of being and thought one should rather ultimately prefer Kant’s ‘real’ dualism, which has the advantage that it doesn’t dilute the opposites.

So who baptized Marx, Hegel or Kant? The least one can say is that Sohn-Rethel comes up with an unsatisfactory answer, offering a sort of quasi-reconciliation of the two, at least rhetorically. No doubt Hegel is a step forward and no doubt historical materialism couldn’t be possible without Hegel’s invention of the historicity of the Absolute, conceiving truth as a historical process.

What this amounts to is that the problem of cognition [*Erkenntnisproblem*] in Kantian formulation posits itself against the background of historical materialism, induced [*induziert*] by Hegel, therefore not Kant or Hegel, so to speak, but Kant in Hegel’s framework [*Kant im Rahmen Hegels*]. Ultimately this is not about the one or the other, but about the modes of appearance of the intellectual/spiritual labor in its separation from the manual labor as a problem of historical materialism. (Sohn-Rethel 1972, p. 37)

This rather sounds like a bad compromise that doesn't resolve our question but let me attempt a charitable reading. We need the Hegelian advance, which, even if insufficient, enabled historical materialism, in order to make a step back to Kant, so that on the basis of newly gained historicity we can properly ask the question about the seemingly ahistorical cognition of nature and its epistemology (mathematics, physics, particularly with the advances of Galilean-Newtonian science, etc.), ultimately condensed in the transcendental subject, and demonstrate its historical conditioning in a non-Hegelian framework. There is a historicity of the 'ahistorical' (a-temporal, timeless) that exceeds the Hegelian historicity, and this is where Hegel's dialectic could rather present an impediment. Why? Expanding the argument, one could say that Sohn-Rethel constantly and forcefully argues against the common idea that abstraction is a feat of thought, something that happens merely in the mind, and promotes his idea of real abstraction which is part of the world out there.

But the philosopher who would have no problem with that and no objection to it is definitely Hegel—for him the idea of real abstraction is so to speak the starting point, and the suggestion of abstraction being merely in the head would be preposterous (and one can read his *Phenomenology of Spirit* as a process of being rid of such simplistic ideas, opposing consciousness vs. reality, etc.—i.e., precisely as a process of learning about real abstraction, as it were). Of course there is real abstraction out there, in both nature and society, of course real abstraction is the basis of thought abstraction, they mutually condition each other. So let me put it this way: Hegel's espousal of real abstraction as quasi self-evident is precisely a hindrance on the way to the real abstraction that Sohn-Rethel is after—the precise nexus of commodity form and the particular forms of abstraction that emerged with the advent of philosophy in ancient Greece and culminated with the Kantian categories and transcendental subjectivity. Hegel's espousal of real abstraction is rather in line with (at the end of the line) the

traditional philosophical realism (as opposed to nominalism), positing *universalia in re*, ‘universals in things’, to use the medieval wording of the long controversy about *universalia* (stretching back to Plato and Aristotle). So, Hegel’s too quick espousal of real abstraction obfuscates the true source of real abstraction in a particular worldly practice, far removed from ideas, a seemingly trivial activity, but which nevertheless yields philosophical and scientific concepts. There is a ‘dirty’ core of pure thought, a ‘base’ origin of its loftiness; there is an infinite judgment not considered by Hegel, not quite the bone Hegel had in mind. (One could imagine Sohn-Rethel saying to Hegel, in line with Freud’s joke: Why are you telling me that there is real abstraction out there in the world when I know for a fact that there is real abstraction out there—why are you lying to me?)

There is a common criticism of Sohn-Rethel, voiced already at the time of his major publications in the seventies, and then often advanced later (often is relative, Sohn-Rethel didn’t come up often), notably by Moishe Postone (1993), namely that Sohn-Rethel takes his starting point in the process of exchange, and deduces everything from there, while never seriously considering the process of production/labor, the reputedly central category of Marxism, and its role in the commodity universe—its conversion into *abstract labor*, as the measure of value, and its key function in producing surplus value. Sohn-Rethel of course mentions all these, but rather occasionally, the bulk of his argument indeed rests on the precise minimal/maximal implications of the commodity exchange: the reduction of all positive material qualities, of use value, the fact that use and exchange are mutually exclusive, the immutability of the commodity during the exchange, the transubstantiation of the commodity in the process of exchange, etc. In the limit, the table of all Kantian a priori categories is deducible from the activity of exchange (although Sohn-Rethel’s deductions are sometimes forced and not quite convincing). As to labor, his main focus is not its production of value and its measure of value,

nor its abstract character, but the separation of head and hand, spirit and body, the intellectual and the manual, which lies at the core of pure cognition. The repressed/suppressed is twofold: the process of exchange, and manual labor, i.e., the process of abstraction involved in the exchange, and the corporeal involved in manual labor. (Real) abstraction and the body are both repressed in the same move.<sup>5</sup> Thus Sohn-Rethel's capital sin would consist in concentrating on the sphere of exchange-distribution and leaving aside the sphere of production, the true site of Marxist theory. The primary scene of real abstraction is for him not abstract labor, but the act of exchange.

I guess one should defend Sohn-Rethel in this respect. The argument against him rests on the idea that production is the site of truth—what determines all other spheres in the notorious 'last instance'. It is the site of 'proper' materiality, hence a test of materialism, while the sphere of exchange, distribution (and consumption) presents an 'illusory' epiphenomenon, a secondary reality in relation to the primacy of production (ultimately a sphere of appearance as opposed to the true essence).<sup>6</sup> But this is not in line with Marx's basic move, and Sohn-Rethel's adamant insistence on form is closer to Marx. Value is indeed created in the process of production, but it is only actualized in the process of exchange which conditions its form, endowing it precisely with the commodity form. It is not that production is the secret core which would then be secondarily represented by the commodity

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<sup>5</sup> Of course, not every act of exchange involves the separation intellectual/manual. The historical occurrence of the coincidence of the two emerged with the advent of philosophy in ancient Greece and was conditioned by the introduction of coinage (dated to 680 BCE)—see Sohn-Rethel's long argument in this respect, largely relying on the extensive work of George Thomson. Coinage 'materialized' the exchange abstraction (turning its 'in itself' into a 'for itself', as it were) and enabled the separation, the emergence of 'pure' intellectual work (e.g., with the origin of mathematics, etc.).

<sup>6</sup> See Žižek 2006, pp. 50–55.



form in the process of exchange—as opposed to this, Marx insists that the main secret pertains to the form itself: the ‘essence’ needs this particular form and the form is ‘essential’. Marx:

Whence, then, arises the enigmatic character of the product of labor, as soon as it assumes the form of a commodity? Clearly, it arises from this form itself. (Marx 1976, p. 164)

Political economy has indeed analyzed value and its magnitude, however incompletely, and has uncovered the content concealed within these forms. But it has never once asked the question why this content has assumed that particular form, that is to say, why labor is expressed in value, and why the measurement of labor by its duration is expressed in the magnitude of the value of the product. (*Ibid.*, 1972, pp. 173-174)

Marx couldn’t be clearer: the difficult part is not to disentangle the hidden content, i.e., labor as the source and measure of value—this was already done by the bourgeois economy, notably by Ricardo. The difficult part is to see how this content acquired this particular form, the commodity form—what follows from there is a *materialism of the form*, not the materialism of content-labor. (And debunking the labor theory of value behind the commodity form of appearance doesn’t dissipate the mystery, the enigma, the ghost-like spectral dimension of commodity. The metaphysical subtleties and theological quirks pertain to the form.) Marx constantly uses the term *Erscheinungsform*, the form of appearance, but the fact that the form pertains to appearance doesn’t make it less real—materialism should take seriously the materiality of appearance itself, not merely unearth the hidden materiality behind it. What Sohn-Rethel calls the real abstraction is the real of this form of appearance itself, not a real as opposed to appearance. After all, the incipit of *Capital*, the first sentence establishing its object, firmly places the project (rather the proper beginning of the project) in the sphere of appearance:

The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails *appears* [*erscheint*] as an ‘immense collection of commodities’; the individual commodity *appears* as its elementary form. Our investigation therefore begins with the analysis of the commodity. (*Ibid.*, p. 125; my emphasis)

Hence Marx begins not with production, labor, the alleged material basis of it all, but with the commodity, hence exchange, hence appearance, hence form. And Sohn-Rethel can find a direct endorsement for his project in Marx:

The categories of bourgeois economics consist precisely of forms of this kind. They are forms of thought [*Gedankenformen*] which are socially valid, and therefore objective, for the relations of production belonging to this historically determined mode of social production, i.e. commodity production. (*Ibid.*, p. 169)

The commodity form is the form of thought, Sohn-Rethel’s crazy *idée fixe* is inscribed in Marx in all letters—all he had to add is ‘transcendental subjectivity’.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, there are weaknesses to Sohn-Rethel’s argument, quite apart from this common criticism which, I think, doesn’t hit the mark. No doubt he owes us some more explanation as to how and why the ‘same’ real abstraction, pertaining to commodity exchange, yielded both the origin of philosophy (and science) in Greece<sup>8</sup> and, at the opposite end, the Kantian transcendentalism,

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<sup>7</sup> The big question remains whether this conception of form can be directly linked with Kant, which is Sohn-Rethel’s agenda and absolute preference—my contention would be that it is at the bottom a very Hegelian conception of form (see form of appearance in relation to essence in the *Logic*, etc.). In Kant, form rather stands opposite to the content (see ‘concepts without intuition are empty’, etc.). Or is Kant in his heart secretly already Hegel who doesn’t dare to say his name?

<sup>8</sup> The introduction of coinage was crucial for the emergence of ancient philosophy and science. Hence one of the most famous of Sohn-Rethel’s pronouncements: “Anybody who carries coins in his pocket and understands their

a priori categories, etc. What happened with the real abstraction in the meantime, over two and a half millennia, how did it evolve to produce such a variety of results in the domain of thought throughout history? What of the history of science, given that Sohn-Rethel is specifically focused on the epistemology of sciences of nature? And most importantly: How did real abstraction change its nature with the advent of capitalism? Is there a qualitative transformation, given its new gear and its quantitative global spread? Sohn-Rethel insists that the Kantian position presented the historic philosophical counterpart to the revolution in modern science coinciding with the contemporary rise of capitalism, but then it's rather strange that he is able to deduce the Kantian a priori categories from the very elementary forms of exchange, already present in antiquity. It all seems that he doesn't really need the capitalist development to propose his short-circuit/infinite judgment linking commodity form and this most elaborate form of thought (transcendental subjectivity), notoriously one of the most complex in the entire history of thought. Does the emergence of philosophy, pure mathematics, etc., in antiquity differ in kind from the Galilean-Newtonian science in regard to its (non)relation to real abstraction? How can the 'same' kernel of real abstraction produce such a variety of models of thought?

Ultimately, how does real abstraction relate to the problem of capital and its corresponding forms of thought? It is clear that Sohn-Rethel takes amply into account only the first three chap-

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functions bears in his mind, whether or not he is aware of it, ideas, which no matter how hazily, reflect the postulates of the exchange abstraction" (Sohn-Rethel 1978, p. 59). See his line apropos of mathematics (and science in general): "This socialized mind of man [...] is *money without its material attachments*, therefore immaterial and no longer recognizable as money and, indeed no longer being money but the 'pure intellect'" (*ibid.*, 130; my emphasis). The very idea of 'categories' was canonized by Aristotle, and then reprised by Kant—Kant pointing out that logic made no progress since Aristotle, it was born perfect and unimprovable, it only needs to be properly framed by the transcendental turn. Curiously, Sohn-Rethel barely mentions Aristotle once.

ters of *Capital* ("The commodity", "The process of exchange", "Money, or the circulation of commodities"), but it looks like he has no real use for the fourth chapter, where capital finally 'makes its appearance' ("The transformation of money into capital" (Part 2), "The general formula for capital"). It's only there that the production and appropriation of surplus value come in, the cornerstone of Marx's insight. The general formula for capital is precisely M-C-M' (as opposed to C-M-C of the 'elementary' commodity exchange), 'money breeding money'—it is here that the real abstraction gets very real, even realer (!), to the point of "gobbling up the whole of society" (*ibid.*, p. 31). What form of thought would then correspond to this? Is the Kantian transcendental subject a match for this? Doesn't Sohn-Rethel deduce real abstraction and the concomitant forms of thought ultimately only on the basis of C-M-C?<sup>9</sup>

The idea that the Hegelian idea, the Hegelian spirit, behaves like capital has a long standing, it can be traced back to Marx himself, and it kept coming up in the history of Marxism—one could list, e.g., Adorno and Postone as major proponents. Does this idea present an extension of Sohn-Rethel's argument about the real abstraction as the core of thought? Could one then propose that the logic of capital presents the concealed core of Hegel's *Logic*, and by extension of the development of spirit, in the same way that Kant's transcendental subject related to real abstraction in commodity exchange? What is the status of this—an analogy? In Sohn-Rethel's argument it is essential that real abstraction is no mere analogy (although he uses the term homology), it aims at the real alien kernel of abstract thought in the (non)relation of a form of being and a form of thought.

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<sup>9</sup> One should keep in mind, though, that C-M-C and M-C-M' don't present a historical succession, but a structural relation—to make it quick, on the one hand, Aristotle's ranting against chrematistics in *Politics* is already based on his criticism of M-C-M' logic; on the other hand, C-M-C can only be deduced as an elementary form on the basis of developed capitalist commodity production.

Schematically, there are three attitudes to Hegel in Marxist tradition. The first one is presented by those who rejected Hegel altogether and saw his influence as detrimental, trying to minimize Marx's (rather obvious) indebtedness, sometimes paying some lip-service to it, but ultimately proposing to by-pass him altogether—one can list most obviously Althusser and his school, the Italians (Galvano Della Volpe, Lucio Colletti), etc., and among the Frankfurt theoreticians precisely Sohn-Rethel, the odd one out in this respect. Second position, taking the cue from Marx's assessment (particularly in "The Paris manuscripts") that Hegel presented the self-creation of man as a process, the man as the result of his own labor, through the process of alienation as the condition of dis-alienation—all this, but in the Hegelian mystified form, as a merely spiritual enterprise, as opposed to the material labor and material historic conditions. What would then be needed is to set his dialectic from head to feet, since what he presents is ultimately the process of emancipation, but in disguise. If we shed off the mystical cover, there is the rational kernel we must hold on to. Most conspicuously, Lukacs presented the proletariat as the subject-object of history destined to re-appropriate the objectivity, produced by its labor and now standing alien opposite to it: instead of ideal reconciliation, real revolution and re-appropriation. In the third perspective, Hegel is seen not as a matrix of an undercover emancipatory logic, but as the matrix of the very logic of capital, reproducing in thought what capital performs in reality, with the pervasive surge that can encompass everything in its movement, expanding while circulating, engulfing every singularity in its universal deployment, positing every externality as an internal moment of its self-movement. Leaving aside the anti-Hegelians, which is it to be, the logic of universal emancipation or the logic of universal domination? Can it be both?<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Žižek has pointed out this dual view of Hegel in Marxism a number of times, I am making it quick.

There is no doubt that Marx describes the movement of capital, the transformation of money into capital, in terms that can only recall the movement of the Hegelian idea, even more, of substance becoming subject. Once we move from C-M-C (the circulation still based on the move from the initial use value to the final use value, thus still in the service of satisfaction of needs—commodity is defined on the first page as an object that can satisfy needs of any sort— with money as mere mediator) to M-C-M', where the mediator, the universal equivalent of value, becomes the subject, the initiating and the final point of the process, then we enter into an ever-expanding circle where any commodity becomes subservient to the self-movement of this substance-subject. Money turns from medium to subject.

[I]n the circulation M-C-M' both the money and the commodity function only as different modes of existence of value itself, the money as its general mode of existence, the commodity as its particular or, so to speak, disguised mode. It is constantly changing from one form into the other, without becoming lost in this movement; it thus becomes transformed into an *automatic subject*. [...] In simple circulation, the value of commodities attained at the most a form independent of their use-values, i.e. the form of money. But now, in the circulation M-C-M', value suddenly presents itself as a *self-moving substance* which passes through a process of its own, and for which commodities and money are both mere forms. (Marx 1976, pp. 255, 256; my emphasis)<sup>11</sup>

There is, first, the very Hegelian moment, namely the capacity to posit the presuppositions—to take something which evolved in the process as the retroactive presupposition of the process itself. Something that emerged later, as a second, as a product

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<sup>11</sup> In another translation, value “suddenly presents itself as an independent substance, endowed with a motion of its own, passing through a life-process of its own, in which money and commodities are mere forms which it assumes and casts off in turn” (quoted in Žižek 2006, p. 59).

of a process (of exchange, etc.), becomes retroactively the starting point which then encompasses all other entities as its inner moments, moments of its self-deployment. Second, this process becomes all-pervasive, universal, as it were, so that any externality is internalized, any singularity is included in the process of universalization. Third, this now has all the makings of an automatic subject (Marx's term) which proceeds as a self-moving substance (Marx's term again). From which it would follow that substance is subject, (automatic) subject as the mover of the self-moving substance. Is this the material realization of Hegel's famous adage 'substance is subject', the one adage on which, according to his own words, everything depends in his philosophy?<sup>12</sup> Is this the social process which forms the disavowed secret kernel of the Hegelian 'substance is subject'? Could one say that in the same way that Sohn-Rethel makes the short-circuit connection between the Kantian transcendental subject and the commodity form, but taken at the level of the simple exchange (C-M-C), in the same way one should make the connection between the Hegelian substance-subject and the movement of capital, the formula M-C-M'? That in both cases we hit upon the unconscious of thought, thought external to itself, prefigured in economic reality, unwittingly extending in thought? The hard kernel that has to remain concealed? Or is it rather that we are dealing with a caricature of what Hegel had in mind? There is Marx's obvious reliance on Hegel when he describes this crucial passage (from money to capital), but on what level does the parallel apply?

Three things have to be noted. First, what is being described here? Is this the description of the way that things really happen, of how capital really functions, or is this rather the description of a necessary illusion inherent to capital itself? Namely the illusion

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<sup>12</sup> One could apply this also to another notorious Hegelian formula, *Sichanderswerden*, self-othering—capital has an infinite capacity of self-othering: it remains itself, or rather becomes even more itself, when encompassing its other, in ever wider reach, in both external and internal expansion.

that this is an automatic process of self-engendering, value engendering and multiplying itself by mere circulation, finding itself in its otherness, appropriating any otherness that it comes across? Or shall we say 'objective fantasy', objective illusion.

How come that capital corresponds so well to this Hegelian fantasy—or does it? Isn't it rather that one has to transform Hegel's dialectic into this fantasy formation in order to conform it to the movement of capital? Marx may well have used the Hegelian tools ('substance is subject') as a conceptual model for this transformation (from money to capital), and shown its function as a necessary illusion, but only to confront it with the harsh reality of the extraction of surplus value, the exploitation that underlies this process of the seeming self-movement, self-engendering, and self-expansion. The surplus it produces is not internally ('automatically') deduced from value as its immanent explicitation, it doesn't follow from what value is 'in itself', it is based on extortion practiced in the harsh conditions of class struggle. The labor that produces the surplus in this apparent self-movement remains invisible in this quasi-Hegelian fantasy circle.

But it's not only the extortion of surplus value, and this is my second point, it is already with the act of exchange that this smooth image doesn't hold. Kojin Karatani—another Marxist Kantian, to make it quick (but he curiously never mentions Sohn-Rethel)—argued that there is a 'jump' already in the exchange of commodities themselves (in Žižek's useful gloss):

[T]he jump by means of which a commodity is sold, and thus effectively constituted as commodity, is not the result of an immanent self-development of (the concept of) Value, but a *salto mortale* [...], a temporary 'synthesis' between use-value and exchange-value comparable to the Kantian synthesis between sensitivity and understanding: in both cases, the two irreducibly external levels are brought together. [...] This is why, although Marx's *Darstellung* of the self-deployment of Capital is full of Hegelian references, the self-movement of Capital is far from the circular self-movement of the Hegelian Concept (or Spirit). (Žižek 2006, p. 51)



Thus even on the level of simple exchange, there is no immanence of progression, there is no mere conceptual deduction from value to exchange—it takes a leap, and a (temporary) synthesis to be constantly negotiated. This is why Karatani is right to point out:

Notwithstanding the Hegelian descriptive style [...] *Capital* distinguishes itself from Hegel's philosophy in its motivation. The end of *Capital* is never the 'absolute Spirit'. *Capital* reveals the fact that capital, though organizing the world, can never go beyond its own limit. (Karatani 2003, p. 9)

This is not the movement of Hegelian spirit-idea towards absolute knowledge or some final sublation-reconciliation in the absolute spirit, there is something unlimited and crazy in this movement, something never to be quenched, but which, despite its frenzy, nevertheless presents its own limit. This is precisely what Hegel would call bad infinity, spurious infinity, which cannot transcend its limit despite its furious ever-expanding accelerating movement—the worse the bad infinity, the more feverish the whirlwind. This is not a movement towards some Hegelian totality, for capital is propelled by the impossibility to ever catch up with itself.

So is Hegel's philosophy then an 'adequate' unwitting rendition of the inherent 'necessary illusion' of capital, a portrayal of its in-built fantasy, which then has to be debunked and brought down to earth by pointing out the harsh reality underlying it, which it covers over? Hardly, and this is my third point. One has to transform Hegel's philosophy into this fantasy form, one has to curtail it in order to fit this image—one has to deprive it of everything that is interesting, intriguing, productive and, well, revolutionary in Hegel. This clearly presents a caricature of Hegel (I am leaving aside the question of Hegel not being completely innocent in lending himself to such caricature). As to the question whether

one can make an analogous move with Hegel such as Sohn-Rethel did with Kant (the parallel 'commodity form—transcendental subjectivity' vs. 'capital—substance-subject', as two forms of real abstraction), I think this is not the case and one would thus move far too quickly. Not because Hegel would be exempt from such 'infinite judgment', but rather because Hegel didn't quite realize the implications of capital, the speculative nature it entailed, or he grossly underestimated what was at stake. Which is no doubt Hegel's historical limitation, given his vantage point.

Hegel's theory of capitalism is encapsulated in his idea of civil society. To make it quick, this is the sphere where private individuals are free to pursue their own self-interest, without regard for the common good, ignoring the universal. They can give free reign to their individual pursuits, but the result of their activity is that they are nevertheless compelled to produce common good as an unintended side-effect of their private interests. In the *Phenomenology* he described this dialectic under the label *der geistige Tierreich*, the spiritual animal kingdom (Hegel 1977, pp. 237–252), displaying how the ruse of reason (whose fitting instance is Smith's notorious invisible hand of the market) plays its tricks behind the backs of selfish greedy individuals, a common universality nevertheless arising from the clash of private interests, albeit in a limited form. That would be the realm of the free market (and the liberal theoreticians stopped there, with private vices yielding public benefits). Hegel was of course no believer in some self-regulatory market forces, but proposed the function of the state as the proper universal in which the private interests can be elevated into the realm of true universality. The civil society would thus be hostage to a limited universality, say pertaining to understanding (*Verstand*), while the true universality of reason could only be attained in the state, as the realm of sublation and reconciliation of the conflicts of private interests. Capitalism would thus be confined to a particular social sphere, where it could usefully deploy all economic forces, but only if

ultimately framed by the state as the embodiment of reason.<sup>13</sup> In itself, the civil sphere cannot achieve stability or totality merely on the basis of private pursuits and the strife of interests. This is what one could call the Hegelian fantasy of capitalism: capitalism contained, or shall we say capitalism within the limits of reason alone, *innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft*.

What Hegel overlooked, in this neat scheme/division, what he couldn't quite see from his historic position, was the conceptual possibility of the advent and spread of capitalism of a quite different order—namely the emergence, within civil society, of a force that doesn't comply simply with the limited universality of understanding (emerging through the conflict of private interests) nor does it translate into the true universality which can only be achieved by the state (and reason). There is, so to speak, a third kind of universality—and capital is precisely a force of permanent universalization, engulfing all particularity on its way in its movement, but a universality running amok, as it were, a wild seemingly limitless universality, blindly following a crazy expansive logic. The 'third kind' is of course not an appropriate designation, it is rather an excrescence, a deviation of universality. It is encapsulated in what Marx called automatic subject, or what he described precisely in terms of self-moving substance-subject, i.e., in arch-Hegelian terms, but in order to present a logic of universality that eluded Hegel, a (false) universality whose force Hegel didn't foresee. One could say that this is something he critically envisaged as a bad infinity yet didn't realize its overwhelming insidious potential. Historically, civil society was not framed (and

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<sup>13</sup> This is where the very young Marx started his criticism of Hegel, e.g., in his manuscript "Critique of Hegel's philosophy of state jurisprudence [*Staatsrecht*]" (1843) and a number of others. His main point was that the reason pertaining to Hegel's state, far from superseding the clashing self-interests of civil society was in its very rationality rather in collusion with them, enabling and conditioning what it was supposed to supersede, thus being prey to and accomplice of the perverted logic of budding capitalism.

superseded) by the state, the bearer of the true universal—what happened instead was that this ‘false’ universality encompassed both civil society and the state and turned them into its hostage, completely disrupting Hegel’s proposed dialectics of state and civil society. It is as if bad infinity wins. Modern states, and civil societies, started to be increasingly at the mercy of this universalizing force. My proposal would be that the trouble is that capital doesn’t behave in the Hegelian manner at all, but rather deploys a kind of universality that Hegel didn’t quite anticipate or whose power he grossly underestimated, a perversion of universality at the very interstice where unlimited reason should supersede limited understanding.

Žižek proposed that Hegel missed precisely the properly speculative Hegelian nature of the capital:

What Hegel was not able to see was not some post-Hegelian or post-idealist reality but rather the properly Hegelian aspect of the capitalist economy. Here, paradoxically, Hegel was not idealist enough, for what he failed to see was the properly speculative content of the capitalist speculative economy, the way financial capital functions as a purely virtual notion processing ‘real people’. (Žižek 2014, p. 31)

But what we have to deal with here is perhaps not the properly Hegelian speculative dimension now finding its new domain in capital, but massively its ‘deviation’, its outgrowth, its capacity to run amok, its aberration, its perversion; its travesty having the capacity to overwhelm and undermine any ‘true’ universality. ‘Speculative’ is the term that one should single out and read in the sense of the Freudian *Gegensinn der Urworte*, “On the antithetical meaning of primary words” (Freud 1994): the Hegelian meaning of speculation as the proper exercise of thought now coinciding with financial speculation, creating value ‘out of nothing’, through shady unfounded transactions, futures, by-passes and unfathomable circulation, from thin air, without coverage,

but nevertheless englobing all spheres of 'real' societies. Is this immediate coincidence of the two meanings of speculation a sort of ultimate parody of the Hegelian infinite judgment that befell Hegel's legacy? The Hegelian speculation was precisely a move that transcended the bad infinity, while the speculation pertaining to the capital is like the infinitization of the bad infinity, perhaps not a bad name for the nightmare of our times. Bad infinity raised to the level of bad speculation, the seemingly most speculative moment as the straying away from speculation.

Sohn-Rethel's contention was that real abstraction pertaining to the commodity form spelled out the secret of Kant's transcendental subjectivity. The prevailing view in Marxism followed Marx's patent Hegelian references and rather saw capital as the secret real abstraction of Hegelian universality, so to speak. But what if there is a real in this abstraction that is of a different order, albeit encapsulated in the Hegelian universal as its outgrowth and perversion? The universal and its ghastly double? This is where the proper work of construction of universality for our times must engage.

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# Freedom and Alienation; Or, Humanism of the Non-All

*Matthew Flisfeder*

Today, the popular concept of the Anthropocene, used to denote the *human* geological age, puts to question the centrality of human subjectivity. Critical posthumanism—particularly in its neo-Spinozan and Deleuzian ontological realist versions, tied to immediacy and pure immanence—demands the de-centering of the human subject, which, in its hubristic and Promethean disregard for the non-human, appears to have set the world on fire, causing irreparable environmental damage. But is an active de-centering of the human subject truly possible? What if the only way for us to properly assess the situation is by doing the opposite—that is, of occupying an anthropocentric position, not in the sense of human domination of the non-human world, but one of making human subjectivity the methodological and ethical center of our investigation into this conundrum? What if the age of the Anthropocene demands, not the de-centering of the human subject, but the reverse: what if it is *because* of the Anthropocene that we must now aim to rethink a dialectical and universalist *humanism*? What if it is the case, in other words, that the *human* subject is the proletariat of, not the Anthropocene, but the Capitalocene (Moore 2015)? For instance, as Fredric Jameson (2019) puts it, the fact of the Anthropocene proves that humanity can truly change the world, but now it would be wise, as he writes, to terraform it.



In precisely the same way that the proletariat is the symptom of the capitalist *economy*, the human subject is now the symptom of the Capitalocene in the sense that the capitalist ecology is *always already posthuman*. By this I mean that the reifying forces of capitalism are always in the process of undermining human necessity, making humans merely instrumental in the generation of profit—even and especially, that is, when we consider the fact that the subject of bourgeois society is reified in its ownership of private property. Objective property becomes a stand-in for human subjectivity—which it trades on the market; or human labor congealed in productive technology, an idea that autonomist Marxists develop in their reading of Marx’s “general intellect” in the *Grundrisse* (Virno 1996). This way of perceiving a posthuman capitalism is no less the case for the working class, conceived as owners of their own private property in the form of commodified labor power. The key difference between capitalism and slavery (although capitalism certainly has relied upon racialized and colonialist slavery) is the fact that the worker is the owner of their own labor power, which they sell, rather than having themselves sold as productive property. Yet, we might concede that the now popular turn to posthumanist critical theory has emerged at the precise historical moment when the middle classes, through neo-liberal market fundamentalism and its transformation of subjects into forms of “human capital,” find themselves increasingly reified in the entirety of their everyday lives. That is to say that “human capital” is the product of the dissolution of the barrier between the subject-owner of labor power, and its own self, conceived in terms of the commodity-object. Now, all of life is/has been commodified and it is in this peculiar historical moment when the proponents of posthumanism aim, not to humanize the exploited and oppressed, but to downgrade humanity the more we are all reified by the capitalist system. How can the de-centering of the human subject in this way be anything but a victory for the posthuman turn in capitalism?

When, in his discussion of commodity fetishism, Marx asserts that capitalist society is premised on the social relation between things, he provides for us the matrix for understanding capitalism as a posthuman structure of the market as the blind, a-subjective and objective, regulatory force. What we call postmodernity is that moment when there is no part of the world that is not potentially commodifiable. Everything becomes reified as commodity, where previously, it was assumed that some human quality is capable of escape (which is why, in art, for instance, modernism is a form that evades commodification). In this situation, *humanity* becomes the symptom of the posthumanist capitalist ecology. The human subject now occupies and overlaps with the same position as the hysterical subject, or the feminine position of the non-all, as in Lacan's logics of sexualization. If it is true that the hysteric, we might say, is Freud's proletariat, expressive of the non-all of the phallic social order, then perhaps we can grasp the human subject in the same way, as the expression of the non-all of posthuman capitalism. Human, as Ray Brassier (2022) has put it, names the absolute negativity—an absent center—against which is posited an affirmative limit constitutive of the metaphysical totality. This is the sense in which I develop my own rethinking of a dialectical humanism appropriate for the age of the Anthropocene. Anthropocene discourse calls, not for the de-centering of the human subject, but for a rethinking of dialectical humanism.

The dilemma, however, with this conception is the fact that, from the perspectives of historical materialism and psychoanalysis, the subject is *constitutively*, and not merely contingently, de-centered and self-alienated. This is a point worth noting against both the posthumanist aim to de-center the human subject and the older tradition of Western Marxist humanism, which aimed towards a politics of *dis*-alienation. Althusser (1996) has noted, in fact, that the significance of Marx and Freud—against the common Freudian-Marxist attempt to blend their methodologies (turning psychoanalysis into an explanation for the libidinal investments

into the consumer society, for instance)—lies in the different ways each troubled the bourgeois-liberal conception of human subjectivity. Marx, on the one hand, challenged the liberal conception of the subject as a free, independent, and autonomous individual by showing that the *class struggle*, as opposed to individual man, in Althusser's terms, is the motor of history. Freud, on the other hand, challenged the conception of the human subject as fully self-aware, self-present, and completely egoistic and rational. Through the discovery of the unconscious (operated by the mechanism of repression) Freud demonstrated that the individual subject is driven, not necessarily by a rational ego, but by its response to repressed, irrational and unconscious wishes, desires, and drives, to which the subject remains unaware at an individual level, often repeating painful experiences that seem to otherwise contradict the goals it sets forth rationally to serve its own interests. To put the point directly, according to Althusser, Marx and Freud both prove that the subject is *constitutively* de-centered and self-alienated—a point that poses a problem for contemporary critical theories focused on projects of de-centering. If the subject is *constitutively* de-centered then what exactly is the usefulness of a politics aimed at radical de-centering? What is the purpose of an emancipatory ethics *aiming* to de-center the subject when the subject is already *constitutively* de-centered, castrated, and self-alienated?

As an emancipatory strategy, Anthropocene discourse appears to propose a reduction in *human* activity, and a retreat into the small. It asks for humanity to wither back into a flat existence, evening out in horizontal fashion with all of the other species living on planet Earth. Anthropocene theory speaks to what Alain Badiou has called an “animal humanism,” where humanity is perceived as a “*pitiable animal*” and “deserves only to disappear” (Badiou 2007, p. 175). Animal (post)humanism and Anthropocene discourse emerge out of a politics of guilt seeking to mend the wound that humanist and anthropocentric politics and culture have supposedly, according to them, cut open in the

*natural* world. It's in this sense that the posthumanist ethics of proponents of the Anthropocene discourse aim to *de-center* the human subject; but as Althusser has argued, the subject is always already *de-centered*. If this is truly the case, then even Althusser's own critique of socialist humanism as ideological remains, in my view, somewhat misguided as a strategy of emancipatory thinking as well as for an emancipatory *science*. While it may, perhaps, be true that *history* is a process without a subject or a goal, it is very difficult to imagine an *emancipatory* strategy (or even a science) that does not develop out of (at least) some conception of an historically relative and contingent premise—relative, that is, to the particularity of the material and historical conjuncture, and examined, evaluated, and enacted by a collective *subject* (the masses) in the class struggle.

Althusser's position is puzzling insofar as it is difficult to understand the emergence of *scientific* socialism without having it grounded in an engaged subjective position within the class struggle. It is not by way of objective-neutral knowledge that scientific socialism examines its object—history—but from a singular position occupied *within* the class struggle; not the spontaneous worldview of the working class (as early Lukács contends), but that of a particular political and philosophical position *relative to* the material conditions of existence. Historical materialism and psychoanalysis, we must recall, are unlike other sciences in that they are forms of *praxis*—the combination of theory and practice—in which the knowledge produced on the part of its subject has the implicit effect of simultaneously changing its object.

The subject cannot, it is true, perceive itself on its own in this way, and it requires arresting, grasping, and mediation from the position of some external, negative, vantage point (the party or the analyst, for instance, maybe even from the position of one's spouse or life partner—the small *a* (*petit autre*) as opposed to the big *A* (*grand Autre*) in Lacanese). Nevertheless, any emancipatory ethics requires building, not towards the de-centering of an

already de-centered and self-alienated (castrated) subject. Neither can it be built on a politics of dis-alienation and the fantasy of an uncastrated enjoyment. Fantasies of substantialization (of nature, of the other) merely disavow the negativity that stands at the heart of existence, and by doing so, have the potential to fall into forms of oppression. There is nothing more violent than forcing the other to substantialize in the way that it is fantasized. Instead, emancipatory politics requires political, methodological, and ethical *centering*. We see this kind of centering, for instance, in the political form of the party, or in psychoanalysis, where the *transference* moves the subject towards reasoning. However, it is never the individual subject alone or on its own that takes this step—belief in the emancipatory freedom of the individual is, after all, the mistake of the *bourgeois* humanist conception of the subject. Analysis *centers* the unconscious, or even the class struggle, as the negative constitutive of the structure, as an *absent* center. Can we, then, defend a form of political centrism in this way? I believe this to be the case and I do so here with the aim of renewing a universalist and dialectical humanism that contrasts with the theoretically fraught project of Western Marxist humanisms of the twentieth century, which aimed at an ethics of dis-alienation.

In a response to my position (Flisfeder 2021), Žižek (2022, pp. 225–228) has argued that my humanism preserves the human while rejecting the subject. He is incorrect. What I defend is not the human against the subject, but rather a conception of the subject that is drawn from a *dialectical* defence of *anthropocentrism*. This, however, is not an attempt to pit philosophical anthropology against ontology. My position emerges out of contemporary posthumanist critiques of anthropocentrism in the context of the Anthropocene discourse. To refer to Žižek’s own terms, I claim that what we require today is not the de-centering of the human, but a “super-anthropocentrism.” As he puts it, “What is required from us in this moment is, paradoxically, a kind of super-anthropocentrism: we should control nature, control our environment;

we should allow for a reciprocal relationship to exist between the countryside and cities; we should use technology to stop desertification or the polluting of the seas. We are, once again, responsible for what is happening, and so we are also the solution” (Caffo and Žižek 2021). As he explains elsewhere, too, “If we have to care also about the life of water and air, it means precisely that we are what Marx called ‘universal beings’, as it were, able to step outside ourselves, stand on our own shoulders, and perceive ourselves as a minor moment of the natural totality. To escape into the comfortable modesty of our finitude and mortality is not an option; it is a false exit to a catastrophe” (Žižek 2021). This is a position that I, too, defend. But unlike the projects of both the Western Marxist humanists and today’s posthumanists, our theoretical and political core cannot be a politics of dis-alienation, but rather must grasp the fact that alienation is a constitutive dimension of subjectivity—a position we can only grasp by setting out from a conception of social humanity, split by antagonism. As Žižek puts it in *Disparities*, human subjectivity is grounded in its own *failure* to become what it is (Žižek 2016, p. 28). The subject is, precisely, the failure of its own signifying representation. The *subject* of human subjectivity is to be located in the reasoning developed out of this failure—this betrayal to be what it effectively *is*; and this betrayal, I claim, *is* the subject of humanism.

### *Towards a Social Humanity*

My initial point of reference for conceiving what I refer to as a universalist and dialectical humanism is Freud. As he puts it in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, the “replacement of the power of the individual by the power of a community constitutes the decisive step of civilization. The essence of it lies in the fact that the members of the community restrict themselves in their possibilities of satisfaction, whereas the individual knew no such

restrictions” (Freud 1961, p. 49). Freud’s conception of civilization, here, constitutes one of the clearest definitions for what I describe as a *universalist* humanism, as opposed to naturalist philosophies—such as the Feuerbachian conception—*misconstrued* as humanisms, as in the work of many of the Marxist humanists, or even the liberal humanists who base their support of market society on some notion of brute and competitive human naturalism and individualism. It is noteworthy, of course, that Freud’s conception identifies restriction/repression as a marker of inclusion into the human community since it indicates a foundational limit against which the reasoning of the human subject takes place. Freud’s description of civilization articulates the form of the structure to which individuals submit, restricting their individual pursuits of immediate satisfaction to join together in the human community—human civilization, as opposed to the mere species being of humanity—as a way to collectively stave off and protect against the violence of a potentially threatening external nature. The final outcome of human civilizational development should be, as Freud describes, “a rule of law to which all—except those who are not capable of entering a community—have contributed by a sacrifice of their instincts, and which leaves no one—again with the same exception—at the mercy of brute force” (*ibid.*). It is the sacrifice of basic instincts which is significant here, since it demonstrates that inclusion is premised on a foundational negation. This, therefore, is only one side of things since the underside of every law is pulsation of the drive that persists in the space of the negation. Authentic freedom, in this sense, is not the freedom to *surpass* or resist the law, but that of giving it to ourselves—to assert our own self-limitations, or the inherent affirmation produced out of the fundamental negation. This is a point, too, that cannot but recall the Hegelian doctrine of the state insofar as it is distinguished from civil (or bourgeois) society.

The problem of civil society, as Hegel describes it, is that it can be confused with the operation of the state. Yet, if the state

is confused with civil society, and if its ends are primarily based in the protection of private property, the product is thus the disavowal of the universal grounds upon which market society may facilitate the satisfaction of mutual needs and instead secures primarily *individual* interests. This, of course, is the claim that Marx develops further in his critique of political economy, which must be read first and foremost as a *dialectical*, immanent, and materialist critique of the bourgeois ideology.

As Marx puts in his tenth thesis on Feuerbach, the standpoint of bourgeois materialism is civil society; whereas, for the materialism developed by Marx and Engels, the standpoint is *social* humanity. We see this developed most clearly, of course, in *Capital*, where Marx sets out to challenge the bourgeois presupposition of the individual caught in nature. Marx responds to the Robinsonades—the reference to Robinson Crusoe in Adam Smith and David Ricardo, for instance—in their assumption of the human individual originating in nature, and instead posits the presupposition of the *socially* determined individual acting in bourgeois society. As Marx puts it at the beginning of the *Grundrisse*, “Individuals producing in society—hence socially determined individual production—is, of course, the point of departure” (Marx 1993, p. 83). Marx’s point, of course, is that political economy begins from the presupposition of the individual human subject in nature—an abstraction that coincides with the avoidance of class struggle in actually existing society—whereas it would be preferable to begin with the presupposition of the individual as it is structured by social humanity, along with the actually existing political antagonisms giving structure to human society (i.e., class struggle as the motor of history).

Marx does not set out in *Capital* to produce a new political economy. His approach is, rather, that of a *critique* of political economy read as the bourgeois ideology of market society beginning with the individual as owner of private property. The materialism of *Capital* should be grasped as one of *immanent*



critique of the bourgeois ideology. Marx's methodology, and his accomplishment, is to show how, if we take the bourgeois ideology at its word—particularly its apparently humanist claims centering on equality and freedom in the market and in civil society—and apply it to a materialist unfolding of the movements of capitalist development, then we encounter, instead, the *undermining* of bourgeois assumptions evinced most clearly in the existence of the proletariat. As Sartre puts at the end of the first volume of *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, “bourgeois humanism lays its contradictions at the door of the proletariat” (Sartre 2004, p. 753).

Marx's accomplishment, in other words, is to show that exploitation is obscured by the form of commodity fetishism, which, amongst other things, creates the illusion that the wage laborer is an equal owner of property, on par with the capitalist. The difficulty for the bourgeois liberal conception of humanism rests on the fact that, although liberalism strives towards equality and freedom—that is to say, liberalism espouses racial equality, gender and sexual equality, and so forth; it even espouses an environmentalist and equitable relationship with the natural world—although it avows these desires, it fails to explain the reproduction of its social symptom, the proletariat, and instead downloads its existence onto the inefficiencies of particular individuals. Not unlike the Kantian expulsion of the Thing—needed to create the illusion of consistency in reasoning—bourgeois humanism excludes its symptom to create the appearance of its own reified system as equitable. It fails to see that the real presence of inequality lies in exploitation concealed by commodity fetishism. This is a fact that is obscured for both the worker and the capitalist insofar as commodity fetishism and the wage form create the illusion that workers are, themselves, individual property owners—owners of their own labor power as commodity-property—which is the condition granting them their relative position of freedom and equality in the market society of individualist competition. Again, as Sartre puts it, “The freedom of the worker-commodity

therefore conflicts with the human freedom of the worker before and during the signing of the contract;” the worker, then, “is the being who lays claim to humanity only to destroy the human in himself; he is anti-human: no one but *himself* has excluded him from bourgeois humanism” (*ibid.*). Such a formal conception of freedom, equality, and humanity, of course, forces us to ask about the fate of those who are or have been, historically, legally restricted in their rights to own property—women, the disabled, the *lumpenproletariat*, etc.—or even those who are themselves considered *as* property—as means of production—as is the case in slavery.

The wage form, thus, obscures exploitation to the extent that it creates the appearance of market reciprocity. Workers sell their labor for a wage and, thus, in the commodification of their labor power, appear as owners of property just like any other capitalist. As owners of their own property, privately produced—i.e., in social reproduction, in the time allotted in the working day to the reproduction of labor power—workers are, in this way, interpellated as subjects of market exchange, conforming to the presupposed assumptions of political economy, of individual producers, engaged in relations of trade and exchange in the market, whose subjectivity, as Sohn-Rethel demonstrates, is *produced* as one of private individualism: “In exchange, *the action is social, the mind is private*” (Sohn-Rethel 2021, p. 24). It’s important that we see, though, that this form of subjectivity is but the result of interpellation by the market form, and by way of bourgeois civil society, and that *bourgeois humanism* is a reflection of specifically bourgeois social relations.

The apparent humanist investment in equality and freedom in bourgeois society is undermined by its very own system of reification. As such, bourgeois humanism betrays and negates the very universality it nevertheless relies upon, as Hegel shows when he asserts that in the market society, individuals enter into arrangements of social relations in which the private production

of the particular needs of each is the condition for the collective production of the needs of all:

In the course of the actual attainment of selfish ends — an attainment conditioned in this way by universality — there is formed a system of complete interdependence, wherein the livelihood, welfare, and rightful existence of one individual are interwoven with the livelihood, welfare, and rights of all. (Hegel 2008, p. 181 [§183])

It is a mistake, however, according to Hegel, to confuse civil society of the market relation with the form of the state:

If the state is confused with civil society, and if its specific end is laid down as the security and protection of property and personal freedom, *the interest of individuals as such* becomes the ultimate end of their association, and it follows that membership of the state is something optional. (*Ibid.*, p. 228 [§258])

Universality, for Hegel, in other words, inheres to a certain extent in the market society, which is, however, undermined in its avowed particularisms and privileging of an individualist subjectivity geared primarily towards the protection of private property. This, however, undoes and damages the very social humanity and universality upon which the mutual satisfaction of needs is based in bourgeois society.

It is, thus, the mature Marx, I claim, who, through an immanent critique of bourgeois ideology in *Capital*, rather than the young Marx of the 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, demonstrates that bourgeois humanism is not, in fact, the universal humanism it claims to be. Bourgeois universality is nothing of the sort since it appears as merely the accumulation of particular individual differences, and emerges as anti-dialectical and *irrational* or conservative. The reasoning initially developed in bourgeois society turns back on itself and, rather than building towards the further emancipation of human subjectivity, halts

reason only by placing a restriction on its capacity to apprehend contradiction in its totality. To make further sense of a universal and *dialectical* humanism, then, we should begin, as the Marx of the theses on Feuerbach does, and as Freud and Hegel do, with a humanism based principally upon a conception of *social* humanity. Not, that is, to conceive a wholly unified humanity—not to imagine an end to the class struggle—but in order to understand the class struggle in its social totality. Today, class struggle has to be reimagined as the antagonism between humanity and the reifying posthumanism of capitalism.

### *The Contingency of Alienation in Marx*

My point in the preceding has been, in part, to argue that we find a more coherent dialectical humanism in the later Marx than what we find in the early Marx, which formed so much of the basis of the Western Marxist humanisms. Marx's early theory of alienation is taken up, most commonly, through a reading of his section on estranged or alienated labor in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, where he describes humanity's alienation from its foundational nature, or from its *species-being*. Marx's early development of the category of alienation, as well as the naturalism of his Feuerbach-inspired conception of species-being emerges out of his critique of Hegel's apparent idealism in *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Marx writes:

The importance of Hegel's *Phenomenology* and its final result—the dialectic of negativity as the moving and producing principle—lies in the fact that Hegel conceives the self-creation of man as a process, objectification as loss of object [*Entgegenständlichung*], as alienation and as supersession of this alienation; that he therefore grasps the nature of *labour* and conceives objective man—true, because real man—as the result of his own *labour*. The *real, active* relation of man to himself as a species-being, or the realization of himself

as a real species-being, i.e., as a human being, is only possible if he really employs all his *species-powers*—which again is only possible through the cooperation of mankind and as a result of history—and treats them as objects, which is at first only possible in the form of estrangement. (Marx 1992a, pp. 385–386)

Marx adds, however, that

Because Hegel equates man with self-consciousness, the estranged object, the estranged essential reality of man is nothing but consciousness, nothing but the thought of estrangement, its abstract and hence hollow and unreal expression, negation. The supersession of alienation is therefore likewise nothing but an abstract, hollow supersession of that hollow abstraction, the negation of the negation. (*Ibid.*, p. 396)

Hegel's conception of alienation is, according to Marx, tied up with his idealism. It is a conception in which the subject is alienated in thought, which brings the subject down to Earth. On Marx's view, Hegel's conception of alienation coincides with materialism in the way the subject's labor mixes with nature in the movement of a primary negation *from thought*, only. However, as Marx sees it, the subsequent movement in Hegel is one of the *negation of the negation*, in which the subject returns *from* the material world of nature back up into spirit. Hegel's idealism, according to Marx, is shown in its initial movement away from thought only to return to it in the end. Dis-alienation appears in the negation of the negation, according to Marx, as *the restoration of thought to itself*. We can imagine this, for instance, as an inverted triangle in which, initially, the subject is alienated from thought (or spirit), moving from above down to the ground, only to be then, in the negation of the negation, returned back to the heavens of thought, congealed in the idea. For Marx, however, we should think the terms of alienation beginning not from the heavens of thought but from the bottom up, from the material

grounds of nature—that is from the concrete, to abstraction, and then back down into the concrete. The trajectory is reversed, in which the triangular figure goes from the Earth up into the heavens of thought, at which point, in Marx’s paradigm, the subject is alienated from its species-being, only then, subsequently, to be returned back down to Earth in “an objective movement which *re-absorbs* alienation into itself” (*ibid.*, p. 395).

As Jon Stewart explains, Marx’s “critical point is that alienation is conceived as the second step—that is, negation—but then the third step, the negation of the negation does not meaningfully do away with alienation since this third step [in Hegel] is simply an abstract thought” (Stewart 2021, p. 156). Hegel, according to Marx, begins with the Idea as universal and only *then* moves into concrete particulars. Marx’s materialism, in contrast, begins with “the empirically perceived particulars” as “what is truly real,” and thus, for him, “this second step should be the real focus” (*ibid.*). Instead, for Hegel, the third step of the negation of the negation appears to reconcile the second step with the third, of a movement back into the universality of the Idea. This common misconception of the Hegelian dialectical process—from the positing reflection, to external and then determinate reflection; or, in the logic of judgement, from the positive to the negative, to the infinite judgement—that we find in Marx regarding the final reconciliation with the idea is one that has plagued dialectical scholarship for over a century. It’s on these points, too, that we see the continued rejection of the category of the negation of the negation in Stalin, Mao, and even in Althusser.

We can see here, too, the sense in which Marx’s early attention to humanism coincides with a naturalism that he gets from Feuerbach, and it is clear why even some posthumanist scholarship has sought to return to the naturalism of the early Marx (Nail 2020; Butler 2019). Taking humanity primarily as a natural being—an *active* natural being, that is—Marx equates communism in his early writing with humanism in the sense of returning humanity

back to its species origins and, in this way, resembles the idealism of posthumanist monism and what Badiou, as noted above, refers to as animal humanism, insofar as the latter aspires towards the recombination and reconciliation of humanity towards its basic nature. This is not to say that nature shouldn't be a factor for us, but it is not, as some have argued (Johnston 2019, pp. 149-152; Heron 2021, p. 504) an ontological priority. Nature is a *biological* necessity, of course, but there is no basic natural state to which we can return. Alienation, to repeat, is constitutive.

Posthumanism, then, especially in its monist, new materialist, and vitalist varieties, may be grasped, as Žižek sometimes puts it, as the desire to move from subject back into substance (Žižek 2016, p. 55). This is oddly, too, a useful description of some of the earliest versions of Western Marxism humanism. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes in *Adventures of the Dialectic*, historical materialism “states a kinship between the person and the exterior, between the subject and the object, which is at the bottom of the alienation of the subject in the object and, if the movement is reversed, will be the basis for the reintegration of the world with man” (Merleau-Ponty 1973, p. 33). For Merleau-Ponty, seeking “reintegration” is fundamental to the historical materialist outlook on history—that is, that the movement of history heads in the direction of a recombination of subject and object into a totality of the being of the species. The unity of the subject with the natural world, with the homogeneity of society, as well as with the unity of itself, is one way to grasp what was fundamental in Western Marxist incarnations of humanism, particularly in its conception of the problem of alienation, seen in this way as *contingent*. Insofar as both Posthumanist new materialism and Marxist humanisms perceive alienation as contingent both are based on a political ontology of *dis-alienation* and full transparency.

*A Politics of Dis-Alienation?* Both posthumanism and varieties of Marxist humanism aim at a complete recombination of humanity and the natural world, imagining that a certain equilibrium

exists that has been destroyed by the modern order of liberal, Western, capitalist society. Both perspectives, in other words, imagine a moment in the past where the universe was whole and complete, and at some point humanity and nature separated from each other, caused mainly due to the hubris of (the concept of) humanity. This perspective, however, forces an essential question: if the universe was in fact substantially whole prior to this separation and alienation between humanity and nature, what, in fact, was the cause of this separation in the first place? Let's tackle this question second. First, we should consider the *terminal* point of humanist and posthumanist political goals since it is mainly, I claim, according to a kind of retroactive speculation that we are able to come to understand "origin stories" themselves.

So much flows from how we grasp things in the present, but the present is always overdetermined by the way that we perceive our goals or aims—the question of what we want or what we desire in the end—which retroactively forces us to posit our set of presuppositions that give rise to our understanding of the causes of our crises. Erich Fromm, for instance, has claimed that "Marx's aim was that of a spiritual emancipation of man, of his liberation from the chains of economic determination, of resituating him in his human wholeness, of enabling him to find unity and harmony with his fellow man and with nature" (Fromm 2011, p. 3). As a corollary, for Fromm, prior to the emergence of human consciousness or self-consciousness—that is, of humanity's own self-awareness—humanity lived in perfect *unity* with nature. For Fromm, the evolution of humanity "is characterized by man's struggle with nature" (*ibid.*, p. 19). The first act of freedom, therefore, according to him, is humanity's "capacity to say 'no,'" in which case the human individual "sees himself as a stranger in the world, beset by conflicts with nature, between man and man, between man and woman" (*ibid.*, p. 64). Socialism, then, according to Fromm, will be "the abolition of human self-alienation, the return of man as a real human being"



(*ibid.*, p. 68). We can easily see here the way that, for Fromm, the project of socialism as one of dis-alienation coincides with his presupposition that humanity exists as alienated from its essence. Henri Lefebvre, likewise, characterized the project of historical materialism as one of dis-alienation.

Total man, as Lefebvre describes, “is ‘dis-alienated’ man” (Lefebvre 2009, p. 150). According to him, “human alienation will end with ‘the return of man to himself’, that is to say in the unity of all of the elements of the human.” As he puts it, “this ‘perfect naturalism’ coincides with humanism” (*ibid.*, p. 15). There is, of course, precedent to this point in the early Marx of the 1844 philosophical manuscripts, who writes comparatively of naturalism and humanism, noting the way that “naturalism or humanism differs both from idealism and materialism and is at the same time their unifying truth.” The human after all, as Marx notes, is an *active* and *natural being* (Marx 1992a, p. 389). Thus, for Marx, communism as the superseding of private property is a humanism insofar as it is the re-absorption of alienation into itself (*ibid.*, p. 395). As Lefebvre writes, defined in this way, “humanism has a quantitative aspect: it is based on the development of forces of production. It also has a qualitative aspect. Every human community has a quality or style... total humanism does not aim to destroy [national; cultural] communities but, on the contrary, to free them from their restrictions...” (Lefebvre 2009, p. 151). Humanism, for Lefebvre, based on Marx’s conception in his early writing, can thus be understood as “the supreme instance” of “total man” as a “free individual in a free community.” Total man, according to Lefebvre, is “an individuality which has blossomed into the limitless variety of possible individualities” (*ibid.*, pp. 151–152).

The most notable instance of the Western Marxist and humanist insistence on a politics of dis-alienation comes from the young Lukács, who, without having even read Marx’s early writing, developed a conception of emancipation based on a reading of

the later Marx's writing on commodity fetishism. In the development of his conception of reification, Lukács shows how the proletariat in capitalist conditions of exploitation, self-objectifies as commodified labor power. Lukács' turn to Hegel stands out in particular. As Žižek (2020, pp. 41–56) notes, beginning with Lukács and Karl Korsch, Western Marxism turned to a particular kind of Hegelianism that described the social context as the ultimate horizon for grasping objective phenomena. Both returned to Hegel in opposition to the neo-Kantianism of the second international and its insistence upon the gap between objective reality and the normative dimension of ethical practice. Lukács and Korsch aimed at the combination of theory and practice, making its knowledge of history into a practical dimension for changing and transforming its object.

For Lukács, in his early phase, alienation coincides with reification, and the consciousness of the proletariat is one of grasping as subject its objectification as commodity. Whereas Western Marxism, as Žižek puts it, grasps "human praxis as the ultimate transcendental horizon of our philosophical understanding," Soviet Marxism clung to a "naïve realist ontology" (*ibid.*, p. 43), claiming direct access to the whole form of reality and history. Instead of merely subjective *social* knowledge, it claimed direct and objective knowledge of the whole of reality, not unlike the realist ontology of contemporary posthumanist theory that seeks to bypass human epistemology, going straight to ontology. For the later Lukács, however, the evasion of the transcendentalist horizon ultimately returns to a realist ontology in an attempt to humanize Soviet ideology by distinguishing between the objectivizing aspects of labor, as such, and the alienating-reifying dimensions of labor under capitalism.

The theme that nevertheless persists in the various versions of humanist Marxism (as a kind of transcendentalism), as well as in that of the realist ontologies, is the prospect of a transparent *coincidence* between human social reality and nature. This vision,

however, fails to account for *the way* human social reality *separates* itself from nature. At what point does humanity alienate itself from nature? Is it the product of capitalism? Was there an alienation in the feudal order? Fromm (2011) argues that, despite a certain lack of freedom, the human community still provided a sense of wholeness in pre-capitalist societies, provided for by the comfort and security of the social reality. Was it, then, the development of technology that first forced the alienation of humanity? But by what cause was the development of technique set in motion?

The solution to this problem, according to Žižek, is “to abandon the starting point [that is, of a contingent alienation] and to admit that there is no reality as a self-regulated whole, that reality is itself cracked, incomplete, non-all, traversed by radical antagonism” (Žižek 2020, p. 52). Much of the problem in humanist Western Marxism, not unlike the problems we encounter in post-humanism, turns on the way it grasped the Hegelian conceptions of sublation and reconciliation—often associated with the poorly defined notion of *synthesis*. But this is, in fact, *not* the point of the Hegelian reconciliation, which is actually a reconciliation with the *inevitability* of alienation—that is with the fact of negativity. Human subjectivity, we might say, coincides with the negativity constitutive of reality. It is not, as some argue (Johnston 2019, pp. 149-152), through the production of a “de-naturalizing nature”—again, nature is still a biological necessity of human subjectivity, if not necessarily an ontological one—but of the occupation of the position of *negativity* within reality. We can locate human subjectivity, that is, in the form of a primordial *negation*—through a constitutive alienation—that is arrived at in its rejection, as Freud argues, of basic instincts. Every act of (free) choice involves, at the same time, a negation of those choices not chosen. This alienation in every free act of negation is where we locate the human subject.

What we should do, then, according to Žižek, is return to Hegel, as the Marxist humanists did, but to read the Hegelian reconciliation in a different way—*not* in terms of the *contingency*

of alienation, but as a *constitutive* aspect of both subjectivity *and* reality—that is, as informed by a constitutive *lack*. Subjectivity is the product of emergence of the negative in a reality that is constitutively *non-all*.

*From Constitutive Alienation to the Positing  
of the New Signifier*

In contrast to the Marxist humanist conception of alienation as contingent—in which politics is aimed in the direction of *dis*-alienation—in Hegel’s ontology we find that a *constitutive* alienation—and the reasoning required to grasp this via language, representation, and discourse—provides the grounds and the conditions upon which an ethical freedom is made possible. As human subjects, we experience our freedom—and there cannot be any ethics, or even politics, without freedom—not by returning into a species being, but by grasping that reality and actuality are open-ended, never whole on their own, never complete. There is only politics if subjects are free to transform and recreate the actual conditions of existence—to change, that is, the object. This possibility is undermined if we conceive a terminal point of history, in which an alienated subject is finally reconciled with its un-alienated nature, and which would bring about an end to the class struggle. All we can do—if, however, with a conception of universal freedom in mind—is develop that which is necessary given the historical contingency of any and every situation. No one knows the course of history—historical knowledge is only knowable after the fact—and therefore, all we can do is create necessary conditions in situations of pure contingency. It’s from this perspective that we can conceive the overlapping of the lacks in the subject and in reality.

Hegel describes this overlapping of the lacks in the subject and the material world in the section on culture as self-alienated spirit

in *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Here, Hegel describes the world that confronts the subject as the *negative* of its own self-consciousness (Hegel 1977, p. 294 [§484]). The world, however, also has an *alien* reality, according to Hegel, both present and given, and has a being of its own, but in which *it does not recognize itself*. In the absence of its own self-recognition, the subject is, thus, the *negative* of the material world. In its immediacy, the self *appears* without substance, just as much as substance appears without subject. It seems that by alienating itself through externalization—by changing and transforming the real world through work—that substance attains its existence *for* the subject. However, the reverse is also true since this is the sense in which Hegel writes, in the Preface to the *Phenomenology*, that “everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only as *Substance* but equally as *Subject*” (*ibid.*, p. 10 [§17]). In contrast to Spinoza’s substantive monism, for instance, by evincing the process by which Spinoza comes to *think* and *reason* the substantive world, Hegel shows that the presence of the subject is there in the very *thinking* involved in the coming to recognize the actuality of the world as substance. Subject is, here, present where reasoning apprehends the negativity in being.

*Spirit*, for Hegel, represents the self-conscious unity of self and essence, each relating to the other in the form of their *mutual self-alienation*—essence, that is, as a determinateness that has its being and appearing *for* self-consciousness. However, although it is the consciousness of the objective real world, which exists freely and on its own account, consciousness is still confronted by Spirit—that is, through its externalization in the real world *and* by that which *supersedes* the actual world in what lies beyond it. “The *present* actual world,” Hegel writes, “has its antithesis directly in its *beyond*, which is both the thinking of it and its thought-form, just as the beyond has in the present world its actuality, but an actuality alienated from it” (*ibid.*, p. 295 [§485]). Nothing—or nothingness—which is the beyond of the actual, inheres as the

negative of both the self-conscious Spirit and the actual world. “The equilibrium of the whole,” then, as Hegel puts it, is not a unity that remains unto itself, a unity, that is, which is self-substantializing, but which “rests in the *alienation* of opposites” (*ibid.*, p. 295 [§486]; my emphasis). The *whole*, in other words, is a *self-alienated* actuality. There is, thus, we might say a “hole” in the *whole*, which the subject apprehends in its materiality through the process of reasoning the presence of the negative in this way.

Knowledge of the beyond, of this negativity that lies beyond the actual, according to Hegel, at first rests on Faith. Yet, just as consciousness, divided by that which it knows and that which it does not (its *un-conscious*), returns into itself as its constitutive self-alienation, so too does self-alienated Spirit return into the *self*, initially in its immediacy as a single person, but subsequently, through its externalization, it returns in its universality insofar as consciousness grasps or arrests itself via the reference to the Concept or the Notion. The insight that this produces, according to Hegel, completes the stage of culture and moves the subject from Faith to Enlightenment, which, in the very material sense of grasping the constitutive alienation at the heart of both the self *and* the actual world, provides the basis for absolute freedom—and, in Lacanian terms, it is the moment of *subjective destitution*.

By recognizing that *nothing* inheres—nothing, that is, as an object—intrinsically in actuality, not only can Faith, but also the actual world, be overthrown, giving rise to the possibility of *ethical action*, which depends upon the freedom of the subject. In this way, the subject can suspend the realm of causality and enact its freedom in the positing of the Concept. The Concept, in this way, provides the *representational* co-ordinates of self-alienated actuality insofar as it is translated into language and discourse.

As Fredric Jameson puts it, although “language cannot be trusted to convey any adequate or positive account of the Notion [the Concept], or of truth and reality... it can much more pertinently be used as an index of error or contradiction”

(Jameson 2010, p. 35). Language (and representation), in other words, *mediates* that which cannot be said or spoken, which it conveys by grasping lack, negativity, alienation, and contradiction. This is how, for instance, we come to grasp the Real, in the Lacanian sense, at the *limits* of the symbolic, a point that departs from the Deleuzian perspective, where representation amounts, merely, to the congealing of, and therefore the evisceration of contradiction and difference. To the contrary, it is only by way of the mediations of language and representation that we are able to apprehend—or know—contradiction and difference at the limit points of the representation itself. This is also where the Althusserian conception of ideology as an imaginary *representation* of the subject to its real conditions of existence can appear misleading. Ideology is not simply in the representation itself; the representation, rather, is the medium through which the critique of ideology is made possible. Without representation—without language, discourse, and rhetoric—our hands are tied in our attempts to locate that which remains negative at the heart of every affirming and positing of an idea. As Zupančič notes, posthumanist new materialists tend to distance themselves from representational paradigms found in structuralism and post-structuralism. However, she notes, it is the discovery of the *inconsistencies* in language that locate the position of the subject: “if language, discourse, or structure were consistent ontological categories, there would be no subject” (Zupančič 2017, p. 119). This is how even abstractions can be liberating.

In Hegel, then, we see that language becomes the medium of universality, but it is only through our alienation *in* language that we are made capable, through reasoning its logic to the end, of grasping its significance. In speech, as Hegel puts it, “self-consciousness, *qua independent separate individuality*, comes as such into existence, so that it exists *for others*” (Hegel 1977, p. 308 [§508]). Again, as Jameson explains, here we see the paradox of the fact that “my individuality, expressed through first person

language, does not really come into existence until it is expressed ‘for others’” (Jameson 2010, p. 38). In Lacanian terms, we see here how the subject attains its identity via the signifier (from  $\$$  to  $S_1$ ), which represents the subject for all of the others. At the same time, the signifier ( $S_1$ ) is that *for which* all of the others ( $S_2$ ) determine the subject ( $\$$ ). The subject, in other words, is self-present, on the one hand, in its representation in the form of the signifier, while, on the other hand, finds itself emptied out as the missing place—the gap or lack—in the battery of all the other signifiers, or the symbolic order as such.

Language and representation thus, according to Jameson, become, for Hegel, diagnostically necessary. The Concept becomes the representational device against which the negativity that inheres in both the actual world and the subject itself can come to be known. The absolute (ethical) freedom that we found previously in the understanding that *nothing* inheres in the actual world—and that the actual world is, too, self-alienated, fissured by gaps, and thus incomplete—is given form in the way that the subject finds itself capable of positing the Concept, or the new signifier. In other words, to *center* its constitutively de-centered and self-alienated presence. Does this, however, mean that the subject can automatically become self-actualizing, on its own, in this way, thereby completely negating the Symbolic order, the realm of language and representation, in which its self is given substance through its definition by others *in* language?

### *The Alienated (Non-All) Subject of the Signifier*

Alienation, for Lacan, like Hegel, is also consubstantial with subjectivization. The subject is not alienated *from* the symbolic order; it is, rather, alienated *into* the symbolic order. The subject is alienated in the sense that, in the formation of subjectivity, the moment of positive subjectivization coincides with a certain *loss*,



which depends on the subject's relation to the signifier. As Lacan puts it, the signifier "is that which represents a subject for another signifier" (Lacan 1981, p. 207). The subject, according to Lacan, is, therefore, "born in so far as the signifier emerges in the field of the Other" (*ibid.*, p. 199). The choice of signifier into which we invest our identity and our sense of self represents the way that the subject perceives itself from the perspective of the gaze of the symbolic order, or the big Other, and in this way helps to produce the subject as an ego-ideal. Again, as Lacan explains, the signifier "producing itself in the field of the Other, makes manifest the subject of its signification. But it functions as a signifier only to reduce the subject in question to being no more than a signifier, to petrify the subject in the same movement in which it calls the subject to function, to speak, as subject" (*ibid.*, p. 207). This petrification of the subject, this loss central to subjectivity, coincides with its emergence in the field of the Other and is the flipside of its alienation—in order to exist socially and in the field of the Other, the subject is required to give up something, which is why Lacan (2007, p. 124) refers to the subject's entry into the field of the Other as "symbolic castration." As Mladen Dolar puts it, "alienation was for Lacan always essentially connected with the idea of a forced choice... The subject is subject to a choice—this is what makes it a subject in the first place" (Dolar 1998, p. 17). Dolar is quick to note, however, that this choice is "the opposite of a free and autonomous choice one is accustomed to associate with the subject" (*ibid.*), as we see, for instance, in Sartre's existential ethics of responsibility. This is due to the fact that the emergence of subjectivity is formed, initially, in the field of the Other.

The alienation of the subject, in other words, involves a kind of emptying out, which is the other side of its positivization in the field of the Other, in its subjectivization. While the subject submits to its alienation in the Symbolic order of the *big* Other (grand *Autre*), it loses what Lacan calls the object small *a*: the *small* other (petit *autre*)—the objectification of lack. It's how-

ever, necessary, to grasp the fact that the small other only ever emerges as existing *through* the loss itself. Its *positive* existence is that of being lost. Prior to its loss, the small other never existed and, therefore, no actual object can ever satisfy the loss central to subjectivity. The subject is always structured around this lacking. The production of the subject of the signifier coincides with the emergence of the small other in the same way that every act of choice overlaps an operation of an affirmation and a negation. Every affirmative choice we make is, at the same time, the negation of all of the other possible choices. The truth is that we can never be or have everything all at once and, thus, in every act of decision—in every act of choice—we lose something at the same time that we gain something else.

Lacan develops this point by splitting the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* into two separate moments of the “I think” and the “I am”—that is, the split between thought and being. It is noteworthy that this division between thought and being corresponds to the traditional distinction between idealism and materialism that we find described in Marx as early as his theses on Feuerbach, and later expanded by Engels. This division is also, in its later development in “official” Soviet Marxism, adapted by the various anti-Hegelian materialisms of Mao and French Structuralism, central to vulgar materialist, ultraleftist, anti-humanist and posthumanist critiques of subjectivity. But specifically, for Lacan, the choice of thinking *or* being is one in which the affirmation of one, and the negation of the other, doesn’t necessarily mean that the negative choice is completely lost. Its presence persists in fantasmatic form, in the same way that for Hegel being and nothingness consist in assuming each other. This, for instance, is where Lacan improves on the Sartre of *Being and Nothingness*, where Sartre famously rejects the thesis of the Freudian unconscious.

As Žižek notes, in Seminar XI, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, Lacan proposes that, by alienating itself into the field of the Other, the subject is forced to choose thought

over being. For Lacan, the “eclipse of being” is “induced by the very function of the signifier” (Lacan 1981, p. 211). However, Žižek also notes that Lacan later on, in Seminar XIV on the logic of fantasy, reverses course and instead claims that the subject, by alienating itself into the field of the Other, chooses being, instead, with thought therefore relegated to the position of the unconscious. According to Žižek (1993), we shouldn’t read this change in Lacan’s teaching as a later adjustment to a prior formulation. Rather, the two formulations should be read as two different ways of relating to the forced choice of being along the lines of Lacan’s later logics of sexuation.

For Žižek, the choice of *being* must be understood according to the masculine logic of universality—that is, where a universal exception, a finite limit informs the (closed) field of signification. It is in this sense that the phallic signifier creates a point of suture to the signifying field. The choice of *thought*, however, is, thus, one of the *unlimited*—as Joan Copjec (1994) puts it—thus coinciding with the *feminine* logic, where a particular *negation* implies that there is no exception and that the Symbolic order is *not-all*, incomplete and marked by gaps and negativity. The masculine subject, we might say, is here—in the choice of being over thought; the affirmation of a finite *limit*—the Kantian transcendental subject of the *Verstand*, of mere *understanding*; whereas the feminine subject is that of the *Vernunft*, or of thinking and reasoning.

The feminine (hysterical) subject is the one who is constantly engaged in bombarding the Other with questions: what am I? What am I to you? Am I a man or woman? Why am I what you (the Other) are saying that I am? The hysterical questioning here, is, of course, as expressed in Lacan’s discourse of the hysteric (Lacan 2007; Lacan 2006), also key to the production of psychoanalytic knowledge and analytical discourse; and, to avoid any misunderstanding, it is important to note that we call this subject the feminine or the hysteric, not because of anything attached to

the body or the biology of the subject, but precisely because of the *material* anxiety of being a woman in patriarchal society. As Juliet Mitchell once put it: psychoanalysis is the interpretation of a patriarchal society, not the prescription for one. Thus, again, we might say that the hysteric is Freud's proletariat. The hysterical subject is, therefore, the subject as such. Hysteria, as Žižek (2002, p. 101) puts it, means failed interpellation; and, it is in this failed interpellation that we find the emergence of the subject. As Žižek (*ibid.*, p. 62) has also noted, elsewhere, hysteria is the "human" way of installing a point of impossibility in the guise of absolute *jouissance*." This is why, as I have put it elsewhere, the contemporary fear of the human subject coincides with what I have referred to as the *hysterical sublime* (Flisfeder 2021). Put differently, it is the feminine position of the non-all that allows the subject to grasp itself in the *failure* of its own signifying representation. It is from this position, the *hysterical* position of coming to reconcile with the constitutive alienation of human subjectivity, that I now advocate reading a renewed conception of humanism via the Lacanian discourse of the analyst alongside the Hegelian conception of love.

*Is it Possible to Love One's Analyst?*  
*Humanism as Separation*

By referring to love in this way, I do not mean it in the sense of loving all of humanity or the love of nature, and so on. Rather, love here denotes the *choice* of a singular other—a small other (*petit a*) that holds me to account. An other in whom I choose and can trust, into whom I invest my own negativity. As Lacan puts it, "love is giving what you don't have" (Lacan 2015, p. 129). Embracing the small other as a *limit* of my own choosing is the embracing, at the same time, of the formalization of a new structuration giving the subject its freedom—as Anna Kornbluh

puts it, this involves the embracing of a limit “as the *condition* of freedom” (Kornbluh 2019, p. 154; my emphasis). It is not by escaping structure, but by building and producing it, that we create the conditions of our freedom—that is, *by giving to ourselves* the conditions of our freedom. It is not the case, however, as in an older humanist model of the fully self-present and self-aware subject who freely makes choices on their own. Rather, it is the position of the small other as limit who helps to bring about the negativity within us, and that holds us to account for it. We can see this relationship in the link between the hysteric and the analyst.

The hysteric, at the outset, produces the knowledge needed for the analytical discourse. Through its symptom, through its bombardment of questioning, the hysterical subject helps to produce the analytical discourse, as is represented by the matheme of the hysteric’s discourse, where it is knowledge that gets produced.

$$\frac{\S}{a} \rightarrow \frac{S_1}{S_2}$$

This same knowledge is then applied by the analyst in the treatment of the subject.

$$\frac{a}{S_2} \rightarrow \frac{\S}{S_1}$$

And, conversely, what gets produced via the discourse of the analyst is the construction of a new signifier instituting a new signifying structure. What changes in the analytical discourse is the fundamental structuring principle of the subject with regards to its enjoyment—the lack and alienation constitutive of subjectivity. Similarly, with regards to the social field, the production of the new signifier is, likewise, fundamental to changing the structural principle of society (Žižek 2000, p. 93).

According to Lacan, love is what gets produced in the course of the analytical treatment. It interests us, according to Lacan, “insofar as it allows us to understand what happens in transference—and, to a certain extent, because of transference” (Lacan 2015, p. 49). As Dolar notes, love is one of the effects of the transference and, therefore, part of its aim is to cure a symptom produced by the analytical treatment itself (Dolar 1993, pp. 84–85). Love, in this way, according to Dolar, involves a dimension *beyond* interpellation (*ibid.*, p. 87). This, too, is how we can come to see the overlap between the Lacanian analytical discourse, and the Hegelian conception of love. For Hegel:

Love means in general terms the consciousness of my unity with another, so that I am not in isolation by myself but win my self-consciousness only through the renunciation of my independence [*Fürsichsein*] and through knowing myself as the unity of myself with another and of the other with me. (Hegel 2008, p. 162, [§158] Addition)

We can see, here, too, how love relates differently than the standard reference to the struggle between the Lord and Bondsman, and the striving towards the liberal conception of “mutual recognition.” In the latter, self-consciousness is won in a conflict whereby recognition becomes a source for the production of the *big* Other, and we can see this clearly, too, in the way that Kojève describes the creation of desire out of the struggle for self-recognition in the master-slave dialectic. But as Lacan writes in Seminar XX, his teaching aims to dissociate or *separate* the small other from the big Other (Lacan 1998, p. 83). The movement of the subject in the analytical discourse is one of moving from the Symbolic Other to the Real other, and this is something we see, again, in Hegelian love. Hegel writes:

The first moment in love is that I do not wish to be a self-subsistent and independent person and that, if I were, then I would

feel defective and incomplete. The second moment is that I find myself in another person, that I count for something in the other, while the other in turn comes to count for something in me. Love, therefore, is the most tremendous contradiction; the understanding cannot resolve it since there is nothing more stubborn than this point [*Punktualität*] of self-consciousness which is negated and which nevertheless I ought to possess as affirmative. Love is at once the producing and the resolving of this contradiction. As the resolving of it, love is unity of an ethical type. (Hegel 2008, p. 162, [§158] Addition)

Love, as we see in Hegel, allows for the recognition, the grasping of the subject's own alienation—its own lack or gap or negativity—through its reflection in the other. The self-consciousness attained in love is not one of completion and wholeness, or of becoming fully self-aware; rather, it is one of reconciling with the fact of the subject's own constitutive alienation, the negative at the heart of subjectivity. In love, the subject *renounces* its own independence, its own *affirmative* self-presence, and accepts its constitutive alienation. But in doing so, attains the knowledge of the freedom that allows it to produce the structure of its own further freedom. There is also in love something of an irrational kernel—the level of feeling produced in the form of the transference—allowing the subject to, later, join with the rational, objective, and universal form of the state, a rationalism that *can be known* to us.

The structuralist revolution, as Dolar notes, was “a break away from the humanist tradition centered on the subject [...] and particularly as a radical rupture with the philosophical tradition based on *cogito*” (Dolar 1998, p. 13). However, if we are to think emancipatory politics and ethics via reason and the presence of the subject, we can see now in what way the constitutive alienation of the subject is a condition of dialectical reasoning. The kind of reasoning produced in the transference—in love—involves the reconciling of the subject with its own constitutive alienation.

This, to conclude, is how the subject comes to *center* itself in the moment of an ethical act that produces the new as a signifying structure, the fundamental principle of the society, founded upon a necessary transformation that is nonetheless historically contingent. It is how the subject passes, not towards dis-alienation, or de-centering, but towards *separation*—the movement from the big Other to the small other. The new signifier, produced, then, in the analytical discourse, as the new center—an absent center, correlative with the subject as the gap in the structure—and the structuring principle is, as Zupančič puts it, “the event proper, and it triggers a new subjectivization” (Zupančič 2017, p. 127). This is how, again, as Dolar puts it, for Lacan “*there is no process, and no structure, without a subject*” (Dolar 1998, p. 13).

These are the terms in which the renewal of a dialectical humanism that apprehends subjectivity in its constitutive alienation must be grounded: not by way of the false humility of bourgeois and posthumanist concern with a substantialized otherness, where, as Žižek puts it “the subject pretends to speak on behalf of the Global Cosmic Order, posing as its humble instrument” (Žižek 1999, pp. 132–133)—a strategy to combat anthropocentric hubris—but as acknowledgement of the fact that no subject but us can take responsibility for doing what is necessary in historically contingent conditions. In a nod to Sartre, we have to agree that humanity is nothing other than what it makes of itself. We, alone, are responsible for what we do. Our struggle today, then—the struggle of the Anthropocene against the Capitalocene—is precisely the struggle of (dialectical) humanism against posthuman capitalism. Dialectical humanism must be grasped as the choice of preserving the conditions for human universality—a choice that, nonetheless, is centered on a constitutive loss.



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# Holding the Frame/Playing the Game: Transference as Political Potentiality

*William Mazzarella*

If you know Sigmund Freud's book *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), you will probably remember his story about the modern authoritarian leader as a return of the primal father. This is the primal father who was overthrown and killed by his sons, a killing that sets the stage for the invention of law. The killing also establishes the perpetual guilt that from then on keeps the survivors tied to that law—tied more tightly, more insidiously, than they ever were to the living father. The primal father, says Freud, was the original 'superman.' His authority was total, and would brook no autonomy among his sons. He was everything; his people were nothing. What survives of him after the killing is a potent but disavowed charisma of violence that continues to cling to the law.

All this is well known, and was already well known to readers of Freud when *Group Psychology* was published, since that part of the story was really just a rehash from Freud's earlier work *Totem and Taboo* (1913). What is less well remembered is that Freud theorized authoritarian leaders not only as regressive repetitions of the one primal father, but also as revenants of "the first epic poet" (1959 [1921], p. 87)—which is to say the later man who, first among equals, decided to set himself up as the people's leader. By calling him the first epic poet, Freud is suggesting that the leader doesn't just establish patriarchal dominion; he creates a world. More precisely, the leader performs the fetish trick: he makes us

attribute our own world-making powers to him, and credit him with what we have in fact made together. For Freud the leader is, then, at once a throwback and a visionary. He is the occasion for both a massive collective regression and a tremendous collective poesis. He is also, we might say, the occasion for the invention of transference. More on that in a moment.

Freud's story about a long-ago parricide is of course not to be taken literally. The murdered body that haunts democracy may better be understood as what Eric Santner (2011) has called *the royal remains*: an uncanny and unquiet mobile mattering that permeates social life precisely because the sovereignty of the people has no corporeal location, no form of its own. Popular sovereignty is social energy constantly casting around for a body. This is why the leader's body moves so readily into the frame of feeling, giving human shape to this mobile mattering. And this is why the leader's body becomes such a disproportionately fascinating object for both followers and critics. At one level, the modern tyrant is a royal revival—the reincarnation of the excarnated flesh of the king that once was. But at another level, even the erstwhile body of the king was itself only ever a more or less stable ritual placeholder for this restless mattering.

This mobile mattering is not just a feature of authoritarian or exceptional times. Rather it is the stuff that always, in every polity, makes the difference between mere meaning and *meaning that matters* (Mazzarella 2017). It is the substance of charisma, of gravitas as well as of renewal. Of world making images, projects, ideals, movements. This is a fundamental point, then: that the stuff that fires up the authoritarian glow is also what powers the enthusiasms that we like to like. And it is what persists as a founding echo in the law, from where it is always ready to erupt into turmoil again. Freud describes this as an inescapable atavism, a hovering regression: “Just as primitive man survives potentially in every individual, so the primal horde may arise once more out of any random collection” (Freud 1959 [1921], p. 70). But what if

we were to understand this potentiality not as a throwback, not as a regression to a primal or infantile state, but rather as something inherent and dynamic in the relation between the form and force of the social?

What really seems to trouble Freud in *Group Psychology* is the way that the crowd theorists of his time—people like Gustave Le Bon, William McDougall and so on—blithely write about the intense energetics of crowds as if words like *suggestion* and *contagion* explained anything. The way that crowds seem so terribly ready to surrender to a charismatic leader. The shocking violence of which mobs are capable. The way a single image or sound or word can travel like wildfire through a mass of people, turning their attention and their power in a single direction, *just like that* (Mazzarella 2010). The frightening ease with which yesterday's rational and skeptical neighbor might suddenly start spouting the most outlandish, feverish garbage. What's going on there? Freud asked. What makes that possible?

His answer was that it's all about regression. Crowd frenzy is a reawakening of primal attachments. The truth of these primal attachments cannot, Freud argued, be faced directly. It's too shattering. This is where the leader steps in. As a 'new edition' of the primal father, the leader at once *embodies and mediates* the unthinkable yet potent primal thing: "Even Moses had to act as an intermediary," Freud remarks, "between his people and Jehovah, since the people could not support the sight of God; and when he returned from the presence of God *his face shone*" (Freud 1959 [1921], p. 74; my emphasis).

The power of the leader comes not only from their ability to channel the unspeakable back into a socially palatable form. By being the *one* leader, he also prevents the peoples' identification with each other from becoming murderous. This is a stark theme that recurs in the Freudian tradition: that pure identification has to be mediated by a third term—be it law, language, an analytic third space—in order not to end in universal cannibalism. In order

not to *eat* each other out of radically mutual identification, the people need the leader as a shared external point of identification. Freud writes: “Identification, in fact, is ambivalent from the very first; it can turn into an expression of tenderness as easily as into a wish for someone’s removal [...] The cannibal, as we know, has remained at this standpoint; he has a devouring affection for his enemies and only devours people of whom he is fond” (*ibid.*, p. 47). Of course at one level this is just quasi-anthropological hyperbole. But it does contain a provocation worth considering: that it is only when the mobile matter of social life can be channeled into third terms—leaders, totems, charged-up signifiers of whatever stripe—that the restless, shape-shifting substance of life can take on the relative stability of love, instead of consuming itself in a frenzy of fighting and fucking.

From a liberal standpoint, the trouble with authoritarianism isn’t just that leaders exercise their power in arbitrary ways. It’s also that it retards political maturity on the part of citizens. If the authoritarian leader is like a sky-filling father, then the citizen here becomes entirely infantile, crushed into the ground, unable to exercise or even develop their human capacity for autonomous judgment. Consider the absolute importance, to the liberal imagination, of agentive self-determination as the mark of citizenship. In my life as a consumer, I may coyly, even charmingly, admit to having been seduced and overcome by a gorgeous piece of clothing—I *just had to have it*. A guilty pleasure, and I am all the more touchingly human for it. But allowing oneself to be seduced and overcome in the realm of politics is always an embarrassing failure (Mazzarella 2020). There is no ethically admissible guilty pleasure in politics. Seduction in politics is regressive; it means you’re weak and suggestible, like a child.

Suggestion, writes Freud in the 1880s, is “a conscious idea, which has been introduced into the brain of the hypnotized person by an external person and has been accepted by him as though it had arisen spontaneously” (Freud 1963 [1888], p. 30). Suggestion

is insidious, since I think I'm thinking and acting autonomously when actually I am being heteronomously manipulated. Marxists would later call this situation *false consciousness*, without much deepening our sense of its psychic dynamics. And in the age of Trump and other melodramatic masculinists all over the world, many continue to ask the question once posed by Thomas Frank: *What's the matter with Kansas?* Apparently right wing talk radio is planting ideas in peoples' heads that can then appear as spontaneous common sense. Curiously, this is love too, because love, for Freud, inherently involves a loss of critical judgment. But whereas the love of the law, the love of stable institutions, is a sublimated love, a higher love, the love that paves the way for suggestion is entirely desublimated, the love of infantile regression.

Ostensibly the choice is pretty simple, as well as heavily moralized: be an adult or be a child. Grow up or regress. Sublimate your eros or give way to whatever floods your primal scene. At that level it sounds like a problem of psychic weatherproofing: build your walls firm and strong, plug your ears tightly enough, and you'll be OK. But here, the psychoanalytic tradition also opens up a more complex and more interesting question.

It's true that at one level there's always this concern about undue influence, whether it's the analyst implanting false memories or the authoritarian leader authorizing racist fantasies. But the analyst also knows that it's only because I am *addressable*, it's only because something in me can be activated, can come alive in the presence of certain images and words, that I can be healed. As long as we speak of *suggestibility*, it's as if the image is simply one of holding the line against manipulation. But if we pose the problem in terms of *addressability*, then right away things look more ambiguous. Ideology theorists have not thought about this enough. We may, with Louis Althusser, speak of being hailed, of being interpellated in and by ideology. But how far have we come in figuring out why this image or word or gesture rather than that one actually *addresses* me, causing me to turn around and



assume my subjectivity? Here again, it's not so easy to sort the matter of demons from the substance of angels. My addressability is the matrix of my susceptibility to eros—whether interpersonal or political. As Jacques Lacan once pointedly asked, on behalf of all those analysts who had been made to feel that they were supposed to deliver only gentle news in this department: “Is it our job to disguise Eros, the black God, as the Good Shepherd’s curly-haired sheep?” (Lacan 2007 [1958], p. 507)

Psychoanalysis calls my erotic matrix my capacity for transference. The point about transference is that it's where I repeat myself in my libidinal relations with others, but also, and for the same reason, where those patterns can not only be re-enacted but also, in the clinic, transformed. Freud lays it out clearly:

every human being has acquired, by the combined operation of inherent disposition and of external influences in childhood, *a special individuality in the exercise of his capacity to love*—that is, in the conditions which he sets up for loving, in the impulses he gratifies by it, and in the aims he sets out to achieve in it. This forms *a cliché or stereotype in him*, so to speak (or even several), which perpetually repeats and reproduces itself as life goes on, in so far as external circumstances and the nature of the accessible love-objects permit, and is indeed itself to some extent modifiable by later impressions (Freud 1963 [1912], p. 105; my emphasis).

To reduce the problem of political authority to slavish suggestibility, then, is to avoid the more unsettling problem of the *special individuality in the exercise of our capacity to love*—which is to say our transferential addressability. As Freud himself writes in 1912, it only makes sense to speak of suggestion if by suggestion we understand the “influence on a person through and by means of the transference-manifestations of which he is capable” (*ibid.*, p. 112). Sándor Ferenczi would add: “there is no such thing as a ‘hypnotising,’ a ‘giving of ideas’ in the sense of psychically incorporating something quite foreign from without, but only

procedures that are able to set going unconscious, pre-existing, auto-suggestive mechanisms” (Ferenczi 1994 [1909], pp. 84–85).

Reading these words, one sees why Freud’s nephew, Edward Bernays, was so very keen to translate his uncle’s insights into marketing magic. And one can understand Freud’s well-known distaste at the idea. But there’s a problem here that goes deeper than any fastidious reluctance to sell out. Freud presumed that the instrumentalization of psychoanalysis, whether in the service of states or corporations, would lead it right back into the domain of pure suggestion. This, he mused, would be the price of any mass extension of its techniques. Speculating in 1919 on the possibility of a future mass psychoanalysis, he writes that such a public extension of therapy would “compel us to alloy the pure gold of analysis with the copper of direct suggestion; and even hypnotic influence might find a place in it again, as it has in the treatment of war-neuroses” (Freud 1963 [1919], p. 190).

This, then, is also where the Freudian theory of authoritarian leadership and crowd submission is weak. In theorizing the leader and the crowd, Freud ignores his own best insight. Because if there is an erotic matrix for individuals that comes alive, that opens up in transference, then surely something like that also happens at a public level. How is it that when it comes to the public sphere, suggestion is suddenly “direct” again, as if the old, melodramatic specter of mind control had a kind of plausibility when it came to mass publicity that it had long since lost in the clinic? If transference in the clinic has the power to trouble any neat distinction between doer and done-to, as Jessica Benjamin puts it, then how is this not also the case in its public, political registers?

Mainstream political theory remains entirely caught up in the normative assumption that good, responsible citizenship means thinking for yourself, acting autonomously, reaching your own mature judgments. But if any kind of social engagement that has even a little bit of enthusiasm in it—a little bit of eros—is relational and grounded in transference, then what does that mean for the

assumption of the citizen's normative autonomy? When it comes to citizenship, we seem to have no sense that in the world of politics there could be a stance other than freedom or submission. Or better, although we recognize that things are never so simple, it's as if, in our analyses of any given phenomenon, we want to place it along a spectrum where freedom is at one end and submission is at the other. Or if we find evidence of submission in one area of social life, then sustaining political hope means scurrying around trying to find evidence of freedom in another. Although many of our most cherished liberal ideals are of egalitarian intersubjective process, our models for what this might look like remain premised on individual subjects arguing with each other from within more or less fortified positions: Habermasian communicative reason or something like it. Is there a way that we can remain 'realistic' about power relations while at the same time theorizing political relations as a question of addressability (as opposed to agency) and what it may yield—good and bad?

Remember how Freud characterizes the leader as not only a return of the primal father but also as the world-making first epic poet? I'm interested in how the transferential relationship has this poetic capacity, this world-making potential. Or rather, perhaps I should say world-*disclosing* potential. Drawing on the Kleinian object relations tradition in psychoanalysis, Betty Joseph (1985) argues that what emerges in transference is not just the patient's pattern of love, as it were, but much more than that: what emerges is a whole *scene* of attractions, aversions, and attachments, nothing short of a "total situation." A kind of psychic living space, a virtual dwelling in which every piece of furniture, every knickknack is a clue in the rebus of my addressability.

I use the word *scene* deliberately, because I think there's something interestingly theatrical about the transference situation. Not just because it's a re/enactment. Also because the relation is a kind of *true fiction*. It's as if the analyst silently says to the patient: *I know very well that I am not really your object of desire,*

*but nevertheless, if I sustain the play of this transference without 'playing into it,' the real enactment of your love can have real transformative effects.* We could perhaps extend this scenario to the public field, and imagine the citizen silently replying to the leader: *I know very well that you are not really the object of my desire, but nevertheless, insofar as you stand in for it, I can really live and thrive in the scene of my love.* Thinking about it this way has the added benefit of not having to go round in circles about whether people 'really believe' in the leader or not, or about how they could possibly be so naïve or so blind or so racist as to be deceived by their leaders, etc. (Mazzarella 2015).

The big difference between the clinical and the political scenes, of course, is the ethical position required of, respectively, the analyst and the leader. The analyst has to undergo a kind of *askesis*, a sort of labour of renunciation. The analyst must not refuse the transference; at the same time, they must not be drawn into it. Many a leader, on the other hand, will—consciously or unconsciously—feel the tremendous power and potential of the transference, and will have few scruples about playing into it. But to blame the leader for what might happen to us in this exploitative situation is surely to fail to take responsibility for the effects of our own response-ability. Again, this is another reason why manipulation models of authoritarian leadership are so unhelpful. Either we believe that suggestion without transference is possible or we acknowledge that political maturity means taking responsibility for the transferences that are activated in public life. And that requires a different kind of political work, a work that is at once public and intimate.

Perhaps we could connect Freudian thinking on transference with Walter Benjamin's messianic-revolutionary historiography. In the Freudian tradition, the loose affect that hovers around a repressed conflict flares up in the transference and seizes on the person of the analyst, just as the royal remains might seize on the body of a new leader. A short-circuit occurs between the

past and the present, activating and intensifying both of them in unpredictable ways. Similarly, for Benjamin, potentials embedded in the past flash up into the present, through a kind of wormhole in time, with revolutionary or catastrophic consequences. These are often moments of intense collective political activation, when crowds stream into public spaces, take over streets, and perplex liberal commentators with the intensity and apparent aimlessness of their affect.

Consider how, in Ferenczi's description of transference, there is an initially puzzling affective disproportion. The analyst, Ferenczi writes, "becomes convinced that the apparently motiveless extravagance of affect, the excessive hate, love and sympathy of neurotics, are also nothing else than transferences, by means of which long forgotten psychical experiences are (in the unconscious phantasy) brought into connection with the current occasion, and the current reaction exaggerated by the affect of unconscious ideational impulses" (Ferenczi 1994 [1909], p. 36). An archive is activated, powerfully, disturbingly, perhaps transformatively. In these moments all bets are off. The distance between repetition and renewal has never been shorter.

In the orthodox psychoanalytic view, it's the conflicts arising from our first object choices—our Oedipal situation—that fuel later transferences. Later object relations theorists expanded the scenario, such that each of us is understood to have assembled a complex psychic scene that includes not just the first conflicts, but also subsequent layers of introjection: objects that we invest with our desire and then absorb into ourselves, installing them in vital and yet often troubling locations amid the furnishing of our inner worlds. Again, if we're thinking about how all this might be expanded into a social or political analysis, it's not a stretch to imagine that persistent social conflicts, conflicts that are 'structural' if seen from a social science standpoint, also shape the layout of our capacities for desire, attachment, and aversion in the world. And if the transference that is activated in the therapist's office

tends to disclose a “total situation” that is markedly domestic in character, a scene in which Mama and Papa tower like giants, then perhaps the “total situation” disclosed by political transference might make other investments and conflicts visible.

But there’s something else to think about here as well. In Freud’s story the resolution of the Oedipal conflict basically means that desire becomes fungible. This is what parents are supposed to do for their children to help them grow up: parents are supposed to use the children’s love for them to convince the children that in order to function in the world they will have to love others. They will have to accept substitutes. They will, in other words, have to become capable of transference. *I know very well that you are not my father/mother, and yet nevertheless...* But in truth, what we’re talking about here is more than substitution, regression, or re-enactment. Transference is more than a repetition; rather, it brings into the disenchanted present animated elements of early experience. Not because those elements are inherently numinous, but because they were once absorbed through a child’s senses: haptically, mimetically. “New inventions,” writes Susan Buck-Morss in her magnificent meditation on Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, “conceived out of the fantasy of one generation, are received within the childhood experience of another” (Buck-Morss 1995 [1989], p. 273). Benjamin observes: “A generation’s experience of youth has much in common with the experience of dreams. Its historical configuration is a dream configuration. Every epoch has such a side turned toward dreams, the child’s side” (Benjamin 1999, p. 388).

Considering the way that liberal political theory tends to frame any kind of surrender as childish, and therefore as a failure of citizenship, Benjamin’s political redemption of childhood experience is radical. For Benjamin, every generation carries the unchosen task of absorbing their parents’ historical epoch in a mythical, mimetic mode and then carrying forward the potentials of that enchantment into their own disenchanted adulthood. The

task of childhood, Benjamin writes in the 1930s, is “to bring the new world into symbolic space. The child, in fact, can do what the grown-up absolutely cannot: recognize the new once again. For us, locomotives already have symbolic character because we met with them in childhood. Our children, however, will find this in automobiles, of which we ourselves see only the new, elegant, modern, cheeky side. [...] Every childhood discovers these new images in order to incorporate them into the image stock of humanity” (*ibid.*, p. 390).

Again, the reason this interests me here is because it opens up some reasons why thinking about transference could be productive in social theory. It’s one thing to say that there’s something numinous about the image of the primal father that seems to hover above every two-bit tyrant like a profane halo. But it’s quite another to extend the question of transference to the social field more broadly, especially to consider the ways in which it animates the concrete forms of historical experience in ways that are at once highly intimate and undeniably collective. This would mean considering how every generation of adults carries the ‘dream’ or ‘child’s side of their parents’ historical present into their own moment of maturity. Not just, as it were, the ‘mythical’ glow of this early experience, but also—thinking psychoanalytically—the attachments, conflicts, hopes, and humiliations that attach to those early epic scenes. And then turning the Benjaminian insight back onto the psychoanalytic literature, we would have to consider how the re-enactments of transference, indeed the ‘total situations’ of transferential scenes, are prepared by the uncanny enchanted/disenchanting doubling of historical experience.

There are tremendous creative potentials in these historical short circuits—as well as, of course, the potential to get locked into slavish repetitions when all that dream energy gets mapped onto new father figures. The point is that transference goes both ways. It can be the dead end of compulsive repetition and submission. But it’s also the very principle of poesis. Peter Sloterdijk

makes an argument about the creative potential of transference that, crucially, paints it as both temporal repetition and as spatial expansion. For Sloterdijk, transference is, again, a question of a total situation, of a *scene*: “one must insist that transference is the formal source of the creative processes that inspire the exodus of human beings into the open. We do not so much transfer incorrigible affects onto unknown persons as early spatial experiences to new places, and primary movements onto remote locations” (Sloterdijk 2011 [1998], p. 12). Sloterdijk proceeds playfully to rework what Ludwig Wittgenstein famously said about language into a kind of transference credo: “The limits of my capacity for transference are the limits of my world” (*ibid.*, p. 13).

In the analytic situation, the analyst is the medium, the occasion of the patient’s transference. Can we imagine a form of political leadership that would enable and encourage non-regressive transferences in a collective field? I expect that some will think this an irrelevant, perhaps a reactionary question. Do we even need leaders? I don’t know. I do know that we have them, so perhaps it might be interesting to imagine how they could be otherwise. Ferenczi describes the role of the analyst as *catalytic*. A catalyst in chemistry is a substance that increases the rate of chemical reaction without itself undergoing permanent change. And one sees what he means. Even though Ferenczi advocated a ‘warmer,’ more involved stance on the part of the analyst than Freud did, the metaphor of catalysis underlines something crucial about the analytic situation that also applies to political leadership. A good leader, like a good analyst, must be capable of *holding the frame* without *playing the game*. ‘Holding the frame’—I borrow the phrase from an essay by the analyst Jessica Benjamin (2004)—means providing and sustaining the ground or scene in which the transference can come alive.

But the *not playing the game* part is crucial too. In analysis this means that the analyst is conscious of their own counter-transferences, and that they don’t make the mistake of thinking,



for example, that they really are the true object of the patient's transference-love. A good leader, likewise, must not take the people's enthusiasm and love as a personal tribute, while also not discouraging or blocking the revolutionary energy it contains. To follow Thomas Ogden (2004) and Jessica Benjamin, the transformative potential of transference lies not in the potentially codependent and coercive dyad of the analyst and the patient, but rather in a collaborative "third," an unfolding to which they both must surrender. Similarly, in politics the authoritarian relation is rife with regressive identification and narcissistic mirroring, whereas openings to creative change depend on holding the frame of a third space, an imaginal opening in which leader and people are not constantly poised to psychically swallow each other.

Freud is very clear that holding the frame of transference requires a strict and, as it were, *active* renunciation on the part of the analyst. A renunciation for which nothing in ordinary life has prepared us. "It is [...] just as disastrous for the analysis if the patient's craving for love prevails as if it is suppressed. The way the analyst must take is neither of these; it is one for which there is no prototype in real life" (Freud 1963 [1915], p. 174). The transformative force of holding the frame lies in the tenderness of its inhuman artifice. And in part, this tenderness requires refusal. Lacan wrote: "If I frustrate [the patient] it is because he is asking of me something. To answer him, in fact. But he knows very well that it would be but words. And he can get those from whomever he likes" (Lacan 2007 [1958], p. 515). Freud put it this way: "As far as his relations with the physician are concerned, the patient must have unfulfilled wishes in abundance. It is expedient [for the analyst] to deny him precisely those satisfactions which he desires most intensely and expresses most importunately" (Freud 1963 [1919], p. 187). Some complain, Lacan later notes, that the analyst is *only* frustrating, withholding. But the analyst's refusal to *play the game* is generative; it takes place "in order to allow the signifiers with which the [patient's] frustration is bound up

to reappear” (Lacan 2007 [1958], p. 516). What reappears may be signifiers, but they are lively, visceral ones. They amount, in Lacan’s words, to “the here and now of an incarnated problematic” (*ibid.*, p. 512).

The fact that the scene of transference holds a fiction is what allows truth to appear in it. In a truly wonderful passage, Freud acknowledges the profound difficulty of this work but concludes that the play is necessary because, for demons to be overcome, the actor—or rather the signs by which his desire announces itself—must *really appear*: “It is undeniable that the subjugation of the transference-manifestations provides the greatest difficulties for the psychoanalyst; but it must not be forgotten that they, and they only, render the invaluable service of making the patient’s buried and half-forgotten love-emotions actual and manifest; for in the last resort no one can be slain *in absentia* or *in effigie*” (Freud 1963 [1912], pp. 114–115). Again, the actor must *really appear*.

In analysis as in politics, then, there is an opportunity to *resist giving answers* for long enough that the urgent form of a desire becomes visible and, perhaps, tractable: again, the here and now of an incarnated problematic. In the authoritarian relation, by contrast, the underlying problematic is never addressed but constantly displaced—and thus incarnated in the most violent ways: in the bodies of others who must be injured or killed. Cornel West once observed that Donald Trump isn’t charismatic, but he is cathartic. Josef Breuer, with whom Freud collaborated early on, used to call the method they were inventing ‘cathartic,’ whereas Freud came to prefer ‘analytic.’ Perhaps Freud already sensed the ambiguity of catharsis, its proximity to terrible violence. And why not catalysis, after all?

The authoritarian leader is the one who is ready with an answer before the question has even been asked. The one who cannot resist appearing as the revenant father or mother. The one who doesn’t want to hold the frame, because who knows what might appear in it? Besides, there’s just too much noise, too much

chatter in the public sphere today. Holding the frame means being able to be silent, and attentive to what silence may provoke. But silence is an impossibility in the contemporary media; dead air is its definition of dread. Silence appears only as the sign of emergency. What would happen if instead of the so-called news, we had two minutes of silence?

Consider the 2015-16 US presidential campaign of Senator Elizabeth Warren. For all her agility and intelligence on the stump, wasn't there something deeply oppressive about her catch phrase, *I have a plan for that*? Didn't it signal an anxious misunderstanding of what the moment required? As if, faced with the biggest bully ever to occupy the White House, the need of the hour was to hurtle ahead, problems and solutions already pre-defined, preplanned, predigested. Technocratic authority has its own way of covering its eyes and hurrying past the here and now of an incarnated problematic. But it's worth thinking a bit harder about what holding the frame—in analysis or in politics—might actually make possible.

In one common version of the story, psychotherapy is basically an extension of the project of Enlightenment. Which is to say it's the pedagogical project of making citizens capable of making their own choices. Mature, upstanding human beings, autonomous and self-reliant. As the analyst Thomas Szasz put it in the early 1960s, this is all about "the value of self-determination and responsibility, and the fact that, however difficult to achieve, non-coercive human relationships are possible" (Szasz 1963, p. 278). This all sounds very solid and impeccable. But everything hinges on what this non-coercion actually looks like.

From very early on, Freud's thinking about therapy was bound up with a pedagogical impulse. The analyst's job was to provide room for the transference; but the patient's job was to be educable. This, for example, was why at certain points Freud insisted that narcissists couldn't benefit from therapy, since their libido was all tied up in themselves and thus not available for

transference: “Observation shows that sufferers from narcissistic neuroses have no capacity for transference or only insufficient residues of it. They reject the doctor, not with hostility but with indifference” (Freud 1966 [1915-17], p. 556).

Despite the pedagogical impulse, this is a crucial thought: that the first barrier to transformation through transference is not resistance but indifference. A state in which no relation, including a relation of resistance, is activated. In which all kinds of words might be exchanged, and all kinds of prompts and provocations might be attempted, but in which there is no resonance, in which nothing comes alive, nothing new is in motion. The absence of eros. Two subjects confront each other, self-contained, speaking words that change nothing. And as Lacan observed, the demand for words requires no yielding; in general, it is simply the desire to be told what you already know. Meaning without affect; meaning that doesn’t matter, except as evidence of a reassuring inscription. By contrast, holding the frame allows the “total situation” to appear as a space of open-ended enactment—as painful and as exciting as that can be. An enactment that is at least as much about entrainments, rhythms, and resonances that are not in the first instance grounded in language. As Jessica Benjamin puts it: thirdness—the scene that emerges out of the relation between analyst and patient—“begins with the early nonverbal experience of sharing a pattern, a dance, with another person” (Benjamin 2004, p. 16). The third space isn’t just a project to be built out of nothing. It’s a place to play with addressability. Benjamin elaborates: “we might say that the third is that to which we surrender, and thirdness is the intersubjective mental space that facilitates or results from surrender” (*ibid.*, p. 8). Surrender, following Emmanuel Ghent, is to be carefully distinguished from submission. And so, writes Benjamin: “Surrender implies freedom from any intent to control or coerce” (*ibid.*).

It’s easy to roll one’s eyes at terms like non-coercive intersubjectivity, especially when it comes to our political present. It can

sound starry-eyed and naïve. As if we really could just get down to talking to each other, taking each other into account, changing and being changed. As if there were not structural obstacles and injustices and inequalities that always already condition what counts as a recognizable body, a legitimate desire, a valid claim. As if it were just a matter of everyone agreeing to put down their weapons and re-entering the public sphere (and not just the analyst's office) with all good intentions. Yes of course, if that was all it was, none of this would make any difference. If that was the case, we would be right to be indifferent.

And yet of course we are not. We are not indifferent. We are profoundly invested, but often in ways that keep us locked into self-defeating patterns of enjoyment. *Cruel optimism*, Lauren Berlant calls it. Jessica Benjamin has some good things to say about the trap of dyadic relations, which she calls the 'complementary' structure. She's talking about intimate interpersonal relationships, but consider the way, for example, that Trump-lovers and Trump-haters are locked into a kind of codependent love-hate fascination with each other's sore spots. In analytic terms, this is how Benjamin describes the dynamic: "In the complementary structure, dependency becomes coercive; and indeed, coercive dependence that draws each into the orbit of the other's escalating reactivity is a salient characteristic of the impasse" (*ibid.*, p. 9). In this codependent frenzy, there appear to be only two available positions: either you are the doer, or you are the done to. Either you are acting or you are submitting. It's like Hegel's master-bondsman dialectic accelerated to the dizzying, flickering, sickening pitch of a whirling zoetrope. Each party to the dyad is pre-invested in the other as the place of their truth and their pain. And so it goes, round and round, compulsively playing the game as the desperation grows.

Holding the frame puts things on pause, slowing down the flicker, while at the same time not demanding that anyone *be reasonable*. In fact, the ethos of the transferential space is that there

is nothing *mature* or *composed* about it. For that reason, among many others, the liberal longing to return to a rational public sphere, to restore long-lost canons of civility, entirely misses the point and the opportunity of the present. Which is not the opportunity to remind anyone of a lesson they were supposed to have learned, but to make non-coercive room for the here and now of an incarnated problematic.

In that regard, the authoritarian gesture consists of offering the premature finality and false reassurance of an indubitable word, a master image, a deathless body—as if to say: don’t worry, this is your foundation. This doesn’t change. This doesn’t go away. The impossible promise that parents make to their children. The allure of authoritarianism has deep roots, as Freud knew. Its promise seems to reactivate the very *first* promise, a promise made in gestures as much as in words. But it also stages the prospect of its own overcoming, just as—ideally—the parent is supposed to teach their child how to love another. Holding the frame rather than playing the game.

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# What Does Art Work Through?

*Samo Tomšič*

Many would probably find that Hegel's aesthetics did not age particularly well and preserved only modest relevance for thinking art's vicissitudes in capitalist times. As if this was not enough, Hegel's view of art as a mere transition in the development of spirit, and of diminished metaphysical significance compared to religion and philosophy, is anything but flattering and reflects an outdated conception of philosophy. Nevertheless, Hegel's aesthetics revolves around an issue of ongoing importance, the double character of artwork and its inner tensions.<sup>1</sup> In this respect, Hegel's aesthetics indeed anticipates the critical horizon of two prominent theoreticians of work, Marx and Freud. In the following I will return to some intersections between these contexts, sticking closely to Hegel's framework and merely indicating possible synergies of his philosophical aesthetics with Marx's critique of political economy and Freudo-Lacanian psychoanalysis.

## I

Hegel begins his lectures on aesthetics by distinguishing between "servile art" (*dienende Kunst*) and "free art" (*freie Kunst*) (TWA

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term *artwork* for describing both art-practice or aesthetic production and art-object.

13, p. 20).<sup>2</sup> Aesthetics must therefore depart from the recognition that the field of artistic production is traversed by the opposition of freedom and servitude. Servile art is subjected to external demands and unfolds as a compulsive process, whereas free art supposedly proceeds autonomously and spontaneously, without imposed restrictions or directions. True artwork would then have to resist aesthetic consumption, where it is valorized via sensuous or intellectual pleasure it may or may not cause. However, this consumption is art's smallest problem; other valorizations represent a significantly greater challenge to the presumable artistic freedom, and particularly from the economic point of view, there is no such thing as free art. As if this is not enough, another predominant valorization concerns production of knowledge, a feature that philosophical aesthetics repeatedly sought in art, beginning with the discipline's founder, Alexander Baumgarten, and its most famous representative, Immanuel Kant. Nowadays the question of art's epistemic value and its contribution to the "growth of knowledge" is more than ever on the agenda. Artistic work became a form of research, and correspondingly, artworks assume the role of epistemic objects, containers of "surplus knowledge" (Milner 2006, p. 337).<sup>3</sup>

If the couple "free art" and "servile art" is meant to pinpoint two distinct registers of artwork, then such opposition indeed amounts to purism, which echoes in the somewhat newer opposition between autonomous and commodified art. Rethinking

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<sup>2</sup> The English translation for *dienende Kunst* is ancillary art (Hegel 1988, p. 7).

<sup>3</sup> To speak of art-knowledge, or of art as cultural technique, as is often the case in contemporary German academia, ultimately demands that artistic practices justify themselves as epistemic procedures and become integrated into the scientific regime of knowledge. Here, German language is again most precise: *Wissenschaft* (science) is composed of *Schaffen* (creating) and *Wissen* (knowledge), which defines science as *the* mode of production of knowledge. As such, science is also the discourse, which determines what counts and what does not count as knowledge.

Hegel's inaugural steps may nevertheless show that artistic freedom and autonomy obtain a more nuanced, sophisticated and critical meaning, signaling a minimal yet crucial resistance of artwork to valorization. The couple "free art" and "servile art" then does not necessarily describe two distinct modes of art, but a difference that traverses every artwork from within, an immanent split of art, indicating a rupture or a torsion in the relation between artwork, on the one hand, and pleasure, knowledge and value, on the other. In this respect "free art" could also be called conflictual.

## II

Hegel himself could be suspected of pursuing an epistemic, and specifically metaphysical valorization of artwork, thus reproducing the typical philosophical attitude. The oldest epistemic valorization of artwork departs from examining its relation to nature (for instance Plato's mimetic conception of art). In this framework Hegel registers the first tension that can be associated with artwork. The emphasis on discontinuity rather than continuity between art and nature logically follows from Hegel's attempt to break with the aesthetic tradition of his time (notably with Kant, where aesthetics remains in service of epistemology) and elaborate a properly dialectical philosophy of art, which conceives artwork as a conflictual process of becoming (of spirit, the absolute, idea, etc.). Understood in this way, artwork contains a break with the regime of natural being. Because natural phenomena do not contain any spirit, they cannot cause any feeling of the beautiful or sublime that would be comparable to art.<sup>4</sup> Hegel did not need to develop his mature philosophical system to draw this conclusion. In a diary documenting his excursion to the Bernese

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<sup>4</sup> This does not mean that nature cannot be experienced as beautiful or sublime. But these are then radically contingent.

Alps, the young Hegel already made a note, which anticipates his later critique of Kant's aesthetics:

Neither the eye nor the power of imagination finds in these formless masses any point, where the former could rest with approval or where the latter could find preoccupation or play. Only the mineralogist finds stuff to risk insufficient assumptions about the revolutions of these mountains. Reason finds in the thought of duration of these mountains or in the art of sublime one ascribes to them nothing that would impress it or necessitate astonishment and admiration. The view of these eternally dead masses caused me nothing but the uniform and at length boring idea: *this is how it is* [*die einförmige und in die Länge langweilige Vorstellung: es ist so*]. (TWA 1, p. 618, my translation)

There is no such thing as the natural sublime because nature contains only duration, as opposed to becoming, *the* feature of spirit. Consequently, there is nothing particularly astonishing about the duration of being, the fact that something *is*. The opposition between duration and becoming reflects other dichotomies – state and movement, identity and non-identity, stability and instability – as well as two types of temporality, the linearity of duration and the retroactivity of becoming. The movement that the mountain view triggers in reason corresponds to their duration and is accompanied by the feeling of *Langeweile* (boredom, or literally long duration). Contrary to Kant, it is the feeling of boredom – and not of the sublime – that names for the young Hegel the affection of thinking through (natural) being. Or more closely to Hegel's text, the appearance of natural being triggers a boring idea or representation – “this is how it is,” or simply, “it is” (of course, this does not imply that nature is boring).

A scientific discipline such as geology has its epistemic reasons for reconstructing the events that created the mountain landscape, but this scientific reasoning does not touch upon the issues raised in the emergence of sublime. Behind the explicit thesis that there is no such thing as the natural sublime, an implicit one can be

intuited, namely that astonishment has no place in science. Science proceeds under the condition that it overcomes the fascination with its object. The paradigmatic example of science rooted in astonishment is the premodern, Aristotelian and Ptolemean science, which strived to construct a harmonious totality (*kosmos*) endowed with an aesthetic surplus. Plato and Aristotle both argued that the task of science consisted in “saving the appearances” (*sozein ta phainomena*) – describing reality from the perspective of the astonished human observer.<sup>5</sup> A science departing from the feeling of the sublime projects an aesthetic surplus into the natural real and thus performs cosmetics on the scale of the universe (recall that *kosmos* echoes both in cosmology and in cosmetics).

The young Hegel may have targeted the following reflection from Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*:

The astonishment amounting almost to terror, the horror and sacred awe, that seizes us when gazing upon the prospect of mountains ascending to heaven, deep ravines and torrents raging there, deep-shadowed solitudes that invite to brooding melancholy, and the like – all this, when we are assured of our own safety, is not actual fear. Rather is it an attempt to gain access to it through imagination, for the purpose of feeling the might of this faculty in combining the movement of the mind thereby aroused with its serenity, and of thus being superior to internal and, therefore, to external, nature, so far as the latter can have any bearing upon our feeling of well-being. (Kant 2007, p. 99)

The natural sublime triggers movements of thought, it introduces a dynamic into reason that is caused by an object in excess,

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<sup>5</sup> For a favorable reading of this premodern scientific ideal, see Pierre Duhem (2003). Duhem insists that this ideal remains valid for modern physics. The position has been questioned by Alexandre Koyré (1973). Of course, the astonished human observer *par excellence* is none other than the philosopher, whose discipline, again according to Plato and Aristotle, originates in astonishment (*thaumazein*).

a surplus situated at the border of subjective and objective, inner and outer, thought and reality, without pertaining either to the intellectual or the natural register. This is not the Hegelian scenario from above. The natural appearances contain no cause for an affective surplus and the only aesthetic thought they may trigger is the empty assertion: *Es ist so*. No affective surplus is produced; instead, we are dealing with a negative affect, which moves by diminishing affective tension rather than increasing it. The observed phenomena seem empty: “eternally dead masses,” being without becoming, hence without difference, which would destabilize natural being from within. Relating to nature by means of the sublime is displaced, because nothing *works* in nature, or rather, because nature works in the sense that it functions, hence Hegel’s talk of duration (boring ontological stability).<sup>6</sup> In order for the sublime to emerge in the subject, something in nature would have to fall out of place; a disruption would have to occur, which would trigger a proper change in being. Dynamic as it may be, the grandeur of wild nature is ultimately a standstill. And Kantian aesthetics seems to overlook that the natural sublime is rooted in the fetishizing gaze of the neutral observer, who in any case remains at distance from the natural dynamic.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Of course, Hegel’s lines perfectly match the Newtonian universe, which functions like clockwork. The universe of thermodynamics, of Einsteinian physics and of quantum mechanics hardly function in the same manner; they no longer resemble a clockwork but rather stand for an organized disequilibrium.

<sup>7</sup> A homologous development takes place in the register of politics, where the Kantian observer can experience enthusiasm only under the condition of being exempted from violent historical events such as the French revolution. The enthusiastic spectator observes history from an ahistorical position, for being part of historical turmoil would imply repulsion, as Kant (1991, p. 182) himself concedes.

### III

Once artwork is no longer compared with nature it can appear as an activity organized around a specific surplus (*Überfluß*), by means of which art succeeds in “softening the soul” (TWA 13, p. 16). This is where the appearance of artwork as superfluous (*überflüssig*) comes in. The German term *Überfluß* reveals its speculative potential, if we consider its literal meaning – overflow – which simultaneously points to fluidity, redundancy, and surplus. The assumption of free art then implies that this surplus cannot be entirely integrated in the predominant registers of valorization, notably scientific knowledge and economic value. Differently put, the surplus in question cannot be converted into increase of knowledge (surplus-knowledge) or increase of value (surplus-value) without leaving a remainder, which continues to generate its own type of movement. Art affects the spirit in various ways (Hegel names three of them, which will be discussed toward the end of this paper), and these affections may manifest as pleasurable. Here, the third restriction to the potential artistic break with external valorization re-enters the picture, libidinal valorization or what Lacan occasionally called the “value of enjoyment” (Lacan 2023).<sup>8</sup> Consequently, free art would also have to sustain a minimal gap between its *Überfluss* and increase of pleasure (surplus enjoyment).

To specify his understanding of free art, Hegel dedicates much time to refuting the aesthetic doctrines, which relate art to an external need, demand, or utility. A prominent example of such “relational aesthetics” (to misuse Nicholas Bourriaud’s term) is

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<sup>8</sup> Lacan proposes *valeur de jouissance* as possible translation of exchange-value, thus drawing attention to the proximity of libidinal and social economy. Still, only as superfluous does artwork contain the potential for causing a movement, which may lead to a change in spirit. The superfluous places artwork in direct proximity with the work of critique and the work of psychoanalysis, two other superfluous practices (notably from the economic point of view).



mimetic art. As mimetic technique, art supposedly imitates nature in a more or less “adequate” manner. In doing so, it generates the appearance of natural beauty, including the ontological and cosmological appearance of duration, stability, and harmony. Moreover, if imitation proceeds in an adequate manner, mimetic activity can be interpreted as the epistemic value of art. At least Plato’s valorization of artistic mimesis moves in this direction. However, as soon as art is valorized through the lens of knowledge, its epistemic value inevitably appears diminished, notably in comparison to science and philosophy. Thus, art ends up in a double epistemic servitude, first in relation to the imitated external reality and then in relation to other knowledge-producing activities, with which it presumably competes. The situation seems more favorable if artistic mimesis is examined from the viewpoint of its potential value of enjoyment, which, at least for the silent majority, appears greater than that of science and philosophy. Here, however, art is embedded in libidinal servitude with the imperative of producing sensual or intellectual pleasure. In any case, the mimetic conception restricts artistic activity to the register of appearance.

Hegel strives to complicate this constraint by refusing to engage in a general critique of appearance, not only because “*appearance* is essential to *essence*” (TWA 13, p. 21), but also because such critique assumes the divide between good and bad mimesis. The former presumably stands in adequate relation to the imitated and is therefore valued as truthful, whereas the latter establishes an inadequate relation to the imitated and is considered false and deceiving, non-relational or self-related. Against the background of this opposition, the critique of mimesis concludes that only relational mimesis is worthy of philosophical examination. The third option, the emergence of truth out of non-relation and contradiction remains excluded; *there is no non-relational truthful mimesis*. In contrast, from the Hegelian point of view only

this third kind of mimesis would deserve closer examination.<sup>9</sup> The true ontological scandal of artistic mimesis, if imitating is what art really does, is that it invents new originals and thereby introduces another type of difference from the one between idea and thing, model and copy, essence and appearance, or absolute and relative. In non-relational mimesis art places appearance in the position of idea.<sup>10</sup> In doing so it feints imitation and, more importantly, exposes instability in the order of being, thereby rejecting the ontological tradition grounded in Parmenides's separation of being and movement.

Another relational conception of art follows from the popular view that art pleases the senses or the intellect by offering them an object that corresponds to a sensuous or an intellectual need. This immediately brings art down to consumption. In turn, art *becomes* free when it sabotages the imperative of pleasurable satisfaction, thus destabilizing the system of needs and values from within. In this case, artwork does not simply serve any purpose; claiming this would still entail a superficial understanding of the artwork's superfluity. Rather, the aim of artwork consists in forcing the ongoing valorization of human activities to backfire. Free art must therefore contain more than "futile play," which causes sensuous and intellectual pleasure or serves for "entertainment," "decoration," and other pleasurable goals (*ibid.*, p. 20). While these goals remain within the register of consumption, free art strives to produce a non-consumable and non-valorizable *Überfluss*; it

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<sup>9</sup> Here, one could also speak of hybrid mimesis, which effectively abolishes the Platonic dualism of original and copy. An example of such mimesis can be found in nature: animal mimicry. From a Platonist perspective, the very existence of chameleon is an ontological scandal.

<sup>10</sup> An example of such activity would be the realistic painting of a curtain, which creates the impression of concealing a painting. The example refers to the competition between the ancient Greek painters Zeuxis and Parrhasios (See Lacan 1998, p. 103). For further Lacanian discussion of mimesis, see Dolar 2017a, pp. 570-589.

stands for the perseverance of such surplus amid consumption and valorization. Perhaps one could say that artwork is an irritation of the aesthetic pleasure principle, its immanent disturbance.

Such conflictual unfolding of artwork touches upon the register of truth. Why is this the case? Hegel's singularity in the history of truth-doctrines comes down to the association of truth with non-relation rather than relation. This break is sharply formulated already in Hegel's habilitation theses from 1801, which are introduced by the following: *Contradictio est regula veri, non contradictio falsi* (TWA 2, p. 533; see Dolar 2017b, p. 87). Declaring contradiction the rule of truthfulness and non-contradiction the rule of falsity rejects the entire logical tradition, which originates in Aristotle's foundation of rational thinking on the principle of non-contradiction and its sub-principle of excluded third. It is also no coincidence that the formulation is the first among Hegel's habilitation theses, since it plays the same role as the principle of non-contradiction in Aristotle: it lays the discursive foundations of the system, the logical entry into ontology, providing an orientation in thinking the non-relation that sustains both thinking and being. Above all, truth is here no longer conceived as a stable relation of correspondence between words and things but as the movement of contradiction, for Hegel a paradigm of non-relation. From this viewpoint, art becomes both truthful and free, when it succeeds in making non-relation *appear*.

The Latin etymology suggests that this non-relation concerns the absolute itself (from *absolvere*, loosen or untie). By placing the tension between appearance and the absolute at the core of his reflections on art, Hegel proposed the first thoroughly *non-relational aesthetics*. The appearance of the absolute destabilizes the organization of appearances, but the same action of appearing demonstrates the inherently unstable nature of the absolute. This double instability indicates a different understanding of appearance than, say, in the dualism of sensuous appearance and suprasensuous essence. The German distinction between *Schein*

and *Erscheinung* proves useful for pinpointing the difference between both scenarios. *Schein* is appearance in the traditional sense of lower, diminished and potentially deceitful reality, which must in any case be thought in dichotomy with the suprasensuous (spirit, idea, absolute, essence). *Erscheinung*, in contrast, is appearance, which no longer stands in simple external relation to the suprasensuous but rather comprises its emergence in and through sensuous activity. Hegel calls this the “sensuous presentation of the absolute” (TWA 13, p. 100). There is no absolute outside appearance; only an absolute that appears (or rather emerges) is considered real, but it can only appear by destabilizing the order of appearances. Emergence is the specific movement of the absolute, and Hegel’s metaphysics is a metaphysics of emergent absolute, an absolute emerging from a material activity, in which work plays the central part.

In this scenario appearance is understood as *production* of a “higher reality” and “more true existence” (*ibid.*, p. 22).<sup>11</sup> This implies that the main achievement of artwork consists in intensifying the objectivity of appearances rather than in diminishing the reality of ideas,<sup>12</sup> producing an *Überfluß* that Hegel directly associates with artwork. To reiterate, contrary to the scenario in which the suprasensuous obtains an expression in the register of sensuousness, *Erscheinung* comprises the self-overcoming of sensuousness, the production of sensuousness’ otherness that is nevertheless immanent to sensuousness. This activity is expressed in the dialectic of art, which according to Hegel unfolds from architecture via music to poetry, from spatial structure to symbolic

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<sup>11</sup> To repeat, because this is productive *Erscheinung* it can be called emergence, in order to differentiate it from unproductive appearance, *Schein*.

<sup>12</sup> Freud and Lacan were preoccupied by tragedy because it thematizes the destabilization of the existing order (of appearances or semblances) through singular figures such as Oedipus and Antigone, who are indeed figures of instability. For a systematic account of the role of tragedy in psychoanalysis, see Zupančič 2000, pp. 190–191, 203–204.

structure (and more specifically to the poetics of the signifier, to put it in structuralist terms). Of course, one can always criticize Hegel's decision to introduce hierarchy in this dialectical movement, instead of focusing on homological developments in different registers of art. What is nevertheless worth retaining in this dialectic is the self-overcoming of sensuousness, as well as the insight that this activity is not autopoietic but involves a laboring negativity, which cannot be reduced to the figure of the artist, genius, talent, skill, or knowledge. Since this self-overcoming is understood as a process of becoming, the task of aesthetics consists in examining the relation between structure and history, as well as in determining the exact nature of the laboring subject in this process.<sup>13</sup>

Hegel's aesthetics nevertheless seems to encounter a complication, since his notion of artwork as "sensuous presentation of the absolute" resonates well with Marx's description of commodity as "sensuous supra-sensuous thing" (Marx 1990, p. 163, translation modified; see Khatib 2022, p. 92). What is the relation between artwork and the aesthetics of commodity form? Hegel provided a means for thinking the intricacies of this relation, while keeping the minimal gap between artwork and commodity open, when he distinguished between *Kunstwerk* (artwork) and *Kunststück* (artpiece) (*TWA* 13, p. 69).<sup>14</sup> The crucial point lies in the very meaning of *Kunststück*, artifice or stunt, which anticipates the way Marx famously writes about commodities:

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<sup>13</sup> Framed in this way, the problematic of appearance touches upon Lacan's occasional definition of the signifier as "matter transcending itself in language [*matière qui se transcende en langage*]" (Lacan 2001, p. 209). Lacan's phrasing suggests that speaking is a bodily activity, from which an abstraction emerges: language, understood as an autonomous system of differences existing "outside" the speaking subject.

<sup>14</sup> Hegel makes this wordplay only in passing, and in relation to the question of artistic imitation of nature. But this does not diminish its relevance for thinking the artwork's potential resistance to the various regimes of valorization.

A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. So far as it is a use-value, there is nothing mysterious about it [...]. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a sensuous supra-sensuous thing. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will. (Marx 1990, pp. 163–164)

Commodities perform, or simply are, *Kunststücke*. They stand on their heads, in other words, they invert the relation between use-value and exchange-value; they act like dancing tables, or differently, they follow the logic of value, which endows them with autonomous life; and finally, they cause dissatisfaction rather than satisfaction, which might just be their greatest *Kunststück*. In Hegel, however, the artwork's sensuous suprasensuousness does not overlap entirely with "metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties" that artworks undoubtedly possess as objects of consumption and valorization. Free art insists in the split between truth, on the one hand, and value, knowledge, and enjoyment, on the other. From the psychoanalytic viewpoint one could add that in this split artwork assumes the function of the symptom, the exact opposite of fetish, a conflicted material and symbolic formation placed at the very point of contradiction between opposing tendencies: the tendency of valorization and the tendency of producing an *Überfluss*, which is neither surplus-value nor surplus-knowledge nor surplus-enjoyment. If resistance against reduction to the system of consumption (value of enjoyment), the system of exchange (economic value), and the system of knowledge (epistemic value) is an essential component of artwork, then this resistance addresses a truth concerning work and its vicissitudes in the existing regime of production—the appearance of structural contradiction at the heart of the economic, epistemic,

and libidinal order. In this way, free art could be understood as a way of working through the tensions and contradictions that concern work in general and artwork in particular.

#### IV

As previously mentioned, Hegel distinguishes three main relations between the sensuous and the suprasensuous.<sup>15</sup> The *first relation* is *desire*, or libidinal relation, which overtly places artwork in the framework of consumption. In this relation to a denaturalized need (that Hegel indeed calls desire) art obtains above all the value of enjoyment. Consumption of artworks is accompanied by the production of sensuous pleasure and, being a consumption, contains their destruction, even if the latter is entirely speculative, in the sense that artworks are deprived of their symptomatic status and transformed into commodities or *Kunststücke*: “Neither can desire let the object persist in its freedom, for its drive pushes it just to sublimate this independence and freedom of external things, and to show that they are only there to be destroyed and consumed” (Hegel 1988, pp. 36, translation modified).<sup>16</sup> Consumption entails a sublation (*Aufhebung*), which does not lead anywhere; it is *Aufhebung* in the sense of abolition, rather than elevation, and has no transformative effect (except of transforming *Kunstwerk* into *Kunststück*). If artwork involves resistance, it offers an “other

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<sup>15</sup> For Hegel’s discussion of these relations, see *TWA* 13, pp. 57–60.

<sup>16</sup> If free art nevertheless entails some type of satisfaction, then the mechanism of this satisfaction must be inverted. Artwork then comprises a satisfaction without a corresponding need, inadequate satisfaction. The emergence of freedom in the field of art comprises an excess of satisfaction over the existing system of needs, demands and valorizations, a needless satisfaction without consumption, insofar as intellectual consumption of artworks would be, in one way or another, associated with knowledge (epistemic value), exchange (economic value) or pleasure (value of enjoyment).

satisfaction” that suspends the satisfaction of desire by means of consumption and valorization, in other words, by means of extracting an epistemic, economic or libidinal surplus out of artwork. Artwork should then be undesired; instead of causing desire it should transform it. Hence, for instance, the psychoanalytic link between art and sublimation, which draws attention to such transformation of desire through artistic practice.<sup>17</sup>

The *second relation* is *intelligence*, or epistemic relation, which strives to overcome the particularity of sensuous circumstances and contemplate the generality (essence or law) behind them. Hegel himself names the work that satisfies this theoretical interest “the work of science,” which, by moving from the particular to the general, “transforms [the object] from within, out of something sensuously concrete it makes an abstraction, something thought, and so something essentially other than what that same object was in its sensuous appearance” (Hegel 1988, p. 37). Here, the change of object occurs in accordance with the imperatives of science, understood again as the predominant mode of production of knowledge. For art to break with theoretical valorization and epistemic servitude it must keep the gap between knowledge and truth open. Understood as *Kunstwissenschaft* (science of art), aesthetics cedes the temptation to reduce artwork to epistemic value and transform artists into epistemic workers in the modern accumulative regime of knowledge.

Finally, the *third relation* is *appearance*, an inherently conflictual relation, or non-relation. The sensuous in artwork must

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<sup>17</sup> Regarding sublimation it is worth recalling the following lines from Lacan: “the properly metonymic relation between one signifier and another that we call desire is not a new object or a previous object, but the change of object in itself” (Lacan 1992, p. 293). The crucial point concerns the shift from the changing of objects to change as object. Lacan indeed speaks of desire for change or transformation, which makes the excerpt relevant for reflecting on the link between desire and emancipatory politics. Desire for change must also be distinguished from something that may appear as such, the desire for increase, growth or augmentation of value – the capitalist desire for quantitative change.



be present purely as surface. As such superficiality (*Überfluss*), the artwork is situated “in the middle between the immediate sensuality and the ideal thought” (TWA 13, p. 60).<sup>18</sup> This relation is constitutive of the difference between external, empirical circumstances, which capture desire, and the internal, intellectual conditions targeted by science: “It is not yet pure thought, but despite its sensuousness also no longer bare material existence” (*ibid.*). The placement of artwork between the *not yet* and the *no longer* is indeed crucial. Art acts in the zone of indistinction between the material and the intellectual, something that desire and science both seem to miss. The split of matter in artwork reflects on the level of the senses. Hegel (*ibid.*, p. 57) recalls that the sensuous in art refers only to two senses, vision and hearing, which establish a distance between the object and the subject, but which also bring the autonomy and activity of appearances (images and signifiers) into play. Incidentally, the two senses also play crucial role in the transformation of an object into fetish, which is why artistic production cannot but remain split between *Kunstwerk* and *Kunststück*. In both cases there is a continuum between the sensuous and the suprasensuous, spiritualization of sensuality and sensualization of spirituality, except that in *Kunststück* the laboring negativity falls out of the picture and artworks appear as quasi-autonomous agencies (hence, the purist notion of free art). Hegel’s non-relational aesthetics is superficial, insofar as it focuses on the intricacies of appearance, which can be observed only on the surface, where the sensuous converts into suprasensuous and vice versa. As such, non-relational aesthetics is also

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<sup>18</sup> According to Hegel, “spirit seeks neither the concrete materiality, the empirical inner completeness and extension of the organism which desire demands, nor the general and purely ideal thought, but the sensuous presence which should remain sensuous, but equally liberated from the scaffold of its bare materiality” (*ibid.*). Spirit thus seeks the self-overcoming of matter, but such self-overcoming can only take place in and through work (unless we want to spiritualize matter and thus make it into a laboring subject).

a symptomatology insofar as it constantly exposes the tension in artwork, its immanent redoubling on the fetish and the symptom, *Kunststück* and *Kunstwerk*.

Hegel then finally determines the specificity of work in the field of art. This work must be intellectual but of sensuous character, which is another way of saying that it is neither of the two. Artwork is indifferent to the difference between the sensuous and the intellectual. Therefore, it cannot be subsumed either under “mechanical work, a barely consciousnessless skill in sensuous manipulation or a formal activity according to fixed rules to be learned by heart” or under “scientific production, which passes over from the sensuous to abstract presentations and thoughts or is active entirely in the element of pure thinking” (Hegel 1988, p. 39).<sup>19</sup> Hence the ongoing comedy of negation in Hegel’s introduction to aesthetics, the constant determining of what artwork is not: neither concrete nor abstract, neither technical nor scientific, neither useful nor useless. The artist is neither a subject of knowledge nor a subject of value, neither genius nor talent, which would be the fetishist version of the subject of art, a subject in which knowledge and enjoyment presumably intertwine. Whenever aesthetic practice comprises a striving for freedom it necessarily negates the three central surpluses at stake in the capitalist knot of economy, science, and subjectivity: surplus-value, surplus-knowledge, and surplus-enjoyment. What artwork then produces is truth-value, whereby the crucial agency in this production is not the artist’s person but something that Hegel calls “driving restlessness” (*treibende Unruhe*) (TWA 13, p. 64), an intermediate term between concrete individual and abstract spirit. Driving restlessness does not imply that the work-process unfolds without a subject; rather it exposes a subject situated between individual and spirit, sensuous and suprasensuous, a

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<sup>19</sup> Hegel then concludes, “in artistic production the sides of the spiritual and the sensual production must be as one” (*ibid.*).

subject, which is no longer individual and not yet spirit, indeed a split and decentered subject.

For Hegel, art ultimately stands for the free productive force of human beings, but this does not involve freedom from every antagonism or subordination to external goals. Before unfolding his own narration of the history of art, Hegel rejects all the conventional purposes of art: art is not imitation (whether to demonstrate the power of imitation over nature or to produce pleasure for the senses or the intellect); art does not express the most inner features of humanity or what makes us human; art does not educate or give moral lessons, etc. It is because of its superfluity that art must be associated with the category of truth rather than with knowledge. Truth is, indeed, superfluous, notably in the capitalist subordination of all activity to economic valorization, as well as in the scientific subordination of all work to epistemic valorization, where the only truth that counts is truth as facticity. What remains superfluous is conflictual truth, which is as such irreducible to positive knowledge and economic value and which is the main point of interest for psychoanalysis and the critique of political economy, truth as symptom.

At this point art and philosophy encounter one another. According to Hegel, the task of philosophy consists in sublating oppositions, “to show that neither the one alternative in its abstraction, nor the other in the like one-sidedness, possesses truth, but that they are self-dissolving; that truth lies only in the reconciliation and mediation of both, and that this mediation is no mere demand, but what is in and for itself the accomplished and ever self-accomplishing” (Hegel 1988, pp. 54–55, translation modified). Reconciliation and mediation are here described as accomplished deeds, but they are even more so ongoing actions that do not cease to accomplish themselves. Situated between automatic work and intellectual work, between value and knowledge, artwork expresses something that is at stake in all human activities tending toward freedom, an attempt to work through

the systemic contradictions, *the work of sublation*. There is no sublation of sublation, hence the virtually endless character of sublation. One could say that sublation is the work of truth *and* the truth of work. *Aufhebung* is *Durcharbeiten*.

For Hegel, the main purpose of art consists in sustaining the movement of spirit, its transformative becoming. This is only possible by producing difference in the regime of apparently static being and fixated thought. In this respect artwork indeed comes close to psychoanalytic work, as it is formulated in the Freudian imperative: “Where It was, there I shall *become*,” or to translate, where there was the resistance of libidinal economy, which has hitherto consumed the analysand’s existence, there the suffering subject must begin working on the structure that conditions her suffering. In Freud’s formula, becoming stands for *work in progress*, which mobilizes a traumatic truth of the analysand’s history and causes desire for change *qua* object. Psychoanalysis comes down to what Lacan called “the work of truth” and Freud “working-through” – a work on structure, which resists change.<sup>20</sup>

Just like for Hegel art neither instructs (cognition) nor entertains (enjoyment) but moves the spirit (through superfluous work), psychoanalysis stands neither for *scientia sexualis*, whose aim would be to produce knowledge of sexual enjoyment, nor for *ars erotica*, a practical technique of enjoyment, but for “cultural work” (*Kulturarbeit*) (Freud 2000, p. 516),<sup>21</sup> which introduces in the analysand’s life a new conflict. To repeat, in Hegel’s scenario, which was reborn in Marx’s critique of political economy and Freud’s psychoanalysis, truth is inseparable from contradiction, but the question remains, how to deal with this contradiction. It must certainly not become self-sufficient; one must aim for its

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<sup>20</sup> In this respect, the analytic cure is the perfect opposition to “*Es ist so*” (this time accentuating the Freudian signification of *Es*). One certainly never gets bored in analysis.

<sup>21</sup> The expressions *scientia sexualis* and *ars erotica* are adopted from Michel Foucault’s first volume of *The History of Sexuality*.

sublation. Hence, the task of philosophy and emancipatory politics: striving for reconciliation, which would not assume at the end of the work-process a frictionless state but organize the laboring subjectivity around change as the *common* object of desire.

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# A Reading of “Analysis Terminable and Interminable”<sup>1</sup>

*Mohamed Tal*

The only writing that Freud dedicates to the question of the end of analysis is “Analysis Terminable and Interminable.” This article has been subject to numerous controversies in the history of psychoanalysis, and it is a source for many theories of the ending and the finality of psychoanalysis. And this is perhaps unsurprising since it contains far more questions than answers, far more debates on clinical facts than theorizations.

When one reads “Analysis Terminable and Interminable” for the first time, one might think it is driven by political intentions rather than conceptual ones. It appears that in this article Freud slaughters his most eminent disciples before his own death and writes in favor of an order that may be inherited—and indeed this is a reading that has influenced the reception of this essay for very long time. However, if one follows with precision how Freud recounts his “vertigo” in approaching the final facts offered by analysis, one discovers something completely different. It becomes evident that this essay, aside from its elegance and many lines of engagement, is a hole in the theory. A hole that Freud wants to preserve despite everything he had theorized—the drive.

The essay seems to interpellate its reader by saying: There is something that cannot succeed by other means than failure,

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<sup>1</sup> This article is adapted from part of the first chapter of my PhD thesis “The Dialects of Symbolic and Real and the Concept of the End of Analysis” (University of Ljubljana, defended in July 2022).



namely the failure of knowledge. If the “alchemy of castration” leads nowhere other than castration, then the concept of “castration” must be revised; and if the object of desire does not cease to be lost, then the concept of the “object” must be revised as well. Freud leads us to approach in so many ways the central question that he debates with Ferenczi: Is it true that psychoanalysis is a process of mourning of the partial object? And if so then does it really have a natural end that is the acceptance of castration? In other words, has there ever been a positive object before its negativizing loss for analysis to succeed as mourning? And therefore, is castration originally a loss or a relation to the object?

Freud describes how the experience of analysis crashes at the limit of castration—which he calls a *bedrock*—and with it all its previous conceptual coordinates. On this point, Freud doesn’t provide a theory, but he provides evidence in the form of an inef-faceable scar or a last plea. What does Freud defend so dearly, to the point of giving to the failure of analysis—as a cure—the status of a terminus? I aim to respond to this question by providing a close reading of “Analysis Terminable and Interminable.” Specifically, I aim to show that what Freud indicates as a bottoming out of analysis in the castration complex is a subjective destitution.

### *The Symptom Not to Interpret*

Freud sets out from a critique of the “impatient contempt” (Freud 1964, p. 219) the medical discipline has shown toward psychoanalysis in its relation to the symptom, and questions Otto Rank’s project, and later on Ferenczi’s, aiming at the reduction of the duration of the analytical treatment. By doing so, he dismisses the performative aspirations of a shortened analysis. Moreover, Freud suggests that the symptom presents a far more critical problem than the one conceived, and that its disappearance in analysis can hardly be conceived as permanent. So the question of the length of

analysis gives place to two fundamental questions: first, whether there is, regardless of the length of analysis, a permanent recovery of symptoms; and second, whether there is "such a thing as a natural end to analysis" (*ibid.*, p. 219). Ferenczi posits the concept of a natural end to analysis in *The Problem of Termination of the Analysis* in 1927: "Analysis is not an endless process, but one which can be brought to a natural end" (Ferenczi 1982, p. 52).

The course of Freud's reasoning on the first question (why there cannot be a permanent recovery of symptoms) reveals the hypothesis he departs from: it is only if there has been a permanent recovery of symptoms that there can be a natural end to analysis. Yet, this causal correlation of the two questions goes against the split Ferenczi introduces between them in the beginning of his text, positing that, regardless of the fate that analysis reserves to the symptom, there is a natural end to analysis that is rather on the side of character: "the dissolution of the crystalline structure of a character [that is] a recrystallization" (*ibid.*, p. 47). In other words, if Ferenczi considers a natural end to analysis, it is because he dismisses the symptom (*ibid.*).

So one could say that Freud remains loyal to the symptom—he trusts the symptom—and at a clear distance from this notion of character.<sup>2</sup> He is even ready to sacrifice the question of the end of analysis for that of the symptom, which he considers a more essential one: why does it return? What function does it hold? What is *symptom* the name of?

In this field the interest of analysts seems to me to be quite wrongly directed. Instead of an enquiry into how a cure by analysis comes about (a matter which I think has been sufficiently elucidated) the question should be asked of what are the obstacles that stand in the way of such a cure. (Freud 1964, p. 221)

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<sup>2</sup> Freud uses the concept of ego instead of character throughout, to counter the thesis proposed by Ferenczi on the reconstitution of character.

This recentering of the question on the obstacles (symptoms, repetition) comes right after Freud claims that, even for those ideal cases whose “ego had not been noticeably altered” and whose “etiology of [...] disturbance had been essentially traumatic,” even in such cases where one “can [...] speak of an analysis having definitively ended,” “we do not know how much [their] immunity may not be due to a kind of fate which has spared [them] ordeals that are too severe” (*ibid.*, p. 220). What Freud means by *fate* is a chance that has prevented the return of the symptom. So Freud affirms that unless a sort of chance is involved, the symptom must return (*ibid.*, p. 223). And he evokes right after that the drive<sup>3</sup> and its “constitutional strength” (*ibid.*, p. 212). It is either left to chance, then, or to the drive.

Why does Freud not add anything new about the symptom? Why this fast move onto economy and the drive? Wouldn't he have pushed his theorization of the symptom further if he wanted to? He doesn't take the slightest risk as another step on the path of the symptom's interpretation, for he doesn't speak of a symptom to interpret. Freud approaches the symptom as one approaches a closed and consummated fact. So what Freud starts by putting into the equation, in response to the question of the end of analysis, is the ever-returning symptom as representative of the drive. In that, Freud amends the question of the end of analysis: How can one conceive of the terminality of analysis in light of the interminability of the drive, the symptom, and repetition? It is from there that he wants us to depart.

### *Economy of the Unsynthesizable*

Against the equal division he had proposed earlier in the text between the constitutional (strength of the drive) and the accidental

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<sup>3</sup> *Trieb* is mistranslated in the text as *instinct* instead of *drive*.

(traumatic alteration of the ego), Freud suggests that the constitutional is primary: "One is tempted to make the first factor—strength of instinct—responsible as well for the emergence of the second—the alteration of the ego" (*ibid.*, p. 212). He maintains, then, the opposition of the drive to the ego, yet a version of it that is altered by the priority of the drive: the ego's function is to *tame* the drive, he says, but the drive constitutes the ego, it predetermines a priori its structural failures, and triggers them a posteriori in the actuality of its return.

This division directs him in the twenty following pages toward a constant return to the economic argument (*ibid.*, p. 240ff.) as a way of explaining the return of the symptom: whatever happens to the ego during analysis or after its termination, it is constantly brought down to a deferred economy of the drive, whereby the greater strength of the drive is rendered unsynthesizable for the ego. What Freud emphasizes here is not something that is found unsynthesized under particular circumstances, but the unsynthesizable: something of which synthesis is impossible, if not by a temporary solution. So the entry into the economic argument appears to be an indication of surplus jouissance. There is an unsynthesizable surplus jouissance that the subject cannot do without and which must be regarded as the norm rather than as the exception. Based on this normalization of the unsynthesizable surplus, Freud advances three subsequent claims that have serious implications.

First, he reconsiders the autonomy of the dynamic theory and subjects it to temporality: "we should have to modify our formula and say 'the strength of the instincts at the time' instead of 'the constitutional strength of the instincts'" (*ibid.*, p. 224). What difference is there between these two propositions, if not that this strength of drives is not only proper to the constitution of mental life, but also subject to return? What Freud tells us here is that the surplus mustn't be conceived of as a simple post hoc, a traumatic birth of the psyche (as in Rank's thesis), but as a

component that is always present somewhere in the equation and that manages to get out of hand at any point in time.

Second, Freud interrelates the temporality of the strength of drives to accidental and developmental circumstances (*ibid.*, p. 226). In other words, he tells us that both the traumatic and developmental factors must be conceived of as deregulations of the synthesis whereby the surplus returns, as in the moment called constitutional. He pushes the very definition of those accidental and developmental factors into the return of the drive in its unsynthesizable magnitude.

And third, Freud posits that, if analysis is “a correction of [the ego’s] initial process of repression [of drives]” (*ibid.*, p. 227), then “what analysis achieves for neurotics is nothing other than what normal people bring about for themselves” (*ibid.*, p. 225), which is a temporary solution to a temporary strength of the drive. In other words, if one approaches the drive in respect to its constancy in mental life, and with regard to its unsynthesizable character, one wouldn’t differentiate so much between a subject who has undergone analysis and another who hasn’t needed it, Freud tells us, for they would both be managing the surplus in a temporary manner.

This last point comes in response to one of Ferenczi’s claims in *The Problem of Termination of the Analysis*—namely, that a completed analysis, which is for Ferenczi an analysis that has reached its natural end, produces an identifiable subjectivity that is distinct from normal subjectivity. Ferenczi puts it in the following terms:

We can however indicate certain common traits of persons who persevered in their analysis until the end. The far clearer separation of fantasy from reality, obtained by analysis, allows them to acquire an internal freedom that is quasi unlimited, therefore, a better mastery of actions and decisions; in other words, a control that is more economical and efficient. (Ferenczi 1982, p. 47)

Freud's position vis-à-vis this claim is expressed in a sharper statement further in the text:

One has an impression that one ought not to be surprised if it should turn out in the end that the difference between a person who has not been analyzed and the behavior of a person after he has been analyzed is not so thorough-going as we aim at making it and as we expect and maintain it to be. If this is so, it would mean that analysis sometimes succeeds in eliminating the influence of an increase in instinct, but not invariably, or that the effect of analysis is limited to increasing the power of resistance of the inhibitions, so that they are equal to much greater demands than before the analysis or if no analysis had taken place. (Freud 1964, p. 228)

These two opposed claims on whether or not analysis produces a subjectivity of its own are not all that is in opposition here. Their conceptual procedures are not less opposed than their contents: Ferenczi mentions a psychic economy bettered by analysis only as an aftermath of the modification of character, whereas Freud sets out from it to explain the results of analysis, with the conviction that structure—of the relation of the ego to the drive—has no outside. For Freud, it is a structure that stands on economy, and which may only host a change by economy—the core of this economy being a surplus that is unsynthesizable.

So, for Freud, any possible result of analysis should be conceived of in terms of an enhanced economy within the same structure. When Freud speaks of the ego, throughout this article, he mostly speaks of the subject of the unconscious. While Ferenczi speaks of a dissolution of structure whereby a new structure is achieved—a structure that Ferenczi sustains under the term "character," and which doesn't feature the same duality present in Freud's concept of ego. In this respect, the whole debate leads to two different concepts of subjectivity. What is subjectivity for Freud, and what is it for Ferenczi? This is what we will try to address next, in order to grasp Freud's next move in the article. The

debate might seem to be clinical, but the quarrel about whether analysis permits a changeability in structure shows that it was a conceptual debate all along. The kernel of Freud's disagreement with Ferenczi pertains to the question of subjectivity, and thus relates to the status given to the structure of the unconscious.

### *The Quarrel about Subjectivity*

Ferenczi doesn't offer a recollection of his findings in a renewed introduction of what he considers to be the psychic apparatus. What he leaves us with are clinical notes that require a synthesis. To understand Ferenczi's position from the question of subject and structure, we shall set out from the observation that he had started to take a noticeably different theoretical path from Freud's since Freud's conceptualization of the death drive (1920).

As underlined by José Jiménez Avello, Ferenczi disagrees with Freud's attribution of the death drive to the order of the congenital, or the constitutional, since for him it is impossible that the drive had been a death drive since the beginning of psychic life, and there must have been a traumatic element to direct it into such a function (Avello 2000, p. 32). Ferenczi articulates this traumatic element through a substantial work on the process of mimicry, or primary identification, that he posits to be prior to object relations in psychic development. Ferenczi tells us that what takes place in the infant's mimicry is an introjection of "alien transplants" that are "psychical contents" pertaining to the adult's desire, which the infant's psyche will host, henceforth, as if they were its own, implicating therefore feelings of displeasure (Ferenczi 1985b, pp. 134–203).

The subject will respond to those "un-pleasurable alien transplants," experienced as the traumatic intrusion of the other, by *passional* reactions, says Ferenczi, similar to what Freud describes by the death drive (Avello 2000, p. 36). Avello interprets

Ferenczi's use of *passion* through Ferenczi's reference to Descartes in the post-script of "Confusion of Tongues Between Adults and the Child": passion for Ferenczi, following the Cartesian line of thought, is the subject's response—by suffering—to their own transformation in consequence of their environment, that is to say the Other (*ibid.*).

Avello concludes on a pivotal interpretation of the quarrel between Freud and Ferenczi: Ferenczi opposes Freud's attribution of a masochistic quality to the death drive, for in doing so he would be legitimizing the oppressive action of the Other on the subject by his theory of the psychic apparatus (*ibid.*, p. 38). Freud's classification of the death drive in the constitutional order reflects, for Ferenczi, Freud's willingness to renounce the "essence" of the subject for the Other's oppression. In other words, Freud theorizes the subject in their psychic apparatus as already occluding the Other.

If Avello shows us the other's oppression in Ferenczi's works on the imaginary, Wladimir Granoff underlines this same oppressive process in the subject's entry into the symbolic. *Thalassa*, Granoff tells us, is a term by which Ferenczi introduces to us "the signifier as such," the signifier as a *pure body* deprived from its symbolic dimension—that is to say the status of the symbol before the subject's inscription in the symbolic (Granoff 1958, p. 89). Granoff draws our attention back to Ferenczi's refusal to conceive psychic development within the limits of Freud's reliance on ontogenesis. The access to the symbolic, and thereby to genital sexuality, Ferenczi tells us, is a "phylogenetic catastrophe" that exceeds the "ontogenic" one (Ferenczi 1938, p. 51). The term phylogenetic Ferenczi employs here, stresses not only that the access to genital sexuality is in correlation to the access to the phallic key, but also that the constitution of language in the child's psyche is a genetic process of its own, and the entry into the symbolic is not to be approached as ontogenesis. Granoff returns to Ferenczi's 1912 letter to Freud, where he had written about a certain duality



in the status of the symbol: the symbol up until then had been approached only from the outset of the order it establishes (the symbolic), but it has another dimension one can grasp if one approaches it from without (Granoff 1958, p. 92).

Let us retain from Granoff's disquisition of Ferenczi's line of thought the idea that the status of the symbol is transformed by repression. What the symbol is before repression is a phenomenon, a body, or a form; and what it becomes after repression is a crypt—that is, as in *crypta*, a cemetery under a language. In short, Ferenczi grasps very early the mortification involved in the establishment of the symbol which, for him, is not only the burial of the thing as such, but the subject's burial as well. Miguel Gutiérrez-Peláez formalizes the argument initiated by Granoff through a reinterpretation of Ferenczi's position on the symbolic through Lacan's concept of *la langue*: "What if there is an original (failed) rejection [...] of the symbolic order in the infant? What if language itself constitutes the Urtrauma?" (Gutiérrez-Peláez 2015, p. 6) For Gutiérrez-Peláez, this is how Ferenczi redirects Freud's question. He continues: "Ferenczi intends to unveil a realm prior to language, free of trauma; concepts such as 'Thálassa' (1924), the primordial sea, or 'infant,' he who is speechless or unable to speak, point directly to this." (*Ibid.*, p. 6) From this, Gutiérrez-Peláez articulates this state prior to repression or trauma to desire in Ferenczi's writings: desire is, for Ferenczi, the desire to return to this primordial state, and analysis must operate in the direction of this desire (*ibid.*, p. 7).

Nevertheless, following Ferenczi's progression to this undivided "essence" of the subject leads to no simple conclusion. We are left with a far more complex conceptual problem, which, as Gutiérrez-Peláez points out, Ferenczi wasn't unaware of: if the subject's inscription in the symbolic is traumatic, what is their non-inscription in it (*ibid.*, p. 12)? Is it not equally traumatic? Is not the subject's capture by their jouissance with no Other to inhibit it even more traumatic than one's oppression by the

Other? Is there such a thing as this "outside" of trauma in the psychic apparatus, which Ferenczi seems to want analysis to reach, like a process of "healing" (*ibid.*, p. 16)? It is perhaps with this transcending direction to analysis implied by the idea of the primordial essence that Freud engages in his response when he tells us that changeability in structure is economic, and therefore temporary. For Freud, the structure of the psychic apparatus must include this oppressive Other, it must function as a dialectic that has neither a state that is prior to it, nor an outside. Freud doesn't believe there is a point that precedes the dialectic that one must reach; transcendence for him is but a lure. This is the sustaining idea of the article, from the necessity of the symptom and the dichotomy of ego and drive to the unsynthesizable surplus to his defense of his concept of the duality of the drive.

So Freud disagrees with Ferenczi not only on the concept of the death drive. The following section will show us that he also disagrees with him on the concept of the life drive and with regards to the object of the drive.

### *The Drive as Negation*

Ferenczi posits that there is an end to repetition that may be reached when one accesses his primordial essence. And this is what Freud argues against in his essay. In *The Problem of Termination of the Analysis*, Ferenczi tells us the following:

Originally, for the child, all that has a good taste is good. He has therefore to learn to consider and feel that numerous things that have a good taste are bad, and to discover that obedience to precepts implicating difficult renunciations transforms into a source of felicity and of extreme satisfaction. [...] Every renunciation of the drive and every affirmation of unpleasure are still, clearly, linked to the sentiment of non-truth, that is to say of hypocrisy (Ferenczi 1982, p. 46).

Freud addresses in response Ferenczi's very concept of truth—the drive—on the basis of which he constructs his non-truth. What is this truth Ferenczi articulates to the drive, and whose loss occurs by “obedience” and “renunciation”? Is it not the “primary experience of pleasure” that Ferenczi tells us to be the subject of this “renunciation of the drive” (*ibid.*)? And does it not suppose, already, that what the drive is after is pleasure? Furthermore, if Ferenczi conceives the drive as this “strong tendency” to access primary experiences of pleasure, does he not suppose as well that this drive has an original object, and thereby that its object is originally a positive one? This drive, seeking pleasure in a positive object, is conceptually sufficient for him to throw the whole of the problem of enjoyment on the Other's back, and endow this Other, by the same token, with as much positivity as that of the object he makes him restrict. In fact, Ferenczi's construction of the idea of truth—of enjoyment—bypasses the concepts of surplus and negation from beginning to end, and it is precisely there where Freud directs our attention in his response.

First, Freud tells us that “obedience”—which he translates into “repression”—is not the renunciation to an original pleasure but to a negation that he likens to Flavius Josephus's offense to the Christendom (Freud 1964, p. 236). What is repressed is a negation, and a negation of the sufficiency of the symbolic.

Second, Freud reunifies the drive and the ego which he had kept extrapolated since the beginning of the text: “id and ego are originally one,” he says and then adds that the drive lays the foundations of the ego, which shares its “lines of development, trends, and reactions” (*ibid.*, p. 240). So what Freud advances here is that there is an “ego” that is a realization of the drive as much as there is one that synthesizes it. He claims that resistance sustains a subject that is unsplit and questions therefrom whether one may still call it a resistance (*ibid.*, p. 241).

This brings us to the third point where Freud revises this naming. He had mistakenly called them, he says, the “resistances from

the Id"<sup>4</sup> in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (Freud 2000–10, pp. 4248–4324), and decides to attribute them now to "the behavior of the two primal instincts, their distribution, mingling and diffusion" (Freud 1964, p. 242). What Freud considered to be the resistance from the Id, he tells us, is the drive's method of "defending itself" against recovery, a method by which it shows itself to be "absolutely resolved to hold on to illness and suffering" (*ibid.*).

Fourth, Freud proceeds to explain that this masochism of the drive is the kernel of psychic normality, as opposed to the thesis sustained by Ferenczi claiming "that mental events are exclusively governed by the desire for pleasure," and that this masochism is an abnormality that analysis must abolish (*ibid.*, p. 243). There is a radical conceptual necessity, Freud argues, and not just a "pessimistic theory of life," giving place to this masochism within our conception of our psychic normality (*ibid.*).

Fifth, Freud addresses the inherent duality of the drives, using the example of homosexuality, where heterosexual and homosexual tendencies "are in a state of irreconcilable conflict" (*ibid.*, p. 244). Why don't the two opponents "divide up the available quota of libido between them according to their relative strength [he asks], since they are able to do so in a number of cases?" (*Ibid.*) In other words, why doesn't this duality resolve itself, why does it subsist as a conflict of a constant stance? Freud argues that there is a final cause that exceeds the material one—irrespective of the quantity of libido—which, had things been left to it, would have consumed this duality and produced a unity instead.

In fact, if Freud called his advancement of the dualistic theory the third step in the theory of drives, he might be introducing through Empedocles's supplement, that he prepares here by this negation of the material cause, a fourth one. For in his third step,

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<sup>4</sup> "We have called the behavior, perhaps not quite correctly, 'resistance from the id'."

Freud proposes that if the drive's trajectory leads back by the pleasure principle to the inanimate it departs from (the complete discharge), then the drive is basically a death drive; while the life drive's function he posits to be a postponing or suspension of this complete discharge whereby a sustainment of life takes place. This is what requires a beyond of the pleasure principle for life to be sustained—by an accumulation of excitation without discharge. Nevertheless, if the opposition of the life drive to the death drive was already drawn for us in the third step, what Freud tells us here is that these two opponents, as in Empedocles's love and strife, are rather two successive operations than opponents, two successive logical times of the relation to lack (of being), which always leads back to its beginning.

To grasp Empedocles's supplement that Freud introduces here we must refer to its formalization by Lacan in Seminar XI, which may be summarized as follows: Given that the pleasure principle implies that the subject is already dead in their biological function of reproduction, the drive transgresses this initial death, first, by mounting the subject's need to the Other's demand beyond need. The result of this montage is the split subject that is appointed by the Other, and thereby dead by the symbolic (a point Lacan will call *aphanisis*). Then, to surpass this alienation to the Other (and the subsequent effacement of the subject by the symbolic), the drive operates a second transgression that is separation. This separation proceeds by extracting the Other's supposed jouissance through experiencing it as a pain inflicted by them. This second operation implies the status of the headless subject that is reduced to the level of the sign (anxiety) as objection to the order of the signifier. In that, it is a symbolic death of the subject, the lost symbolic subject being the object of the Other's demand. So the drive sets out from the lack as such—that is the lack of the subject in their function of reproduction—to bring about an alienation whereby the subject enters representation and aphanisis both at

once, then operates a separation by which the subject returns to their *lack as such* yet symbolically, for their death for the Other is a symbolic death that comes to counter their death by the symbolic. Therefore, separation doesn't lead back to the point the dialectic departs from, but to a renewal of the entry into alienation, and thereby to the cyclical functioning of the drive.

In sum, neither can the dialectic of the drive and the Other get back to an original presubjective point, nor can it reach a final accomplishment that is separate from the Other, it has neither beginning nor end. It is a suspension of the subject in the condition whereby being, on one side of the equation, and nonbeing, on the other side, are always present in correlation. Where there is satisfaction, there is death in the biological function of reproduction; where there is symbolic subject, there is aphanisis; and where there is headless subject, there is symbolic death.

Yet, although Lacan considers that this is already beyond Hegel insofar as it surpasses the function of recognition in the master-slave dialectic, where his argument leads us, in fact, is to the very condition that Hegel formalizes as a dialectic. Ray Brassier explains this exclusivity of the dialectic as follows:

Externalization [of estrangement] is deestrangement as estrangement. The prospect of deestrangement emerges only by retrospectively an enabling estrangement. Objectification and subjection are facets of a single indivisible movement. This is why there can be no narrative about overcoming the need to overcome; no history in which the compulsion to repeat would be undone by the remembrance of compulsion. There is no self-relation uncontaminated by estrangement. (Brassier 2019, p. 104)

Brassier's conclusion on the dialectic of estrangement summarizes the endpoint of Lacan's formalization of the drive and of Freud's revision of the duality of the drive by Empedocles's theory: there is neither initial nor final state where overcoming can become unnecessary or accomplished.

To return to “Analysis Terminable and Interminable,” Freud starts by explaining that Empedocles had posited that the universe was organized according to two governing forces—love and strife—that are very similar to Eros and Thanatos (Freud 1964, p. 246). And the central opposition that love and strife sustain is not simply life and death, but combination and dissolution. Freud tells us that there isn’t in psychic life such a thing as a fully consumed death, or a stable ontological life, as the misreading of his dualistic theory of drives has drawn. All there is, is the in between—of life and death—which requires, then, combination and separation to sustain:

The one strives to agglomerate the primal particles of the four elements into a single unity, while the other, on the contrary, seeks to undo all those fusions and to separate the primal particles of the elements from one another. (*Ibid.*)

We may consider, retroactively from Lacan’s formalization, that Freud’s reference to Empedocles—that shifts the operation of the drive from cycles of life-death to cycles of combination/dissolution or estrangement/de-estrangement—is a fundamental course correction, and one step further indeed: for in combination, what the drive operates, we may call now alienation; and in dissolution what it operates is separation.

Now, to put his argument back in the context of his debate with Ferenczi, Freud’s very long response leads us to that, if truth—the essence of the subject—is in natural satisfaction, as Ferenczi posits, there would not be a subject to proclaim it as truth, it wouldn’t be subjectivized. This truth is only reachable by the negation of alienation, and it is bound to lead back to alienation. What Freud puts in the mouth of Empedocles is that the essence of the subject can neither be an original nor a final state for analysis to reach. If there is such a thing as an essence, Freud tells us, it can only be conceived of as the suspended horizon of

negation. In this respect, what Freud tells us is that it is because the essence of the subject that Ferenczi defends is only conceivable as a part of the dialectic of self-estrangement, there can be no end to repetition; namely, the repetition of the Other's failure. It is there that Freud's introduction of the drive through the question of masochism—as part of normality—takes full effect. The Other must fail again for subjectivity to persist.

Furthermore, the whole procedure by which Freud devotedly revises and defends this position suggests that truth for him is the dialectic itself. And this is, perhaps, what he considers to be the nature of the result of analysis: not something of the kind of a subjective anchoring in an original lost essence or freedom, but rather something at the level of the inscription of the dialectic itself that conditions being, something at the level of which the necessity of the cyclical failure of the symbolic may be inhabited as a condition of being in its correlation to nonbeing.

### *Five Antitheses for a Mourning of the Concept of Mourning*

Now, it is on these theoretical grounds—of the drive as cycles of alienation and separation—that Freud re-engages with Ferenczi's thesis on the natural end of analysis (*ibid.*, p. 250).<sup>5</sup> We shall start with Ferenczi's thesis to which this section of Freud's text responds, and first with the part of Ferenczi's text that Freud quotes.

Ferenczi correlates his concept of the natural end of analysis to the dissolution of the crystalline structure of character, whose operationalization he points out in the becoming of the analysand's transference. The most tangible expression of this natural end, he claims, is the modification of transference:

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<sup>5</sup> Although this debate on the practical termination of treatment takes place in the shadow of Ferenczi's unfinished analysis with Freud, that is a dimension I will not address here.



Every male patient must attain a feeling of equality in relation to the physician as a sign that he has overcome his fear of castration; every female patient, if her neurosis is to be regarded as fully disposed of, must have got rid of her masculinity complex and must emotionally accept without a trace of resentment the implications of her female role. (Ferenczi 1982, p. 51)

Although one may find in these words an idealistic theory of the liquidation of transference, Ferenczi's statement calls for a conceptual evaluation. Ferenczi argues that analysis must achieve an acceptance of castration—that is, a traversal of castration anxiety—whose manifestation is a “feeling of equality in relation to the physician.” He doesn't introduce one without the other: castration must be accepted insofar as the object lacks in both—the analysand and the analyst—whereby an equality may be negatively established. In this respect, what Ferenczi is addressing, is in fact a traversal of desire's positivization of the lacking object in the Other, whereby the demand that drives this desire gets retrieved from the relation to the analyst.

Furthermore, Ferenczi prepares this traversal of desire's positivization in his article through a reasoning that departs from the libidinal to end in fantasy. We may summarize this reasoning as follows: first, that “there are libidinal tendencies, and not only simple tendencies of self-affirmation or vengeance, that were the variable motives of the formation of character” (*ibid.*).

These libidinal tendencies are yielded in a demand for love that the analysand must come to realize has been reverted in negative transference: “After having exploded all his anger, the dirty child reveals his hidden demands of tenderness and love, with a naïve frankness” (*ibid.*). So up until now, Ferenczi speaks of a recognition of the demand for love, that is the demand of the Other as such. Then Ferenczi moves on to the phallic function in enjoyment: “No analysis is terminated as long as the activities of preliminary and final pleasure of sexuality, as much in their

normal as in their abnormal manifestations, have not been experienced on an emotional level, in the conscious fantasy" (*ibid.*). It is at this point that Ferenczi approaches desire; fantasy is where the kernel of desire's positivization of the object is laid. Before claiming that castration must be accepted, he argues that fantasy must be recognized as such. This is, in fact, the point that Ferenczi reaches beyond Freud in practice.

The patient is finally perfectly convinced that analysis is for him a means toward new satisfaction, yet still in fantasy, that doesn't bring him anything in reality. [...] He turns inevitably toward other possibilities of satisfaction that are more real. (*Ibid.*)

What occurs, by the medium of this recognition of fantasy, is a *conviction* by which the analysand surpasses fantasy—and thereby desire—together with the limitation of his enjoyment to the analytic situation, and directs himself onto real activities procuring him satisfaction. What the analysand is convinced of is that analysis "doesn't bring him anything in reality," this emphasis on the real should indicate for us that Ferenczi speaks of a sort of traversal of desire's function—that is, not to reach satisfaction—whereby the analysand becomes rather tolerant to satisfaction. What Ferenczi proposes is a modification of the analysand's enjoyment whereby the analytic situation, as modality of sustaining enjoyment, gets exhausted: "the analysis must so to say die out of exhaustion"—an exhaustion that, following Ferenczi's reasoning, we should be able to call the exhaustion of fantasy and desire (*ibid.*).

Once there, however, Ferenczi introduces a phrase that provides context retroactively to the whole reasoning he proposed to us earlier:

The whole of the neurotic period of his life appears then, truly, as a pathological mourning that the patient wanted also to displace on the situation of transference, but whose veritable nature is

unmasked, which puts then an end to the tendency of repetition in the future. The analytic renunciation corresponds therefore to the actual resolution of situations of infantile frustrations which were the origin of the symptomatic formations. (*Ibid.*, p. 52)

Ferenczi's foundational idea is in the master signifier "mourning"—a term that has become widespread in analytical theories since this debate, and which Melanie Klein inherited. This is a term that also took center stage in the works of some Lacanian analysts, such as Daniel Lagache, and which Lacan has done enough to repudiate by the distinction between the partial object and the primordial object introduced in the concept of the object *a*. We shall see a little further how Freud's response prepares a "mourning" of the theory of mourning that Lacan will formalize later on; for now, let us try to grasp what Ferenczi advances here.

Originally, he tells us, there are "infantile frustrations" and their antidote (result)—"symptomatic formations." In other words, the symptom's business is to prevent the accomplishment of a loss to keep frustration at a bearable level. Ferenczi previously unpacked this symptom in the demand of the object of need, the demand of love and the desire of the phallic object that the analysand must come to recognize. Those are the main constituents, for Ferenczi, of "pathological mourning"—that is to say, mourning that doesn't reach "renunciation." This means that renunciation, for Ferenczi, together with castration, is separation; and that "the tendency of repetition"—in line with symptomatic formations—is the tendency of repetition of demand, inasmuch as (for him as well) demand sustains alienation (which this logic of object relations reduces to attachment). And it is only on those bases—that repetition is the sustainment of attachment to counter loss—that Ferenczi can posit that transference is repetition, and that, therefore, mourning and renunciation can resolve transference, repetition, and infantile frustrations all at once.

One must point out here though that this placement of repetition on the side of alienation provides the exact opposite

definition of that which Freud advances; for Freud, repetition is Empedocles's strife—it is the Other's failure—that is separation, and that is at a clear distance from transference. This is the—long inherited—misunderstanding in response to which Lacan announces his formalization of repetition (in Seminar XI), as a fundamental concept that is distinct from transference, by the clear statement: "the concept of repetition has nothing to do with the concept of transference" (Lacan 1981, p. 33). The clinic of mourning is not Freudian, therefore, insofar as it stems from a notion of transference that is explained by a notion of repetition, and which are both distinct from the concepts of repetition and transference that Freud proposed.

Now, aside from those conceptual problems in Ferenczi's use of transference as repetition, and of repetition as sustainment of attachment, which remain effects of a more fundamental misunderstanding, let us turn to the master signifier, *mourning*. What is it in the order of things that one can mourn? What is it, other than that whose presence precedes his absence? If there is any reason for us to believe in the necessity of such a mourning, it stems from our belief that the object is originally a positive object, and consequently that the only entry point to this business of its negativity is privation. The whole purpose and natural end of analysis that Ferenczi unfolds for us departs from the object as defined by evolutionary theory—that is, an object suspended between pleasure and attachment. Furthermore, to sustain the theory of mourning doesn't go without supposing that the being of the subject is ontic, that it is in itself, and that it may, if one mourns the thing till the end, be sustained by something other than a lack. In other words, for one to practice analysis as a clinic of mourning, one needs to be a firm believer in a sort of self-sufficiency of the subject.

Freud responds to Ferenczi's claim (that demand is a demand of love) by arguing that the analysand "refuses to subject himself to a father-substitute, or to feel indebted to him or anything"

(Freud 1964, p. 252). In other words, Freud argues that Ferenczi had classified under negative transference something that, at the end of the day, might not be so in line with a demand of the Other; that Ferenczi had neutralized, in his defense of negative transference, a demand that longs for the exact opposite of the Other—a demand that negates the Other. After all, what is a demand for love, other than a demand for the Other's lack?

At no other point in one's analytic work [Freud pleads] does one suffer more from an oppressive feeling that all one's repeated efforts have been in vain, and from a suspicion that one has been "preaching to the winds", than when one is trying to persuade a woman to abandon her wish for a penis on the ground of its being unrealizable or when one is seeking to convince a man that a passive attitude to men does not always signify castration and that it is indispensable in many relationships in life. (*Ibid.*)

Although what is spelled out in those lines articulates what Freud suspects to be the binding rapport between desire and castration, the level at which he addresses this rapport is the level of demand, and a demand to which one cannot but fail to respond to. In other words, this relation of desire to castration is subsumed in an impossible demand addressed to the analyst, a demand in consequence of which the Other is bound to fail. What is demanded is the Other's castration. Freud's statement exceeds by far a theoretical claim that castration anxiety is unsurpassable, it is a last plea whose function is to preserve a last trace to a secret. Freud tells us: at no other point in one's analytic work had I suffered as much from being—as Other—negated with such persistence; at no other point had I realized that what the analysand truly demands is a nonrecovery, a nonobject, and a non-Other. And that, inasmuch as his recovery—the acceptance of castration—would be surrendering his jouissance to the Other: "he refuses to accept his recovery from the doctor" (*ibid.*).

On that point, one must disagree with Chawki Azouri's thesis, according to which Freud's words constitute a defense of the paternal function, whereby he restricts psychoanalysis in his order of inheritance from surpassing the father (Azouri 2015, p. 204). The resonance of Freud's words—"he refuses to subject him-self to a father-substitute"—poses the exact opposite question: Has there ever been a paternal function involved, as a law, in castration? Or has castration been only accepted inasmuch as it sustained a father, and the desire of the father in position of the law, producing thereby repression and identification? There are, indeed, theorists of the dictate of the identification to the analyst (Balint for instance, one of Ferenczi's successors), but Freud is not one of them, even less when he shows that the clinic of mourning is an ideologization of the Oedipus complex by claiming that castration cannot be accepted. Is there anything better than mourning, after all, to sustain the father's desire in position of the law—which interdicts what (of *jouissance*) is already impossible? For mourning bets on nothing else than the symbol, it is a rendering symbolic of what is missed; mourning, therefore, sustains and operates by and under the Name-of-the-Father. Furthermore, mourning supposes that, in its completion, lack may be fully consummated and that the subject can exist by something other than a lack; which implicates, then, the self-sufficiency of the symbolic subject, and thereby an existentialist deadlock. Freud doesn't address identification but the refusal of identification: he claims that castration doesn't function in accordance with the Oedipus complex after all. In other words, the Oedipus complex, the endpoint of which is identification, turns out to be a perverted fallacy. The Oedipus complex turns out to be a symptom that the analysand drops at a certain point and "refuses to subject him-self to a father-substitute."

Miller explains this refusal in opposition to the pervert's position, taking his point of departure from Lacan's *Encore*:

Lacan can be translated [in *Encore*] as saying—”the neurotic imagines that the Other demands his castration.” Where the acknowledged pervert admits the jouissance of the Other, the neurotic is [...] perceptively directed before everything by what would be, on the part of the Other, the demand for his castration, that reduces the law of desire to a demand for castration. (Miller 1997, p. 29)

In effect, there where the pervert may still exist in the acceptance of castration as “instrument of jouissance of the Other,” the neurotic gets effaced, and this is sufficient reason for this running aground on anxiety. As Freud shows us, the neurotic refuses to surrender their jouissance to the Other by accepting castration.

This is why Lacan can develop [Miller continues] what plays out at the end of the analysis as the refusal, by the neurotic subject, to sacrifice his castration to the jouissance of the Other. It is even what explains in the paradoxical formula, by saying, “The Other does not exist for him.” One can’t understand more. This means—the Other does not exist for him, in the sense where only phallic jouissance matters fully. At this moment there, he refuses the sacrifice that is necessary for the Other to exist. As Lacan says, “If he existed, he would be pleased by my castration”. (*Ibid.*)

In this sense, one may ask if this sacrifice of knowledge is an unbeing of the supposed subject of knowledge, and in reversed reasoning, if the unbeing of this supposition is protective of jouissance. Is the unbeing of the subject of knowledge a beyond of castration? Or is it a holding onto castration that goes as far as negating the Other? Freud tells us that this is the final scene of an analysis, which is a scene that is phallic in appearance (a holding on to castration), but anal in kind: you won’t get my jouissance.

No analogous transference can arise from the female’s wish for a penis, [Freud continues] but it is the source of outbreaks of severe depression in her, owing to an internal conviction that the analysis will be of no use and that nothing can be done to help her. And

we can only agree that she is right, when we learn that her strongest motive in coming for treatment was the hope that, after all, she might still obtain a male organ, the lack of which was so painful to her. (Freud 1964, p. 252)

Freud shows how this holding onto castration produces a disbelief in knowledge and in analysis at once, together with the realization that desire is a lure, inasmuch as desire only leads back to the castration it departs from. What Freud provides is a little more detailed than Ferenczi's claim: it isn't *the crystalline structure of character* that is dissolved in that moment of analysis—for what is character?—but it is desire, for desire is castration—that is to say, the Other's desire. Then Freud advances to formalizing castration as a bedrock, insofar as it constitutes the last frontier of knowledge:

The decisive thing remains that the resistance prevents any change from taking place—that everything stays as it was. We often have the impression that with the wish for a penis and the masculine protest we have penetrated through all the psychological strata and have reached bedrock, and that thus our activities are at an end. This is probably true, since, for the psychical field, the biological field does in fact play the part of the underlying bedrock. The repudiation of femininity can be nothing else than a biological fact, a part of the great riddle of sex. (*Ibid.*)

Here, we must first question Freud's introduction of the "repudiation of femininity," which he substitutes for Alfred Adler's "masculine protest" two pages earlier (*ibid.*, p. 250). What difference is there between those two formulations, aside from Freud's expressed intention of accommodating *Penisneid* along with the fear of castration? If the masculine protest relates to castration from the outset of the object as positivity, the repudiation of femininity underlines the exact reverse, whereby the object as negativity constitutes the initial point. And if Freud precludes



both the fear of castration and *Penisneid* in this initially negative state of the object, then the penis is already posited to be a positivization of a lack that precedes it. In other words, what is operated by Freud's formulation and use of repudiation of femininity is not the repudiation of femininity, but the repudiation of lack.

So it is this repudiation of lack that Freud claims is a bedrock that "can be nothing else than a biological fact, a part of the great riddle of sex" (*ibid.*, p. 252). Why does he not stop at the biological fact in explaining this bedrock? He adds: "a part of the great riddle of sex," the riddle that constitutes enjoyment in both men and women. What is a riddle other than something not yet explained, which he calls "biological fact" inasmuch as it is unformalizable? Is that not what is meant by this bedrock? Is it not, precisely, a *bedrock* in what concerns signification? Miller asks: "What did Freud expect of the experience if not a formula for the sexual relation? He hoped to find it inscribed in the unconscious; hence his despair at not finding it" (Miller 2009, p. 2). One may say, then, that Lacan's breakthrough in Seminar X, where he addresses lack as *irreducible to a signifier*, is a formalization of this dead end.

In conclusion, we have five antitheses against the theory of mourning—that is, to be more specific, a mourning of the partial object. Let us summarize these antitheses by briefly correlating them to the formalizations that Lacan will bring to them. (1) Freud claims that demand is deception insofar as it aims at the Other's lack; that demand is separation, not alienation. Lacan formalizes this point in Seminar X under *that which deceives*. (2) Freud shows that the paternal function is an effect of castration, not a cause of castration (as in the Oedipus complex). Lacan conceptualizes this rupture with the Oedipus complex by a re-routing of castration in the property of jouissance itself. (3) Freud claims that if the analysand, after all, "refuses to subject him-self to a father-substitute," then the paternal function is in itself a positivization of the lacking object. Lacan develops this idea in the object's entry into exchange by the medium of the castration

complex. (4) Freud claims that desire leads nowhere other than castration. Lacan formalizes this by arguing that desire can only lead back to lack, which renders the object a *cause of desire*, as opposed to an *object of desire*. Finally (5), Freud shows us that the repudiation of femininity—that is, the repudiation of lack—is the bedrock of formalization. Lacan translates this into the lack that is irreducible to a signifier. These are the five antitheses by which Freud counters the theory of mourning, whose end point is an acceptance of castration.

These are, moreover, five of the fundamental coordinates of the object as object *a*. Although Lacan challenges Freud on the end of analysis in Seminar X, he must have followed to the letter Freud's antitheses as theoretical indications in some cases, and as evidences in others, calling for a conceptualization such as the object *a*. It is by the object *a* and its fourth stage, after all, that Lacan will show that *mourning* cannot realize more than a substitution, since what may be mourned is the object as seen (its image  $i(a)$ , which is already a substitute) and not the object as seeing (the gaze). So, this falling of the gaze involves a destitution that exceeds mourning, and that belongs on the opposite side of mourning, in melancholia. Why would Ferenczi qualify such a thing as the dissolution of the crystalline structure of character as a mourning? The whole emphasis in this dissolution is on destitution rather than loss. Ferenczi's practice, rather than his concepts, is what's beyond mourning.

### *The Finitude of Finitude*

At no point in "Analysis Terminable and Interminable" does it seem that Freud is losing ground on a particular certainty. This certainty is first introduced in the symptom not to interpret, then operationalized in the economy of the unsynthesizable, then drawn in the defense of the drive by Empedocles's theory, and

finally substantiated in the five antitheses against the concept of mourning. Although Freud never quoted Hegel, or even read him as far as we know, his certainty is phenomenological: that the ethical can at no point become ontic. What Freud is certain of, to go back to Brassier's formalization, is that "there can be no narrative about overcoming the need to overcome; [ergo] there is no self-relation uncontaminated by estrangement" (Brassier 2019, p. 104). In fact, Ferenczi provides such a narrative, but then the narrative itself is a fact of the need to overcome, of which it narrates the overcoming. In fact, Freud tells us not to bother searching there for a purpose of analysis, for what can be found in this realm does not exceed ideology.

Any concept of a finality to psychoanalysis must align with this impossibility that he shows us the analysis and coming to realize in what he calls an "internal conviction":

No analogous transference can arise from the female's wish for a penis, but it is the source of outbreaks of severe depression in her, owing to an internal conviction that the analysis, will be of no use and that nothing can be done to help her. And we can only agree that she is right, when we learn that her strongest motive in coming for treatment was the hope that, after all, she might still obtain a male organ. (Freud 1964, p. 252)

Does Freud go so far as to claim that transference can be liquidated? As a matter of fact, Freud only speaks of a resolution of the transference neurosis—never a liquidation—when he doesn't address what this resolution really involves; he introduces this resolution in most of his writings as a gateway to another articulation, but never addresses it as a problem itself. Now, the quote we have before us is clearly distinct from this usual dismissive affirmation of the resolution of the transference neurosis. Freud doesn't venture such a claim here, he rather approaches the question of transference comparatively—"no analogous transference can arise"—as if there is something in transference that doesn't

allow such a clear distinction on the matter as the one there is in a resolution. And although this inability to distinguish may stem from Freud's limited understanding of castration and the feminine position, his comparative approach also poses the question whether transference is limited to the analytic situation in the first place for it to assume such a responsibility as that of resolving it. In other words, this comparative approach poses the question whether there is a subjective rapport that is exterior to transference. On that, Freud claims, as early as in *Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (1909), that "transference arises spontaneously in all human relationships just as it does between the patient and the physician," so the "myth" of the resolution of transference loses its conceptual ground early in the history of psychoanalysis (Freud 2000–10, p. 2236). Now, I am certainly not claiming that what Freud advances here is the last thing that could happen to a transference in analysis; but I am pointing out that Freud is approaching transference quite correctly, he is speaking in terms of what is realizable, a "non-analogousness" of transference—as opposed to a transcendence of transference.

There can be "no analogous transference" to that which was sustained, Freud claims, by the "wish for the partial object" along the analytic treatment, and which falls, in the end, through an "internal conviction." So what Freud claims is that transference subsists, but with a cut that is this "internal conviction." This is far more nuanced than what Ferenczi proposes about the "feeling of equality in relation to the physician," and the "far clearer separation of fantasy from reality, obtained by analysis" (Ferenczi 1982, pp. 47–51). Although Ferenczi has led analysis beyond Freud, Freud's conceptual delicacy maintains a greater sobriety against the ideological outcomes of analysis that were derived from Ferenczi's claims. For if one thinks transference at the end of analysis through this "equality in relation to the physician," or the "clearer separation of fantasy from reality," or, even better, the "internal freedom that is quasi unlimited," one cannot but end up

in the idea of the resolution of transference—which stems from the very misunderstanding of transference (*ibid.*, p. 47).

Now let us approach this “internal conviction,” the central element of the proposition, which Freud says he “can only agree she is right” in. What internal conviction does he agree she is right in? Is it that she will not obtain a male organ after all? Or that her analysis had been motivated by this desire all along? Or that, after this conviction, analysis has become useless? Isn’t “conviction” a rather strange word to be used in psychoanalysis? Have we ever seen this word written in a psychoanalytic text—other than Freud’s and Ferenczi’s on the end of analysis? Doesn’t Freud tell us, by naming this an “internal conviction,” that something has gotten out of hand? Does he not tell us that this analysand is all alone in her conviction? That he does not share with her this same conviction, but that in a certain way—the way of the evident perhaps—he gets forced to agree? Does he not tell us that by this conviction the internal has gotten concealed again for him, inasmuch as conviction doesn’t demand acknowledgement? It is so strange that he who has led analysis as far as destitution—Ferenczi—hasn’t given us a single word on the unbeing of the supposed subject of knowledge, for he dumps it all in negative transference, while what Freud tells us in all the fury of this *passage à l’acte* is that it was all about his destitution as supposition of knowledge.

To have conviction, after all, is neither being certain nor needing to know; and Descartes is accountable enough by his precipitation to create the non-deceiving God out of his first certainty for how demanding certainty is in its relation to knowledge, inasmuch as it aims at truth (Lacan 1981, p. 36). The conviction that Freud tells us about, and that he qualifies as internal, is something else, it is of a different category than that by which Descartes had to get rid of God (if I reached the certainty that “I am” by pure reason, then God wants me to) and which since Lacan has been called a sleight of hand. The analysand’s conviction does not assume that

the Other agrees, but that it forced him to: he "can only agree that she is right," that the right is in her. Doesn't that involve the Other's becoming a lack? For what else does this conviction lead Freud to than lacking conviction? Doesn't this conviction preclude a stumbling of the Other? The very last lines of Freud's article are astonishingly precise on this matter. He says not only that the Other falls with his knowledge or "mastery" (as he calls it using Ferenczi's words, "the mastery of the castration complex"), which requires then that he "consoles" himself with something, but also that what he falls into, or back to, is "certainty"—that is being divided:

It would be hard to say whether and when we have succeeded in mastering this factor [the repudiation of femininity] in analytical treatment. We can only console ourselves with the certainty that we have given the person analyzed every possible encouragement to examine and alter his attitude to it. (Freud 1964, p. 252)

What Freud says is that he doesn't know, but he is certain. And what does his certainty account for, what is he certain of, other than the will he places against his doubt? To return to the conviction in the name of which this fall has taken place, that is the suspended evident inseparable from experience and irreducible to knowledge, one can see it laid in the same lines Mladen Dolar writes to substantiate Hegel's absolute knowledge:

One could say that the absolute knowledge is a crossroad, a partition. There are two ways that follow from it: having reached this point, having climbed to the top of this ladder, one can only revert to the experience, which was there all along—the way to truth is truth itself, the absolute knowledge is nothing but the realization that the truth was produced on the way, unwittingly, and that there is nothing more to learn there, no wisdom to possess [...] except for what has been learned on the way. (Dolar 2017, p. 88)

Isn't this absolute knowledge the internal conviction—in its three propositions combined—that Freud calls “the source of outbreaks of severe depression in her”? That 1) there is nowhere else to go from there, other than to the beginning; 2) that truth, after all, is what she already experienced; and 3) that there was nothing else left for her to learn? Is there not in this absolute knowledge the very failure of knowledge as supposed, the failure of the phallus whose absence is projected on infinity? Dolar's further explanation of the function of the cut produced by absolute knowledge interprets with great precision the nuance that Freud introduced in the axiom “internal conviction, ergo non-analogousness of transference”:

The absolute knowledge thus rejoins the sense certainty, the most naïve beginning of the *Phenomenology*, experience is caught in a circle, one is thrown back on one's own experience, on its beginning—yet with a cut, after the break produced by the absolute knowledge. Is there life after the absolute knowledge? The parallel has been already suggested a number of times: it is like continuing to live one's life after analysis, after the break produced by analysis, and the absolute knowledge is in structural analogy with the end of analysis. (*Ibid.*)

Although backing absolute knowledge by the end of analysis might not surpass elucidation—for if there is anyone who may testify and give evidence on the end of analysis, that doesn't make it more graspable than absolute knowledge—Dolar's comparison permits the reverse. Can absolute knowledge back the end of analysis in its conceptualization? What Dolar tells us is that absolute knowledge is, on the one hand, the cut in knowledge by which experience gets disentangled from it and starts leading back to itself, and on the other hand, the cut in experience to which experience is led back to, in itself—an opening in experience that leads “from consciousness to subject,” out of itself, and thereby to logic (*ibid.*). So this cut is, in fact, a departure from knowledge

as supposed and, at the same time, an entry into knowledge as produced, in a closure of experience on itself in infinite cycles.

The critical fact that Dolar questions at this point is how experience becomes *estranged* from itself while realizing its fall into repetition and similarity to itself; how it becomes "non-analogous transference," while continuing to function as transference. Dolar explains this non-analogousness of experience after absolute knowledge by two factors: absolute knowledge leads to a recognition that (1) experience repeats experience in cycles, that experience is but a loop there is no way out of, and (2) that experience is "subtended" by a cut in experience, whose opening submits it to a logic out of itself (*ibid.*). These are, indeed, Hegel's two scars on experience by absolute knowledge—that are not so distinct from Freud's—in sequence with which Dolar asks: "Is there life after the absolute knowledge?" Hegel tells us there is *the pure decision to think*, which Dolar translates into: there is "the life of the concept" (*ibid.*, p. 89).

Should we ask the same question about the end of analysis? Is there life after the end of analysis? This is a far more complex question than the first, for Freud doesn't say "there is the life of the concept," he says "Analysis [is] Terminable and Interminable." At one pole of the article, he writes, "no analogous transference can arise from the female's wish for a penis," and at the other, "what analysis achieves for neurotics is nothing other than what normal people [who are not excluded from this wish for a penis] bring about for themselves"—which is then a temporary solution to a temporary strength of the drive (Freud 1964, pp. 225, 252). Freud's constant perplexity when approaching the end of analysis shows that the true question he was burdened by is not "does analysis have an end?" but "what is the termination of analysis an end of?" What is it in the order of ends that analysis terminable must realize, and thereby become interminable? What Freud was asking is "What is it an end of, that reduces the terminality of analysis to a negligible factor, in approaching the question of



the end of analysis?” This is the question that Freud finally opens by the internal conviction that equates to absolute knowledge.

“The end” is a term with a long philosophical history, which I certainly cannot sufficiently address in this paper. I shall only approach it very briefly through Hegel’s phenomenology with the aim of deducing Freud’s answer to the question formulated above. The spine of “the end,” which Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda extracted in *The Dash*, is in the question whether there is such a thing as an ended end, whether there is a final and fully consummated end, or if the end—as Hegel shows us—is an un-end “forcing us not only to begin anew but to think of beginning in a new way” (Comay and Ruda 2018, p. 109). And this is what Freud shows by his long section on the drive, and more specifically by Empedocles’s theory: that there is no separation that one can conceive of as final, there is no final end, there are only different entries to repetition. This leads to the second point, which Alenka Zupančič explains with the idea that the end and repetition (just like desire and castration) are one and the same thing, inasmuch as repetition is driven by the end (repetition seeks the end) and therefore the end is the cause of repetition (Zupančič 2016, p. 1). The third point that Zupančič offers is crucial for understanding Freud’s answer to the question:

The fact that there are real causes of concern here [in Zeno’s obsession with health] (if concern it is) in no way contradicts the fantastic character of many of these representations of the end. What I mean by this is that the idea of even the most radical, definitive, irreversible End serves as a framework through which we contemplate (and interpret) our present reality; and it often serves as means of its ideological consolidation. It serves, first, to give us an idea of just how much is needed to change our present reality, that is, it provides a spectacular answer to the question: what has to end in order for our present troubles to end? (*Ibid.*, p. 8)

Zupančič’s formulation of “the end” as framework, perhaps of fantasy as such, insofar as fantasy is the kernel of desire’s

positivization of lack, allows us to posit now that what Freud describes as radically lost in the analysand's "internal conviction"—the cut of absolute knowledge—is nothing other than this framework, this idea of the final end. It is the internal conviction that there isn't a final end that analysis can reach—"analysis will be of no use and that nothing can be done to help her"—whereby this suffering of hers can be done with once and for all. So what is it an end of that reduces the terminality of analysis to a negligible factor in approaching the question of the end of analysis? Is it not the end of the one and final end? The only possible end to analysis, Freud tells us, inasmuch as the end is repetition, is the end of the one and final end; in which case the cut of absolute knowledge would have elucidated that the end has already taken place, and that it will continue to do so indefinitely. This is the only logic—Hegel's logic—able to make sense of "Analysis Terminable and Interminable": analysis may be considered as terminated when it has become interminable, when it has ended the idea of its final end.

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## Abstracts

### Suicide as a Political Factor: Edith Wharton, Tana French, Terblanche Delpont

*Slavoj Žižek*

The text takes its cue from the Hegelian negation of negation, read here as a failure of negation. Since the ultimate example of self-negation is suicide, the article considers three examples of a failed suicide from Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* (1911), Tana French's *Broken Harbour* (2013), and the one provided by Terblanche Delpont, who shocked a conference audience in Johannesburg by suggesting a symbolic suicide of white South Africans.

*Key words:* negation, suicide, Wharton, French, Delpont, Lacan, Afropessimism

### Scarred Tissues: Trauma, Desire, and Class Struggle in Tana French's *Dublin Murder Squad Series*

*Mirt Komel*

The article focuses on Tana French's *Dublin Murder Squad Series* through a Marxist and psychoanalytical perspective on the development of the detective novel genre. In the first part of the article a general theoretical framework is developed along with an overview of the development of the genre of detective novels, while the second and main part proceeds with detailed analyses of six novels of the series, namely: *In the Woods*, *The Likeness*, *Faithfull Place*, *Broken Harbour*, *The Secret Place*, and *The Trespasser*.

*Key words:* Tana French, Dublin Murder Squad Series, Marxism, theoretical psychoanalysis

## On Man's Right to Be Jealous, and Woman's Duty to Induce Her Own Demise

*Lidija Šumah*

Jealousy is most commonly discussed as a juridical or practical problem. However, with Kant, jealousy becomes a pragmatic solution. Against the backdrop of Kant's doctrine of matrimonial law and Foucault's take on Kant's *Anthropology*, the article discusses the mutual interconnectedness of (the) right (to be jealous) and (the) duty (to induce jealousy). The article shows that, read together, this duality provides us with Kant's idea of marriage.

*Key words:* Foucault, jealousy, Kant, Lacan, law, love, Lévi-Strauss, nothing, psychoanalysis, structural anthropology

## Aesthetics for Hypochondriacs: Kantian Illusions, Sex Phobia, and Self-Soothing Philosophy

*Eric Reinhart*

A self-soothing philosophy of the subject relied upon by a sexless hypochondriac has shaped not only modern epistemology and rationality but has also been interwoven with philosophies of history around which contemporary theorization of the political continues to be organized, or so goes the argument of this essay. In the wake of the co-constitutive advent of European Enlightenment, capitalism, and colonialism, 'experience' has been widely structured by epistemological systems formulated by European philosophers and the normative regimes of subjectivity, economy, and government with which they have been entwined. Immanuel Kant's transcendental aesthetic is central to this ideological formation within which contemporary being and politics remain largely subsumed. It is with the hope of unsettling this subsumption that I return to Kant's concept of time in *Critique of Pure Reason* and consider it alongside the management of his own self-diagnosed hypochondriasis, sexual desire, and fear of insanity. By bringing the philosopher's psychic needs and the work of philosophy into explicit interrelation, I attempt

to read the latent desire and its phobic inversions embedded in Kantian epistemology and to trace their persistent operation in subsequent Hegelian and Marxist theorizations of history and revolutionary form.

*Key words:* hypochondriasis, Kant, sex phobia, time and temporality, transcendental aesthetic

## “Who baptized Marx, Hegel or Kant?” On Alfred Sohn-Rethel and Beyond

*Mladen Dolar*

The paper investigates the ambition and the legacy of Alfred Sohn-Rethel, particularly through his notorious notion of real abstraction and his claim that Kantian transcendental subjectivity is the clue to the commodity form. The paper examines the weaknesses of Sohn-Rethel's treatment of Hegel and poses a broader question concerning the nature of Hegelian abstraction. In the history of Marxism, Hegel has served both as a model of the process of emancipation (albeit in idealist disguise) and as a model for circulation, growth, and accumulation of capital itself, engulfing all particularities in analogy with the Hegelian idea. The paper argues that the real abstraction of capital rather presents a perversion, an excrescence, a metastasis of the Hegelian abstraction, something that cannot be sublated by the logic of reason, a universality run amok, which escapes the logic of the Hegelian idea.

*Key words:* Sohn-Rethel, real abstraction, Kant, transcendental subjectivity, commodity form, Hegel, capital

## Freedom and Alienation; Or, Humanism of the Non-All

*Matthew Flisfeder*

Today, the popular concept of the Anthropocene, used to denote the *human* geological age, puts to question the centrality of human subjectivity as an ethical agency. Critical posthumanism, in this context, demands

the de-centring of the human subject, which in its apparently hubristic disregard for the non-human, seems to have set the world on fire. But what if the human subject is already *constitutively* de-centred and self-alienated? What purpose is served by aiming to de-centre the already de-centred subject? Beginning with Freudian and Marxist conceptions of a social humanity, this article ties together Hegelian and Lacanian conceptions of ontological incompleteness to argue that it is precisely in our constitutive alienation that we discover the freedom required for ethical action. In contrast to posthumanist and Marxist humanist conceptions of subjectivity, the article shows that it is precisely in the movement from the hysterical discourse to the analytical discourse, in the Lacanian sense, and with it the Hegelian conception of love, that we may discover a dialectical humanism capable of helping us to grapple with the material conditions that plague us today.

*Key words:* alienation, freedom, Hegel, humanism, Lacan, posthumanism

## Holding the Frame/Playing the Game: Transference as Political Potentiality

*William Mazzarella*

Starting from a rethinking of Freud's arguments about authoritarian leadership, this paper explores how the psychoanalytic concept of transference may help us better understand the authority of leaders and people's readiness to be addressed and animated by it. In particular, the paper brings together Freud on transference and Benjamin on mimesis to ask how the relationship between repetition, transformation, and creativity may be understood at collective political level.

*Key words:* transference, leadership, authority, mimesis, creativity

## What Does Art Work Through?

*Samo Tomšič*

The paper returns to Hegel's introductory lectures in aesthetics to discuss the way they address the problematic of labor in the field of art. The intricacies of artistic labor are already pinpointed in Hegel's distinction between "servile art" and "free art". The latter is supposedly untangled from every valorization, be it economic, epistemic, or aesthetic. However, Hegel does not simply postulate artistic practice as a realm of "untroubled" freedom. Rather, free art is the Hegelian name for a specific tension in artwork, which reflects in its double character. Hegel indicates this in a symptomatic wordplay: *Kunstwerk*, *Kunststück*. The paper then links this Hegelian take on artwork to the problematic of labor in critique of political economy and psychoanalysis.

*Key words:* art, labor, value, Hegel, Marx

## A Reading of "Analysis Terminable and Interminable"

*Mohamed Tal*

In "Analysis Terminable and Interminable" Freud describes how the experience of analysis crashes at the limit of castration—which he calls a bedrock—and with it all its previous conceptual coordinates. At that point, Freud doesn't provide a theory, but he provides evidence in the form of an ineffaceable scar or a last plea. What does Freud defend so dearly, to the point of giving to the failure of analysis—as a cure—the status of a terminus? I respond to this question by providing a close reading of "Analysis Terminable and Interminable." Specifically, I aim to show that what Freud indicates as a bottoming out of analysis in the castration complex is a subjective destitution.

*Key words:* end of analysis, castration complex, theory of mourning, drive, compulsion to repeat, *la passe*, subjective destitution



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