

# MASTER/S



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# Table of Contents

<i>Mladen Dolar</i> The Master Is Undead . . . . .	5
<i>Frances L. Restuccia</i> Burning Down the Ship from “the Inside Out”: Afropessi- mism’s Ethics of the Real . . . . .	27
<i>Nathan Brown</i> Alas, poor Yorick! ... The Being of Spirit is a Bone . . . . .	51
<i>Eric L. Santner</i> His Master’s Missing Voice . . . . .	75
<i>Bara Kolenc</i> Earthlings and Spacemen: Life-and-Death Struggle . . . . .	99
<i>Gregor Moder</i> Caesar’s Wounds: On the Absolute Master . . . . .	133
<i>Jure Simoniti</i> The Master, the Slave, and the Truth upon a Membrane... .	153
<i>Simon Hajdini</i> Dialectic’s Laughing Matter . . . . .	189
<i>Frauke Berndt</i> Undoing the Master/s: Generic Ambiguity in Karoline von Günderrode’s Ballad “Don Juan” . . . . .	215
<i>Henrik Jøker Bjerre</i> Master, Don’t You See That I Am Learning? . . . . .	247

<i>Peter Klepec</i>	
On Ridiculous Master .....	263
<i>Candela Potente</i>	
Hysterical Authority .....	299
<i>Goran Vranešević</i>	
Our Duty Towards Our Master: Hegel's Feelings on Feelings .....	315
<i>Yuval Kremitzer</i>	
Caught in the Web. Media and Authority, Between Old and New .....	337
<i>Slavoj Žižek</i>	
Whose Servant Is a Master? .....	385
<i>Jamila M. H. Mascot</i>	
Rage Against the Machine: Adorno, Hegel, and Absolute Mastery .....	397
Abstracts .....	421
Notes on Contributors .....	433

# The Master Is Undead

*Mladen Dolar*

Since our gathering takes place in Slovenia, and since this conference deals with the problem of the Master and largely involves psychoanalysis, let me start with an anecdote that links Freud and Slovenia in a rather spectacular way, and which can serve as a sort of parable, maybe the best entry point into our subject of the status of the Master.

Freud was our compatriot; he spent most of his life as a citizen of Austria-Hungary, which included present-day Slovenia. He traveled through Slovenia a number of times on the way to Italy, but on one occasion he stopped for his one and only attested visit to this country. In the beginning of April 1898, Freud spent his Easter holidays on a trip to the Adriatic coast with his brother Alexander, and on the way back they visited a couple of subterranean caves in the Slovene karst. Freud reports about the trip in a letter to Fliess dated April 14, 1898. I will leave aside Freud's remarkable and hilarious encounter with the Slovene guide, Freud's only documented encounter with a Slovene, and focus on his visit to the spectacular Škocjan caves, a major tourist attraction already then, and still bigger nowadays (it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site).

The caves of Škocjan [...] are a horrifying freak of nature – a subterranean river running through magnificent vaults, with waterfalls and stalactites and pitch darkness, and a slippery path guarded by iron railings. It was Tartarus itself. If Dante saw anything like this, he needed no great effort of the imagination for his Inferno. (Freud 1977, p. 253)

The tourist trip suddenly turns into something like a metaphysical journey, a descent into the abyss, a visit to Tartarus, the Acheron, the Dantean Inferno. (Dante allegedly traveled through this area, and there are about a dozen caves which claim that this is the very spot where he got inspiration for the *Inferno*.) The time of this visit was the period of gestation of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (published a year and a half later, in November 1899). Though it may be a bit far-fetched that Dante got his idea for the *Inferno* in those caves, it's perhaps less far-fetched that Freud got his inspiration for the epigraph to *The Interpretation of Dreams* on this occasion, an epigraph that inaugurated psychoanalysis, a line taken from Virgil, Dante's guide in the *Inferno*: "*Flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo*," "If I cannot bend the Higher powers, I will move the Infernal Regions" (*Aeneid* VII, 312; Freud 1977a, pp. 31, 769).<sup>1</sup>

So what did Freud find at the bottom of this Slovene Inferno? His account of it to Fliess continues like this: "The ruler of Vienna, Herr Dr. Carl Lueger, was with us in the cave, which after three-and-a-half hours spewed us all out into the light again" (*ibid.*, 253). This inconspicuous line contains big drama. At the bottom of the abyss, Freud met the *Herr von Wien*, as he says, namely the burgomaster of Vienna, one of the best known and most notorious political figures of the time in that part of the world. Their common descent into the Slovene hell was their only meeting; they would never come face to face in Vienna. They had to come to this *anderer Schauplatz*, this Slovene other scene, they had to take a vacation from the center of the *Zeitgeist* to meet on the outskirts of the Empire.

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<sup>1</sup> One should be reminded that the originally intended epigraph was to be taken from Milton's *Paradise Lost*: Let us consult "what reinforcement we may gain from hope, if not, what resolution from despair." (I, 189–191) This is appropriately put in the mouth of the devil. The alternative motto seems most apposite for our times.

Who was this person and why is this encounter in hell so emblematic? Dr. Carl Lueger (1844–1910) was the burgomaster of Vienna from 1897 until his death and the head of the Christian-Social Party. He was a very popular and populist leader, most notorious for his blaring anti-Semitism.<sup>2</sup> The best clue to his significance is to be found in Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*. Adolf Hitler spent his youthful years roaming the streets of Vienna (1907–1913), the same Vienna that produced all those great intellectual and artistic figures—the notorious cunning of reason must have been playing some sort of trick there. We find out in *Mein Kampf* that Hitler had one great role model at the time, his Ego-ideal: he found a great source of inspiration in that “greatest German burgomaster of all times,” “the real genius of a burgomaster,” “the great and genial reformer,” and particularly the great promoter of anti-Semitism. Lueger was the one who opened his eyes to the true nature of Jewry, he claimed. Hitler particularly praised Lueger’s ability to stir the feelings of the masses and address them beyond the treacherous parliamentary politicians and parties. It was from Lueger, he says, that he learned everything he needed to know about anti-Semitic propaganda.

Quite apart from this very drastic sequel in the history of fascism—this is retrospective knowledge, not available in 1898—Lueger’s anti-Semitism was already so notorious at the time that the first time he got elected, in 1895, Emperor Franz Josef himself refused to appoint him. Freud says that he celebrated this occasion by indulging in an extra cigar. The Emperor actually refused to appoint Lueger three more times, but he eventually had to give in to the “democratic will of the people” (after an intercession by the Pope). Why did the Emperor so adamantly refuse the nomination? No doubt he was led by conservative reasons; he wanted Vienna to be ruled by a decent aristocrat, not an upstart, a

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<sup>2</sup> For Lueger’s political and cultural background and impact, cf. Schorske 1980, pp. 119–139 and *passim*.

troublemaker and hate-monger who spurred divisions and catered to zealots. The Emperor instinctively opposed the kind of politics that abandoned all decency, manners, and decorum—everything that Hegel brought together under the heading of *Sittlichkeit*; he opposed a politics that contravened the unwritten laws that form the fabric of society and built its success on these contraventions. There is something highly emblematic in this constellation: Franz Joseph was arguably the last emperor, the last figure of the ruler as father, the Father of the nation, the epitome of stability. He ruled for sixty-seven years (surpassed in length only by Louis XIV and Elisabeth II), and Freud was born and spent three quarters of his life under this rule. In this dispute about investiture, so to speak, the last model of the old authority confronted virtually the first example of a new type of authority, quite literally the figure that would serve as a direct model of the catastrophic rise of a new type of leader. The Emperor did what he could to stop this ascent—a historic moment that can be regarded as the swan song of the old authority. It is furthermore significant that Lueger was regarded as *populist* already back then.<sup>3</sup> It is as if the advent of populism as a political concept and a political logic reaches directly from those times into ours, while also strangely framing the fate of psychoanalysis.

Freud's encounter with Lueger in the Slovene underground has, as I said, the value of a parable. In a dramatic echo of this encounter, Freud will have to flee Vienna in 1938 and finish his days in exile on account of Lueger's pupil recapturing Lueger's Vienna, almost exactly forty years after Freud met his master in the Slovene cave. And this can serve as an inaugural image of psychoanalysis and its political mission: confronting the problem

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<sup>3</sup> The term populism apparently first emerged with the rise of the People's Party in the US at the end of the nineteenth century, mostly with positive connotations (indeed, the members themselves used the term Populist Party), but the dark underside was very quick to follow.



of authority after the downfall of old authorities, in the historical moment of the rise of new authorities (*ersatz*, fake masters?)—a mission which directly translates and reaches into our present turmoil.

Here is my first point: there is widespread criticism of psychoanalysis going around (most conspicuously by Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus*, Foucault, a large part of feminism, etc.), saying that it ultimately presents the father as the clue to every authority—even though diluted and sublated into the mere signifier of the Name-of-the-Father, it is still a father, thus perpetuating the patriarchal tradition—and, in a larger scope, that it reduces the vagaries of human desire to a family drama, to Oedipus—even though this is the most dysfunctional family in human history. As opposed to this, I would argue that Freud discerned the function of the father and its vicissitudes precisely at the time when this traditional account historically lost its sway, at the point of the decline of traditional sovereignty. It's not about extolling and preserving the father, but about taking stock of the father function after its demise, as the afterlife of authority, not its reduction to a premodern figure. To be sure, Freud proposed the myth of the murder of the father, of the dead father acquiring more power than the living one, ruling as the Name of the Father, as the symbolic authority underpinning the authority of the symbolic, etc. But one could say (I am repeating the formula I used before, but this is a useful shorthand) that with the advent of modernity *it was the dead father himself who died*. He lost his symbolic impact, his name stopped being the foundation of authority, it was revealed as an imposture. These massive historic presuppositions made it possible for Freud to identify the father not as a source of authority, natural, religious or symbolic, but in the contingency of his function. It was not that any father or ruler could no longer measure up to his function, but rather that the symbolic function itself lost the power of measure. Lacan, with his knack for slogans, proposed an excellent catchphrase, which

works well in French: *père ou pire*, father or worse. The rule of the father, the paternal authority, the patriarchal order, etc., was bad enough, but we are heading for worse. This is why this accidental encounter can be seen as the return of the repressed, the return of what modernity seemed to have done away with, namely masters based on transcendence, in the natural order or in their assumed position of exception. The promise of modernity was that they would all be swept away in the name of reason and knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

But here is my second point: to say that this is the return of the repressed, the recurrence of the Master who should have met his demise with modernity, a Master not realizing that he was dead—all this is misleading, because what we are dealing with is not a regression to a constellation where sovereignty still rules supreme, as if the old Master figures could make their comeback with a vengeance. This is the fundamental enigma one is confronted with, and this is the subject of our conference: the new figures of masters may put on a charade or a travesty of sovereignty, but they are inherently products of modernity itself, perhaps precisely of what Lacan, in a shorthand, called the university discourse. Lacan's theory of the four discourses was proposed in 1969, more than half a century ago, in what now seems to be another world, in the immediate aftermath of May '68, in a historical moment which seemed to promise a possibility of radical change. This was the most elaborate, complex, and sophisticated theory of power, domination, and authority that psychoanalysis ever proposed; it set a standard. But what to make of it, how to abide by it half a century later, in the historic moment of closure, when all possibilities seem exhausted, worn out, and drained?

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<sup>4</sup> Eric Santner developed a compelling argument about this shift, an argument that underlies much of his oeuvre, but is particularly prominent in *The Royal Remains* (2011). Put briefly, once transcendence is reduced to immanence with modernity, what emerges is what he calls "the surplus of immanence," which makes its way as the seeming recurrence of the royal. The subtitle of his book is *The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty*.

The theory of the four discourses was premised on the break of modernity. It was only from the vantage point of that break that one could envisage the discourse of the Master as the clue, the underlying structure of premodern social ties, bringing them to a minimal common core, with the structural function of the master signifier, what Lacan called *le signifiant maître*,  $S_1$ , in the position of the agent. And as opposed to it, there was his proposal of the university discourse, which spelled out the major claims of modernity, placing knowledge,  $S_2$  in his algebra (I don't want to go into the technicalities), in the position of the agent, proposing a general framework that would accommodate the unprecedented rise of science and technology, and at the same time a political form, a social bond based on legitimation by competence, knowledge, expertise, a collective rationality that would prevail if allowed unrestricted public use.<sup>5</sup> But the critical point of this mechanism was that it doesn't entail that the master has vanished—in Lacan's scheme it is now rather pushed under, out of sight, concealed at the place of the hidden truth of the discourse of knowledge, its suppression conditioning the very advent of the universality of knowledge, lying low, waiting to come out, but not as a return of the past, rather as a future prospect. Master or worse, *ou pire*, and it's the travesty that makes it worse. What appears now is rather a fake, a counterfeit master—should one say the Master and its double? But the double in psychoanalysis is never a mere copy; it possesses an eerie quality that exceeds the alleged original, a surplus, and one can be reminded of the long history of doubles which proliferated precisely at the break of modernity.

The first one who had to confront this new constellation, the quasi-return of a quasi-master, was actually Marx in his *Eighteenth*

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<sup>5</sup> If one wants a contemporary version of this, there is Steven Pinker's (2018) bestseller *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress*. It promotes something like capitalism "within the bounds of reason alone," to use Kantian parlance, with little concern for the reemergence of the Master and new forms of domination.

*Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (2019). And he gave us, already with the opening salvo, a simple canonical formula that can serve as a general guideline: first as tragedy, then as farce. Instead of Napoleon, there is the pitiful figure of his nephew, a caricature deserving of scorn and derision. But the problem is that this figure cannot be cast aside as an oddity or an accident; it must be treated as a symptom, and this is how Marx treated it only a few months after its emergence (indeed, Lacan hailed Marx, not Freud, as the inventor of the symptom). It is the symptom of the then ascending liberalism, which was established as a political concept precisely in that period, at the same time as Bonapartism, which figures as its double in disguise, its farcical other face. This is not a return of the Master, but a farce, and it is through this farce that the new bourgeois order could survive, consolidate, and flourish. It was under the auspices of the farce and caricature that the expansion of industrialization and modernization could occur, mixed with plunder and arbitrary caprice. And quite tellingly, there was an inherent connection between this fake master and the lumpenproletariat, the outcasts of all social classes, as Marx pointed out, a structural connection one can pursue to this day. The figure of Louis Bonaparte may seem to be as far removed as possible from the university discourse (based on knowledge, reason, science, expertise), but it is this farce that brought out its presuppositions and functioned as its extension. It is therefore no coincidence that Bonapartism later served as a model for analyses of fascism, and continues to be sporadically evoked today as a tool for understanding the new populisms. Still, although the problem is, in a nutshell, structurally the same, one should not make haste with such parallels: first, because the figure of the farcical master has drastically evolved since then (the rise of media, and then of social media, has added a staggering dimension to it and imposed a different logic); second, because the nature of the global spread of capitalism and its antagonisms, which this apparent regression enables and perpetuates, is of a different order of quality and

magnitude; and third, because the nature of repression has taken a very different form: the hidden underside seems to be publicly displayed in full view, transgressions of the written and unwritten laws are manifest, while this coincides not with the lifting of repression but brings about its heightening and reinforcement.<sup>6</sup> For my present purpose, it suffices to point out that Marx was the first to confront this problem in one of his most brilliant political texts, which remains a point of reference. And as is true of all subsequent quasi-regressions, Bonapartism came precisely as a response to the failed revolution of 1848, with so many failed revolutions to follow. It was the first occurrence of what would become a rule, the rule of the unruly, the recurrence of the excess over the rule.<sup>7</sup>

Freud's encounter with Lueger roughly coincided with an artistic production that took place in another part of Europe, namely with Alfred Jarry's *Ubu roi, King Ubu* (or *Ubu the King* or *Ubu Rex*),<sup>8</sup> produced in December 1896 in Paris. "The production's single public performance baffled and offended audiences with its unruliness and obscenity," says our wiki-oracle. Indeed, this seems to have been the literal staging of our problem, the farce of sovereignty subtly detected by a young man of twenty-three,

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<sup>6</sup> One of the most elucidating papers on this is Yuval Kremnitzer's "The Emperor's New Nudity: The Media, the Masses and the Unwritten Law." I draw on the English manuscript; it has so far been published only in Hebrew and in the Slovene translation (Kremnitzer 2020), soon to appear as a book with The MIT Press.

<sup>7</sup> For both brief comments on Marx and on Foucault, I am indebted to the insights of Frank Ruda's paper on grotesque sovereignty (2021), a manuscript not yet published in English. Ruda develops both lines of argument systematically and pursues them with vigor.

<sup>8</sup> Ubu, Trump—what's in a name? They both give the impression of being onomatopoeic expressions, but if onomatopoeia aims at imitating natural sounds, what is this the imitation of? What do these names evoke? I can fondly recall that the excellent production of *King Ubu* in the Slovene National Theatre in 2016 marked precisely the beginning of the Trump era (with the unforgettable late Jernej Šugman as Ubu), establishing a short circuit between the two.

subtly precisely in its utter lack of any subtlety, giving us a blunt spectacle of arrogance, stupidity, shamelessness, egotism, greed, cruelty, vulgarity, and debauchery.<sup>9</sup> Sovereignty in its undiluted form, with the implication that this seemingly premodern excess of authority (authority being excessive by its very nature) may well be the hidden secret of the deceptive modern ways of power.

I am mentioning this because, maybe surprisingly, Foucault, in his lectures at the Collège de France in 1975 (titled *Abnormal*), briefly touched upon this problem under the label of “grotesque sovereignty” and proposed Ubu as a model.

I am calling ‘grotesque’ the fact that, by virtue of their status, a discourse or an individual can have effects of power that their intrinsic qualities should disqualify them from having. The grotesque, or, if you prefer, the ‘Ubu-esque’, is not just a term of abuse or an insulting epithet [...]. Ubu-esque terror, grotesque sovereignty, or, in starker terms, the maximization of effects of power on the basis of the disqualification of the one who produces them. I do not think this is an accident or mechanical failure in the history of power. [...] I do not think that explicitly showing power to be abject, despicable, Ubu-esque or simply ridiculous is a way of limiting its effects and of magically dethroning the person to whom one gives the crown. Rather, it seems to me to be a way of giving a striking form of expression to the unavailability, the inevitability of power, which can function in its full rigor and at the extreme point of its rationality even when in the hands of someone who is effectively discredited. (Foucault 2003, pp. 11–13)

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<sup>9</sup> I can add that the same Alfred Jarry also proposed a new discipline, which he called ‘pataphysics (note the apostrophe!); whereas metaphysics deals with the rule and the universal, the domain of ‘pataphysics is the exception, the unruly, the glitch, the abnormal. The ‘Pataphysical College (founded in 1948 in Jarry’s spirit) had many illustrious members, such as Marcel Duchamp, Jean Genet, Eugène Ionesco, Raymond Queneau, Boris Vian, Man Ray, Italo Calvino, the Marx Brothers, Jean Baudrillard, etc. For a curious connection between Jarry and Lacan, cf. Paul Audi, *Le théorème du Surmâle: Lacan selon Jarry* (Lagrasse: Verdier 2011).

For Foucault, grotesque sovereignty is the inherent and constant possibility of all sovereignty. It is sovereignty brought to its pure form, a manifestation of the fact that all sovereignty is based on the grotesque, on the theatrical, and thus ultimately groundless—the grotesque reveals its *ex nihilo*, the pure and crude display and performance of power as such. The grotesque sovereign, in his obtuseness and obscenity, displays the nature of power as such (and Foucault uses the terms “clown” and “buffoon,” which are in vogue with the current grotesque figures). Every sovereign is ultimately an Ubu in disguise, but when the disguise is taken away, this paradoxically doesn’t undo but reinforces his position; it doesn’t disqualify him. Even if this grotesque nature is brought to light for all to see, even if it is deliberately displayed, this has no consequences. I mentioned the theory of the four discourses, and Foucault proposes a fifth one in passing: “Ubu’s discourse,” *le discours d’Ubu* (ibid., p. 14). If Lacan, too, famously suggested a fifth discourse—just once, though, like a *hapax legomenon* not to be pursued further—namely the discourse of capitalism, then this can be taken as Foucault’s complementary addition, its abstruse double, forming an unexpected pattern: calculation, profit, technological progress, etc., on the one hand, and the vulgar, the obscene, and the grotesque, on the other. Maybe one could propose “Adam Smith *avec* Ubu.”

This is a lucid and maybe unexpected insight, but I think there are two problems with it. First, for Foucault the grotesque appears as the naked and raw truth of sovereign power manifesting itself, something always potentially present and occasionally coming out. But is there, can there be a bare truth of power, power fully exposed, deployed undiluted, in its sheer inevitability and absurdity? This is the paradox I hinted at before: the more everything is exposed, the bigger the deception; the more all inhibitions are lifted in this display, the bigger the repression. Ultimately, there is no power without obfuscation, no naked truth of power, since nudity can function as the ultimate and best disguise. And second,

Foucault, so keen on historicity and the careful scrutiny of historical breaks, analyzing them with subtlety and meticulous precision, is here acting in a surprisingly abrupt ahistorical manner. The grotesque is presented as a transhistorical category, stretching from Nero (according to Foucault, the first major instance of grotesque sovereignty) via Shakespeare's tyrants to Mussolini, all of whom serve equally well as examples, indiscriminately of the old sovereign power and the new biopolitical one. But our problem is the way in which the university discourse of modernity inherently produces these figures of grotesque sovereignty, as symptoms of its internal tension, manifesting how  $S_2$  cannot measure up to its position of agent—Ubu's discourse, with all its crass ignorance and stupidity, is an offspring of the university discourse of knowledge, its disavowed bastard.

But tellingly, Foucault points to another problem, another symptom, namely that the dimension of the grotesque doesn't concern only the sovereign (or the fake sovereign) but also the rule of bureaucracy—bureaucracy precisely as the monstrous extension and expansion of  $S_2$ , knowledge run amok. It's not only the grotesque master but also the apparatus which should run the modern state that can go berserk. This was, by the way, Hegel's wager, his strategy in dealing with the relation between the master and knowledge: to keep the master, but to reduce him to a minimum, to a mere signature, to dotting the i's, while the administration is supposed to run the state with its know-how. Yet the moment the master is removed, knowledge itself shows a propensity to run wild on its own. It turns out that knowledge, sustained by its own resources, may not be quite the epitome of rationality proposed by the Enlightenment.

Since the nineteenth century, an essential feature of big Western bureaucracies has been that the administrative machine, with its unavoidable effects of power, works by using the mediocre, useless, imbecilic, superficial, ridiculous, worn-out, poor, and powerless



functionary. The administrative grotesque has not been merely that kind of visionary perception of administration that we find in Balzac, Dostoyevsky, or Kafka. The administrative grotesque is a real possibility for the bureaucracy. Ubu the 'pen pusher' is a functional component of modern administration. (Ibid., p. 12)

So here we have it: given Lacan's structural determinants of  $S_1$  (the master signifier) and  $S_2$  (the chain of knowledge), we have, on the one hand, the Master and his double, the coming out of the master in grotesque sovereignty, and then  $S_2$  and its double, knowledge run amok: it's the redoubling, the travesty, that will get us in the end. First Ubu as the sovereign, then Ubu as the administrator, the public servant, the pen pusher. Ubu as the grotesque version of  $S_1$  mirrored by the grotesque version of  $S_2$ . In Lacan there is a purely signifying logic which produces the necessary doubling of  $S_1$ - $S_2$ , the elementary signifying dyad, but then there is the redoubling of this redoubling, where it appears as though the phantom-like double adopts the double nature of the signifier. It's the redoubling—the fake, the pastiche, the caricature—that may prove fatal.

After the Master and his double, and knowledge and its double, let's consider the third in the line of structural elements that form the building blocks of the theory of the four discourses: jouissance and its double. Jouissance, enjoyment, is what comes with surplus—arguably all jouissance is surplus jouissance. It is implied by, produced by the signifying logic, yet heterogeneous to it, seemingly a surplus over it. It was one of Lacan's great feats to connect the question of (surplus) enjoyment to the problem of Marx's surplus value, which provides an entry point into his theory of capitalism. In one of the most important pronouncements in the seminar on the four discourses (Seminar XVII, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan 2007), Lacan maintained that what defined capitalism, the invention of a new economic order, was that at some point (initially in the sixteenth century)

“something changed in the master’s discourse at a certain point in history [...] the important point is that on a certain day surplus jouissance [*le plus-de-jouir*] became calculable, could be counted [*se comptabilise*], totalized. This is where what is called the accumulation of capital begins” (ibid., p. 177; Lacan 1991, p. 207).

The statement is staggering, for it encompasses the advent of capitalism, Marx’s theory of surplus value, and Lacan’s take on the concomitant surplus jouissance, all in one go. It goes very far (as far as Lacan would ever go, I guess) in spelling out a key feature of capitalism<sup>10</sup> by this far-reaching proposal: capitalism is obviously about the production and accumulation of surplus value, this is its (Marxian) definition, and Lacan coined the psychoanalytic notion of *plus-de-jouir* (with all its ambiguity in French) based on Marx’s model. Now, if surplus value can be counted, calculated, accumulated, turned into profit, this has a parallel (homology, says Lacan) in surplus jouissance; the economy extends to the economy of jouissance, or the economy of jouissance subtends economy, so the surplus jouissance also becomes calculable. The contention is perplexing and paradoxical, because the very definition of jouissance is that it always comes in excess, that it derails, that it cannot be contained in the domain of the pleasure principle, that it is non-economical by its very nature, that it’s always out of place and out of joint, transgressive, traumatic, repetitive, etc. So how can it be counted, *comptabiliser*, says Lacan? If we are to follow this suggestion, then capitalism succeeded in an incredible feat. It managed to tame the untamable beast, to submit it to counting and measure, to count the uncountable, to measure the

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<sup>10</sup> To be sure, there is the famous attempt by Lacan, in 1972 (cf. Lacan 1978), to propose the fifth kind of discourse, precisely the capitalist discourse (which features  $\$$  and  $S_2$  on the upper level, and  $S_1$  and  $a$  on the lower), but it is a *hapax legomenon*, a one-time occurrence, and although many people tried to do something interesting with it, I rather believe that Lacan tried this out, saw that it doesn’t quite work, and abandoned it. (I will let myself be persuaded if a convincing reading is presented.)

immeasurable, to economize the non-economical, to bring the excess to the boundaries of the pleasure principle. But did it really succeed? The problem is that this is not quite the taming that would go in one direction alone; it also produces a reverse effect in that capitalism is inherently driven by excess. It was never to be contained within the pleasure principle (it was always beyond), it never relied on hedonism (despite appearances in consumerist society, etc.). Making *jouissance* countable also turned the count into something excessive, always driven by surplus, “irrational,” unlimited. It infinitized the count. Putting *jouissance* in the service of economic accumulation (which seemed to contradict its nature) also “contaminated” the economic realm itself, into which it was inscribed. Its excess could be capitalized, but capital itself became permanently driven by this excess.<sup>11</sup> Enjoyment is homogenized, so to speak, through subsumption to accumulation, but this is exactly what derails the supposed homogenization. This, then, would be the great achievement of capitalism: what should derail the whole through the excess is internalized as its inner condition and fuel. Hence, any crisis of the unmanageable surplus becomes the generator of an ongoing drive; any radical or even revolutionary innovation or subversion can begin to serve as the fresh blood of this drive. Hence the futile expectation of the last century and a half that some final crisis would now emerge, the moment of the finally manifested truth. Instead, what we witnessed was capitalism’s capacity to integrate all the subversive gestures and movements that seemed to radically oppose it, including (and especially) May ’68 (the historic moment when Lacan proposed this theory).

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<sup>11</sup> Lacan places this divide within the master’s discourse (“something changed in the master’s discourse”), well before the later advent of modernity and the university discourse. Did one have to “invent” the discourse of the university in order for this excessive mechanism to function properly? The agency of  $S_2$  in the place of  $S_1$ , replacing and repressing the traditional master?

Now, *jouissance* and its double—does this mean that we have two kinds of *jouissance*, the authentic and the fake one, *jouissance* that can be functionalized and counted, and *jouissance* that cannot be? The one serving the capitalist economy, the other in excess over it? Or is it rather that this apparent split is itself already inscribed in the accumulation driven by surplus *jouissance*, so that everything that resists it is already part and parcel of its drivenness?

Here is how Lacan himself points very precisely to this (seeming?) split:

What Marx denounces in surplus value is the spoliation of *jouissance*. And yet, this surplus value is a memorial to surplus *jouissance*, its equivalent of surplus *jouissance*. ‘Consumer society’ derives its meaning from the fact that what makes it the ‘element’, in inverted commas, described as human is made the homogeneous equivalent of whatever surplus *jouissance* is produced by our industry – an imitation surplus *jouissance*, in a word. Moreover, that can catch on. One can do a semblance of surplus *jouissance* – it draws quite a crowd. (Lacan 2007, p. 81)

Lacan uses the expression *un plus-de-jouir en toc* (Lacan 1991, p. 93), which indeed means imitation. The dictionary also gives être *du toc*, “to be fake,” and “sham” for *toc*. So in another most important pronouncement, we have it all spelled out—the imitation of *jouissance*, a fake *jouissance*, a semblance of *jouissance*, the homogeneous equivalent. Briefly, *jouissance* and its double. But—and this is the problem—this doesn’t mean that there is some authentic *jouissance*, of which this would be a mere imitation, a *jouissance* which would be lost with the consumerist fake. The mirage of the loss of proper *jouissance* comes in the same package and rather sustains the *toc*; the authentic/fake split figures as an internal split of the same process, the countability and homogenization of the surplus turning surplus into the key asset of its opposite, capitalizing on the very impossibility to make it countable and homogeneous (cf. Zupančič 2006).

Does this logic have a limit, is there a way of getting out of it? I'm afraid it does, I'm afraid there is, but not quite the way we would wish for. The limit may well be something that is increasingly being manifested, in full view, something that perhaps characterizes our present moment. The question can be formulated like this: is there an excess over the excess? A surplus over the surplus? Are we facing an over-accumulation of the side-product of this integration of the excess into the profit-making machinery, to the point that it can no longer be absorbed? Perhaps something shifted in the half-century that separates us from that moment, a period marked by the steep rise of neoliberalism (to make it quick), and perhaps a process is underway that will gradually (or even suddenly?) make this infinite capacity for integration impossible. Something happened to the surplus *jouissance* and its accumulation, so that the surplus of the surplus can no longer be recuperated and threatens to shatter or paralyze the machinery and its framework. It is as if crises and excesses no longer function as a way of recuperation and renewal, but rather threaten with the collapse of the social bond. Maybe the symptomatic economy of surplus enjoyment in the so-called consumerist society Lacan had in mind no longer defines our habitus; we may have reached a different stage of dealing with (the surplus over) the surplus, and a far more dangerous one.

For the present purposes, we can propose a very rough empirical observation. The long decades of neoliberalism have produced an affective surplus that manifests itself in two seemingly opposite reactions: endless fatigue and accumulated rage. Fatigue, tiredness, exhaustion,<sup>12</sup> burnout, depression — not as a widespread psychological condition, but as a socially necessary form of affect, not an individual shortcoming. We are witnessing an extension,

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<sup>12</sup> There is a difference between tiredness and exhaustion. If one is tired, one cannot realize various possibilities, but exhaustion means that the possibilities themselves have been exhausted — no amount of rest would remedy this.

exacerbation, and generalization of depression, which has reached pandemic global proportions in the last thirty or forty years, well before Covid, and the spectacular rise of which coincides and intersects, fatally, with the rise of neoliberalism, presenting its affective counterpart. On the other hand, there is an excess of rage, anger, wrath, fury, of seeking an outlet, which is constantly lying low and flaring up in unexpected manifestations of inarticulate violence. There is something like a “free-floating” excess that can be quickly channeled and directed at various surrogate targets.

The affective surplus takes two seemingly opposed forms, an “active” and a “passive” one, but they are ultimately two sides of the same coin. In short, depression can be seen as rage that has been arrested and stuck in the throat, turned inward, so that it immobilizes, paralyzes, and blocks its bearer. The oscillation between the two is structural, and there seems to be no dialectical mediation between the two extremes. This duality largely defined the Covid moment in recent years, though the process began much earlier, with Covid acting only as a magnifying glass, condensing what had accumulated over the decades.

The syndrome of “depression-rage” also directly concerns the fate of psychoanalysis in the last half-century. This massive twin pathology seems to have largely overshadowed the basic pathological structures pinned down by psychoanalysis (the trinity neurosis-psychosis-perversion), as well as their more recent transformations and extensions (the pathological narcissist, the borderline, “universalized foreclosure,” universalized perversion, etc.). It is not that these are new clinical entities (depression has a venerable, long history under the guise of melancholia, acedia, etc.), but rather that there is a sheer quantity of accumulated social affect that goes far beyond the boundaries of psychoanalysis as a clinical practice. One reason that psychoanalysis has been marginalized in recent decades is connected to the stunning rise of the pharmaceutical industry, which offers a wide range of chemical means for these massive and acute afflictions (amassing

equally massive profits), while psychoanalysis is expensive, time-consuming, and socially limited. The world has been flooded with antidepressants and anesthetics in one form or another, with pills that, on the one hand, try to wake us up and stimulate us, and on the other, to calm us down and anaesthetize us, to the point that there is hardly an individual left in developed societies who is exempt from this onslaught. The zero form of subjectivity is the anaesthetized and stimulated individual, to the extent that an overall diagnosis of our age can be designated as narcocapitalism (cf. Sutter 2018).<sup>13</sup>

These may be somewhat naïve empirical observations about the general nature of affect affecting our time, but what I am trying to single out as the surplus over the (usual) surplus is directly related to our topic of the new type of master. The rise of populism in the past few decades has been largely conditioned by this dual affect, and populism is precisely a way to use it, channel it, exploit it, capitalize on it—it is the very stuff that provides it with fuel. If the pharma industry largely serves pacification, populism thrives on excitation. It systematically capitalizes on the production of rage, its spread and intensification. The new type of fake masters can be seen as a direct social expression of this surplus over the surplus, its exploitation and expansion. The rage is directed at easily interchangeable targets, those who are allegedly stealing our enjoyment (immigrants are always at hand, Islam, China, “cultural Marxism,” political correctness, LGBTIQ+, the elites,

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<sup>13</sup> But what is the pharma industry other than a further implementation of science, with its supposed capacity to affect the psychical by direct chemical and biological means? After all, it can perversely appeal to the old Enlightenment materialist premise that the psyche (“spirit”) is subject to material causality, like everything else, and that it can be influenced in material ways, accounted for by neuroscience, etc. It is as if one side of the Enlightenment, producing anesthetic effects, stands against the other heir of the Enlightenment, which demands radical awakening. In any case, we have not left the university discourse—its new functioning is also defined by the way in which science takes care to pacify the effects produced by this discourse itself.

the deep state, all haphazardly mixed together to meet the needs of the moment), combined with the absence of a political program (Trump's MAGA is the most conspicuous model). The function of a populist leader is ultimately to use this excitation and rage to reinforce precisely the structure that produced the surplus over the surplus, thus offering the prospect of a self-propelling vortex. Leftist and liberal politics is increasingly not only having to compete with it; rather, populism has begun to define the very backdrop against which political struggles are fought. What looks like populist excess is in fact a product of the contradictions of the apparently normal course itself, drastically exacerbated in the fifty years that separate us from Lacan's conceptual proposal. The surplus of surplus spills over into something one could call the crisis of crisis, for the disintegration of the social bond that increasingly looms is something quite different from crisis as a way for capitalism to recuperate the excess and integrate it back into its movement. The paradox is that the grotesque, the double, and the fake have to sustain the structure of what is ultimately still the rule of the university discourse. (Is this another instance of the Hegelian infinite judgment?)

Lacan practically never undertook the risky business of predicting the future, except, perhaps astonishingly, with his predictions of the rise of new racisms and increased segregation. As early as 1967, he claimed: "Our future of common markets will be counterbalanced by the increasingly crude expansion of the processes of segregation" (Lacan 2001, p. 257). He related this to "the consequences of the way that science rearranges social groupings, and in particular the universalization it introduces" (*ibid.*).<sup>14</sup> He would return to this proposition in the famous television interview in 1973 (*ibid.*, p. 534) and several other times. In 1967 there was still no talk of the four discourses, but the

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. also p. 588, where he qualifies Nazism as "a reactive precursor" of the segregation to come.



general point is clear: the university discourse is the agent of the implementation of science, of the universalization it entails, and at the same time of common markets and globalization, but the more these twin processes progress, the more the tension will intensify, the more the problem of surplus enjoyment will come to the fore, the bigger the prospect of segregation. The more the problem of the theft of enjoyment and of the others who enjoy at our expense will spread, the more globalization will erect ever new walls against the segregated. Lacan envisaged segregation as the structural consequence of the university discourse. His predictions are, to be sure, very general, but we can see that they have unfortunately turned out to be true. We have not got out of what he termed the university discourse half a century ago, but have been subjected to its consequences in very drastic forms. With the new figures of fake masters—where the grotesque and the caricature rule supreme, where lifting the mask functions as the best mask—the excess over the excess, or the surplus of surplus, entails the repression of repression. Although populist excesses may look like the lifting of repression, they occur under the tutelage of the new master, whose function is to ensure that they inflexibly turn into new forms of repression, thus producing more surplus of surplus.

The paradox is that now that with the advent of internet and new social media—another huge step in universalization—there is more communication than there has ever been in human history, we may well be facing the prospect of the disintegration of the basic social bond.

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# Burning Down the Ship from “the Inside Out”: Afropessimism’s Ethics of the Real

*Frances L. Restuccia*

“The prognosis is in the hands of those who are prepared to shake the worm-eaten foundation of the edifice.”

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

*Afropessimism* begins with Frank Wilderson’s “psychotic episode,” triggered by the horrific failure of (what I am calling) his late mirror-stage experience at U.C. Berkeley. When Wilderson peers into the mirror, rather than discovering the typical *imago*, he encounters a “nightmare.” Facing a nightmare, rather than forming an ego, Blacks (the idea is) are precluded from being “*Human subjects*,” becoming “*instead structurally inert props*” useful for “*the execution of White and non-Black fantasies and sadomasochistic pleasures*” (Wilderson 2020, p. 15). Having experienced disaster in the Imaginary—insofar as what appears in the white mirror (a macabre Black as the White’s Other) in turn determines what appears in the black mirror—Blacks are relegated to the nightmare of the Real. In *Lacan Noir*, David Marriott reinforces this notion of a missed black Imaginary experience: “In order for there to be an imaginary,” he pointedly reminds us, “it is necessary for there to be an ego as the retroactive effect of disunity” (Marriott 2021, p. 20). Instead, Blacks and this nightmarish Real coalesce, starting *when Whites look in the mirror* and perceive their “Other” as a (black) “non ego, i.e., the unidentifiable, the unassimilable” (Fanon 1952, p. 139).

Yet, unfortunately, as Fanon writes, Blacks cannot benefit from this banishment into “hell.” There’s no *kenosis*, leading to resurrection, here. Rather, “There is a zone of non-being, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an incline stripped bare of every essential from which a genuine new departure can emerge.” “At least,” Fanon asserts, “in most cases, the black man cannot take advantage of this descent into a veritable hell” (Fanon 1952, p. xii). Distinguishing loss (which necessarily “indicates a prior plenitude” [Wilderson 2020, p. 248]) from absence, Wilderson explains that Blacks are deprived of the gift of loss that would enable desiring subjectivity: “There’s no place [...] for what the black man wants, or for a black unconscious driven by its own desire and aggression” (p. 47). Wilderson laments the inability of Blacks to *experience* the Real, to reap its benefits, insofar as they *embody* it. David Marriott, again in *Lacan Noir*, helpfully explains this issue in more technical Lacanian parlance: “While the (white) cogito knows what is ‘outside’, what is ‘different’, what is ‘not itself’,” *ab-sens*—which Marriott conceives as tantamount to blackness—“denies all that it is not for it is the not of the all” (Marriott 2021, p. 41). Lacan, charges Marriott, “opposes a sovereign vision of the world to that of the slave’s”: the Master “grasps its identity in division, and as a division” (p. 43), whereas the Slave is that from which the former divides itself. Marriott therefore discovers the truth of such mastery in the slave.<sup>1</sup>

And there is a subsequent bonus, for the Master, involved here: Wilderson links such black “social death” with white *jouissance*. Anti-black violence, “the violence of social death” is necessary for “White people and their junior partners” to “know they’re alive” (Wilderson 2020, p. 94). The “*spectacle* of Black death is essential to the mental health of the world” (p. 225).

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<sup>1</sup> An assertion Marriott made during a (Zoom) presentation he gave, in the spring of 2022, for my “Psychoanalytic Practices” seminar at Harvard’s Mahindra Humanities Center.

Blacks serve as both the lack (the “earlier lack [...] situated at the advent of the living being” — which is Real insofar as “the living being [...] has fallen under the blow of individual death” [Lacan 1998, p. 205]) as well as plenitude or “lack of lack” (the “lack of the lack,” Lacan also paradoxically theorizes, “makes the real” [ix]), with its concomitant *jouissance*, which Whites accrue via racial violence. (Lacan theorizes something similar in *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, about the master and slave, where he locates in Aristotle his sense that the master receives surplus *jouissance* from the slave’s work and borrows from Hegel the idea that the master “finds its truth in the work of the other [...] who only knows himself through having lost [the] very body he supports himself with, because he wanted to retain it for its access to *jouissance* — in other words, the slave” [Lacan 1991, p. 89]. In “Hegel as the Other Side of Psychoanalysis,” Mladen Dolar elaborates: “the slave pays the master with surplus enjoyment,” and this “spoliation of the slave’s enjoyment by the master” is “what makes the master’s discourse go round” [Dolar 2006, p. 133].) Providing the wellspring of *jouissance* for all non-Blacks, Blacks are in no position to secure a Human status — which is (actually), it turns out, not worth aspiring to, as Wilderson declares: for “the Human is unethical” (Wilderson 2020, p. 333).

Wilderson’s denunciation of the Human as “unethical” prompts us again to invoke Lacan who famously defines ethics, in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, as not “giving ground relative to one’s desire” (Lacan 1997, p. 321). What are we to think, then, of an agent who eradicates the very possibility of desiring or being ethical for another? It seems that Blacks must generate desire a different way, for which alienation and separation, the well-trodden paths of Human subjectivity, are inapplicable. And so Wilderson urges an embrace of disorder, incoherence, dancing the dance of social death that Blacks are, or rather have been compelled to be, to generate what he calls “a revolutionary desire” (Wilderson 2020, p. 250).

## 1. *Revenge of the White's Green Eye*

Fanon establishes in *Black Skin, White Masks* that “only a psychoanalytic interpretation of the black problem can reveal the affective disorders responsible for [a] network of complexes” (Fanon 1952, p. xiv); “the alienation of the black man is not an individual question” (p. xv). A “massive psycho-existential complex” has taken over, and Fanon sets out “to destroy it” (p. xvi). Prefiguring Wilderson’s attack on the concept of the “Human,” Fanon identifies “the problem” in terms of whiteness: speaking of the black Antillean, he explains, “the whiter he gets [...] the closer he comes to becoming a true human being” (p. 2). Rather than accept the “choice” between black skin and a white mask, Fanon presents a better, more widespread solution, one that Wilderson too advocates: “restructuring the world” (p. 63)—by reconfiguring its racist coordinates, psychoanalytically and materially. (The inferiority complex Fanon examines must be “ascribed to a double process: First, economic. Then, internalization or rather epidermalization of this inferiority” [pp. xiv-xv].) Blacks must be released from their wish to be white—a desperate response catalyzed by a sense of inferiority produced by the paralyzing so-called “white gaze” (p. 90).

Fanon provides theoretical background for the (here mistakenly invoked concept) “white gaze” (explaining what propels it) in laying the groundwork for one of Slavoj Žižek’s key points about racism among whites—that ostensibly something valuable, a source of *jouissance*, has been stolen from them. Fanon sarcastically confesses, “as a magician I stole from the white man a ‘certain world,’ lost to him and his kind [...] above the objective world of plantations and banana and rubber trees, I had subtly established the real world. [...] Between the world and me there was a relation of coexistence. I had rediscovered the primordial One. [...] Obviously, I must have a secret” (Fanon 1952, p. 107). In his *Refugees, Terror and Other Troubles with the Neighbors*, Žižek explains the supposed theft: “the other’s *jouissance* is

insupportable for us because (and insofar as) we cannot find a proper way to relate to our own *jouissance*.” And so, “to resolve this deadlock [...] the subject projects the core of its *jouissance* onto an Other, attributing to this Other full access to a consistent *jouissance*. Such a constellation cannot but give rise to jealousy: in jealousy, the subject creates or imagines a paradise (a utopia of full *jouissance*) from which he is excluded” (Žižek 2016, p. 83). Consequently, the White feels justified in exacting racist revenge for what is imagined to be a theft: “the ‘other’ wants to steal our enjoyment (by ruining our ‘way of life’) and/or it has access to some secret, perverse enjoyment” (Žižek 1991, p. 165). Racist revenge thus kicks in, assuming the form of objectifying the Black via what Fanon calls (again) “the white gaze”—bringing *jouissance* back to the White through Black social death, according to Wilderson. What is to be done?

Fanon turns to Sartre for assistance by considering the existentialist philosopher’s thoughts on negritude (simply put, the assumption of “a natural solidarity of all black people—in the Caribbean and in Africa” [Fanon 1952, p. viii], no doubt a European fantasy). In *Black Orpheus*, however, Sartre conceives negritude as merely a “weak stage of a dialectical progression,” “a moment of negativity” that paves “the way for a synthesis or the realization of the human society without race.” Profoundly disappointed by this reduction, Fanon complains that his former, supposedly Hegelian friend misses that “consciousness needs to get lost in the night of the absolute, the only condition for attaining self-consciousness” (p. 112). In a “paroxysm of experience and rage,” Fanon struggles to tell Sartre that his Negritude “reaches deep down into the red flesh of the soil” (p. 116) and comes to realize his need to lose himself “totally in negritude” (pp. 113-14), whose meaning metamorphoses from a positive black social identity to a supreme form of Negativity/Nothingness: “a feeling of not existing” (p. 118). Preparing the way for Wilderson’s dance of social death, Fanon’s subsequent move is to vanish within his

“negritude”—by facing “the ashes, the segregation, the repression, the rapes, the discrimination, and the boycotts. We need to touch with our finger all the wounds” (pp. 163-64). For this disappearance, he relies on Césaire, who dives down, who agrees “to see what was happening at the very bottom” so that “he can come back up” (p. 172). In his *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*, Césaire had wanted to drown himself in “the great black hole” but, upon immersing himself in it, now wants “to fish the night’s malevolent tongue in its immobile revolution” (p. 173). Pushed to the brink of self-destruction, the Black jumps into “the ‘black hole’” from which gushes “forth ‘the great black scream with such force that it will shake the foundations of the world’” (p. 175). Nothing less than such a plunge and accompanying scream seems necessary.

Fanon gestures toward a psychoanalytic solution that benefits from a fall into the “zone of non-being,” to release the Black from being the White’s nightmare—a full inhabiting of this “veritable hell” as a way of taking it over. One of Fanon’s most compelling assertions, on the last page of *Black Skin, White Masks*—“the black man is not” (Fanon 1952, p. 206)—calls for such a Lacanian reading that extends Fanon’s emphasis on the Real. The Black is situated as the “not” in the White’s construction of subjectivity. Fanon advocates a leap into that “not,” that Real space of lack, to become himself “not,” that is, not Black. To Fanon, there is no such thing as a Black, except as a necessary infernal fantasy of the White. *Black Skin, White Masks* points to a drastic way of achieving that dissolution by appropriating the “black hole.” “For Fanon,” as David Marriott confirms, “blackness can only find its ontological fulfillment by no longer being black—or by entering its own abyssal significance” (Marriott 2018, p. x)—an idea that gives rise to the movement of Afropessimism.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Thus far I have zeroed in on two psychoanalytic moments: a mirror-stage moment that reflects a nightmare, rather than furnishes an ego, and thrusts the



It is not only fantasy, a craving for the Other’s fantasized *jouissance*, then, but also phobia that causes the White to racialize the nightmarish Black in the Real: “the lovely little boy is trembling because he thinks the Negro is trembling with rage, the little white boy runs to his mother’s arms: ‘*Maman*, the Negro’s going to eat me’” (Fanon 1952, p. 93). Full of envy and fear, the colonizer in particular approaches the Real of blackness. To Fanon, both White and Black bear a “relation” to the Real—the White through the Black, since the White incarcerates the Black there, and the Black through the White’s incarceration of the Black in the Real. But there is no Real outside of blackness, either external or extimate, no founding Real for the Black, blackness *being* the “unidentifiable and unassimilable.” Both White and Black meet blackness in the Real, although one is a Human that relies on the Real, as it is constituted by enviable and terrifying blackness, and the Other is tantamount to that Real.

In an endnote in *Whither Fanon*, however, Marriott distinguishes the Real in Fanon in one major respect from Lacan’s conception. Marriott proposes that Fanon’s “real” “needs to be understood differently from its inflection in Lacan’s late works” (Marriott 2018, p. 373): “whereas for Lacan the *réel* is at the foundation of the subject, in Fanon’s usage the *réel* is also *imposed*, and denotes a being confronted with a violence that makes the *réel* indistinguishable from *la réalité*, and thus the experience of a certain

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Black viewer into the Real and a so-called “gaze” moment that interpellates the Black as an object. But it is crucial to keep in mind that the Lacanian gaze is located in the Real, and the (supposedly gazing) White (Sovereign) who transforms the Black (Slave) into an object is hardly situated in the Real—quite the contrary. What the white “gazer” inflicts on the Black is technically “the look.” For the gaze is located at the place of the subject’s lack, from where the subject is not. And, to reiterate, the White takes the Black to be what the White is not, thus erecting an anti-black social structure. As Marriott articulates it, the identity of whiteness springs forth from blackness, whereas one finds one’s blackness by accessing the night. The “this-is-me, this[nightmare]-is-not-me” structure of (white) subjectivity depends on such an anti-black psychic incarceration.

violence[.]” Marriott believes that to Fanon the Black “has no ontological resistance to the words or visions of anti-blackness” — the all-too-real that Blacks must cope with on a daily basis (p. 373).

While for Whites the Real serves as the basis of subjectivity, I argue in response to Marriott that the “real” for Blacks is to be that basis in the Real, which is where they are able to be deposited in the white psyche insofar as their “*réel*” is their “*réalité*.” It is due to the injection of *n’est pas*, non-being in the real world, that the Black is vulnerable to being positioned in the Lacanian Real. Wilderson’s conjoining of the two is expressed thus: “there is an uncanny connection between Fanon’s absolute violence and Lacan’s real [...] the grammar of suffering of the Black itself is on the level of the real” (Wilderson 2010, p. 75).

## 2. *Blackness: n’est pas*

It would only, then, be when “the Black” enacts the looking that some form of “Black desire” could emerge, since it is *an encounter with* the gaze that generates desire. The question would seem to be, therefore, how do Blacks extricate themselves from the “noose” that leaves them with “no ontological resistance to the words or visions of anti-blackness” (Marriott 2018, p. 373) in order to assume desire? How do Blacks experience the gaze?

This is an especially tricky question, if the idea is that “the Black is not” — meaning “is no more.” It would then be inappropriate to try to conceptualize “*Black* desire,” although that is Wilderson’s term, since the person no longer designated as black would need to be able to assume generic desire, the assumption of which would in turn correlate with the Black that is not, *where “not” is not non-being*. This is emphatically not to say that the Black would BE the not (that is the current woeful situation), but Blacks would not be. Instead, the new configuration would itself be *predicated on* what it is not.

Reflecting his unease with the sort of solution I am entertaining here, in *Whither Fanon*, Marriott expresses his discomfort with the thought that blackness might vanish, no matter how: to “see the future of blackness in its absolute disappearance is [. . .] to imagine it as a thing obliterated.” Yet, he is keenly aware that, “however painful the discovery, to receive race as a destiny is to forget that [...] the only proof of its meaning is illusion [and suffering]” (Marriott 2018, p. ix). Marriott wrestles with the inconsistency that “blackness is [...] a fact of being,” even as it “remains unthought outside the forces that shatter it” (p. 215) and proceeds to view blackness as a philosophy that afropessimistically declines any idea of reparation that might free it from the contingency that constitutes it. It is, in fact, to Marriott, likely impossible to extract this impurity or flaw, *n’est pas*, even on the part of the Black who wishes no longer to be Black, since the negrophobic psychic effects or affects of that deadlock cannot be avoided: “shame, despair, and guilt [...] leave a residue” (Marriott 2020, p. 33).

Nonetheless, wishing to think the unthought of blackness, Marriott contemplates what he discerns as Fanon’s compelling paradox that to “find its ontological fulfillment,” blackness must enter its “own abyssal significance” (Marriott 2018, p. x). Blackness *is*, as Marriott puts it, “the forced exercise of its own denegation, and this is why it can only confirm itself as what it is not, and disarticulate itself as a ruined work” (214). Located there, denegated, “blackness remains necessarily unknown to any thought whatsoever [...] precisely because it remains unthought outside the forces that shatter it” (215). How then can such an “unthought” be of any use?

However, if no referent or unequivocal name is adequate for blackness, if it “escapes all attributes,” as Fanon and Marriott seem to claim, “including the unity of an ontic-ontological fugitivity or [...] the hypostatized name of ‘absolute dereliction,’” as Marriott writes (Marriott 2018, p. 224), are we not catapulted back to the “unidentifiable, the unassimilable” — to the edge of the Human — that saturates the white mirror that determines the nightmare that

creeps into the black mirror? The challenge would appear to be how to remove blackness from its “imaginarily misrecognized” (p. 225) significance as such a limit, or how to let it fall from the Imaginary into the Real *in a way that dissolves the nightmare*.

Obviously, all Afropessimists are not the same. Marriott’s sense of blackness as *n’est pas*, as well as his conception of the abyss into which blackness enters, is (in his estimation) not comparable with Lacan’s Real—a register that Wilderson makes use of and that Jared Sexton also invokes. In “Blackness: *N’est Pas*” (2020), Marriott contends (despite Fanon’s unequivocal assertions to the contrary) that Fanon distances himself from psychoanalysis to access the meaning of *n’est pas*. Marriott reads Fanon as declaring that a *culturally* injected impurity or flaw precludes an ontological explanation of blackness, placing Blacks outside of themselves (although it is “a means of self-knowing”); and this flaw “speaks from the side of the real” (but not Lacan’s Real), that is, from “the place where what is communicated is absent, prohibited.” And therefore we have, in Fanon, “a being that is also ‘being-qua-not-being’” (Marriott 2020, p. 31). The Black/Slave is an “excruciated” being that cannot harness, Marriott asserts, its own nothing, since “*the thing that makes it into non-being does not belong to it*” (p. 35, my emphasis).

But does that assertion not imply that this excruciated being needs somehow to have (not be) its own Nothing, to be in relation to it, rather than stuck in the black hole that cultural hatred has blasted within it?

### 3. *Afropessimism’s Gift of Death*

Frank B. Wilderson III’s *Afropessimism* establishes on its first Acknowledgments page perhaps its most fundamental premise, namely that “the Human is not an organic entity but a construct; a construct that requires its *Other* in order to be legible” and that

“the Human Other is Black” (Wilderson 2020, p. ix). Afropessimism basically posits as well that “Black people *embody* a meta-aporia for political thought and action.” A Black political agenda frightens even those on the Left since it “emanates from a condition of suffering for which there is no imaginable strategy for redress—no narrative of social, political, or national redemption” (p. 15).<sup>3</sup> Wilderson asks how absence (loss of loss) can be narrated.

At the same time, there is a modicum of empowerment in Wilderson’s Afropessimism, as it enables the expression of what normally could or would not be said: the Human is a parasite on Blacks; while Blacks do not inhabit the world, there would be “no world without Blacks” (Wilderson 2020, p. 229); violence against Blacks is “a health tonic for everyone who is not Black” (p. 40); Blacks “can’t be wiped out completely, because our deaths must be repeated, *visually*.” The murders we witness on “YouTube, Instagram, and the nightly news [...] are rituals of healing [and as we know sources of *jouissance*] for civil society. Rituals that stabilize and ease the anxiety that other people feel in their daily lives.” Such “other people” can then comfortably know that they are Human because they are “*not Black*” (p. 225). Toward the end of his book, Wilderson explains to his mother, who pleads with him to put his effort into reform, that (despite or perhaps because of its unrelenting negativity) Afropessimism “makes us worthy of our suffering” (p. 328).

On the side of “unrelenting negativity”: one of the epigraphs of Wilderson’s Epilogue is from Marriott who asks, “*What do you do with an unconscious that appears to hate you?*” (Wilderson 2020, p. 309). Upon reading this line, Wilderson seems to relive his U.C. Berkeley traumatic episode. The specular word “*appears*”

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<sup>3</sup> Jared Sexton elaborates this point, in his interview conducted by Daniel Barber, in proposing that blackness not only constitutes the outside of every social bond, but it also has the potential to unravel every social bond, which it negatively dwells within, and therefore to release the space for expressing the *unthought*.

crushes his skull “like an elephant’s foot.” He becomes preoccupied with the effects of a feeling of self-hatred that pervades his unconscious. Wilderson is led to think that the Black is “a static imago of abjection” (p. 314). Especially the term “imago” takes us back to U.C. Berkeley, where Wilderson snapped while washing his face. A certain stanza of poetry entered his mind: “for Halloween I washed my / face and wore my / school clothes [...] went door to / door as a nightmare” (p. 17). He feels faint, overpowered by nausea; it is as if he’s “looking into a deep ravine” (p. 6)—collapsing into a “zone of non-being,” a “veritable hell”?

Fanon, Marriott, Sexton, and Wilderson all converge on this point: blackness is devoid of substance, as it is the absence that provides a kind of fortification for others. The image of the man of color’s body, writes Fanon, is “solely negating” (Fanon 1952, p. 90). To Marriott, “blackness cannot be represented as a psychical object in a way that will serve as the narcissistic basis for later experiences.” When the colonized, in particular, “contemplates his existence in the mother’s lofty but stern majesty, he is told to turn his gaze away from the lowly black objects around him, and to stop speaking or acting *nègre*.” He is pressured to “love himself as white and exclude the body, which belongs to blackness alone” (Marriott 2021, p. 64). (Whereas Lacan’s mirror-stage contains the mOther domiciled in the Real, from where she offers a fullness to be lost for subject formation, the colonized mother stands awkwardly and no doubt ambivalently in the white Symbolic, from which she makes unacceptable practical demands that smack of betrayal.)

Rejecting the white mask offered to him by his mother, Wilderson in effect embraces the unembraceable by opting for the nightmare and in turn urges others to join him in assuming this “position” of social death. Afropessimism confronts what he describes as “an endless antagonism that cannot be satisfied (via reform or reparation), but must nonetheless be pursued to the death” (Wilderson 2020, p. 251). Wilderson has seized the reins of the death drive to ride it all the way to the end of the world, the world being “one big plantation” (p. 257). Toward the

conclusion of *Afropessimism*, refusing suicide but committing to madness—that is, to “the fact” that his “death makes the world a decent place to live”—Wilderson *owns* his “abjection and the antagonism that made [him] Humanity’s foil.” He pledges to reside in “the hold of the ship and burn it from the inside out” (p. 323), operating (as I understand Wilderson) at the level of the unconscious, as a way of carrying along Fanon’s Lacanian goal of “restructuring the world” (Fanon 1952, p. 63).

Returning to *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, we find a larger-than-life Lacanian figure that Wilderson seems modeled on. Like *Antigone*, *Afropessimism* is “a turning point in the field that interests us, namely, ethics” (Lacan 1997, p. 243). Lacan poses the same question about Antigone as Wilderson does regarding the Black, namely “what does it mean [...] [to go] beyond the limits of the human?” (p. 263). It is around this limit that the dramas of *Antigone* and *Afropessimism* play. Lacan describes a hymn to Dionysus that breaks out in the penultimate appearance of the play’s Chorus, which turns out to be because “the limits of the field of the conflagration have been breached” (p. 269). Antigone is between two deaths, her literal death and what Lacan calls “the second death.” She occupies *Afropessimism*’s “social death”—a living death experienced outside the Symbolic. She declares from the very start, “I am dead and I desire death.’ [...] An illustration of the death instinct is what we find here” (p. 281). However, all is not lost: appearing as “the victim at the center of the anamorphic cylinder of the tragedy” (p. 282), Antigone sacrifices “her own being in order to maintain that essential being which is the family *Atè*” (p. 283) and in so doing reveals “the line of sight that defines desire.” Her “unbearable splendor” fascinates us and, upon being lost to us, generates our desire (p. 247).

As Lacan asserts in the chapter following the sections on *Antigone*, “realizing one’s desire is necessarily always raised from the point of view of an absolute condition”—such as Fanon’s (Hegelian) night of the absolute from which negativity must draw its value. It is “this trespassing of death on life that gives its dynamism

to any question that attempts to find a formulation for the subject of the realization of desire” (Lacan 1997, p. 294). Befriending death, Antigone commits a radically transformative, Lacanian “authentic act,” which in my view Wilderson emulates as a way of enabling his reader’s own authentic act. In her *Ethics of the Real*, Alenka Zupančič explains that “After an act, I am ‘not the same as before’. In the act, the subject is annihilated and subsequently reborn [...]” (Zupančič 2000, p. 83). Lacanian ethics involves “something that ‘happens to us’” that “throws us ‘out of joint’” since it

*inscribes itself [...] as a rupture. [...] [T]he Real happens to us (we encounter it) as impossible, as ‘the impossible thing’ that turns our symbolic universe upside down and leads to the reconfiguration of this universe. [...] This is when ethics comes into play, in the question forced upon us by an encounter with the Real: will I act in conformity to what threw me ‘out of joint’, will I be ready to reformulate what has hitherto been the foundation of my existence? (p. 235, my emphases)*

Wilderson lures his readers into the zone of the Real as Antigone summons her spectators, and analysts bring their analysands into this same space, to reconfigure their unconscious coordinates. The aim in the case of Wilderson is to incite “a revolutionary desire” that subtends a “politics of refusal and a refusal to affirm, a program of complete disorder” (Wilderson 2020, p. 250). This is its condition of possibility. Wilderson draws his readers beyond the brink of disaster, invites them to accompany him in the dance of social death, and establishes himself firmly in the place of the gaze, beckoning/jamming.

Targeting the Real, as I suggest Wilderson does, enables “our own death [social death] or a general catastrophe [...] to function as the ultimate horizon of our desire,” leading to an “‘awakening’ of [...] the ethical” (Zupančič 2000, p. 237). By locating itself in Fanon’s “zone of non-being,” that “veritable hell,” Afropessimism shows how *ab-sens* can be *experienced* by a person with black



skin. Wilderson stands firmly in the Real place of the *non-moi* to demonstrate that it does not, or rather should not, serve as a foundation strictly for privileged non-blacks. A person with black skin planting his two feet staunchly there, insofar as they *can* stand there, jams up the racist structure, precluding the *non-moi* from *being* blackness, cancelling its status as a nightmare. Wilderson takes over the *n’est pas* to which Blacks are consigned, so that the idea that blackness is tantamount to the Real makes no sense.

The anti-blackness integral to the “this-is-me, this [nightmare]-is-not-me” structure of non-black subjectivity must be abolished as the self-hating Black unconscious (recall Marriott’s unconscious that hates him) that upholds it is reconfigured. The Real must become emptily available for all—rather than constituted by the blackness of some and harnessed by a privileged coterie. Demonstrating an ethics of the Real, Wilderson’s Fanonian/Lacanian work offers *an experience of the Real* in order to transfigure the collective unconscious, so that Blacks no longer “form a mass of indistinguishable flesh in [that] collective unconscious” (Wilderson 2020, p. 162), so they no longer serve as *ab-sens* (for the so-called Human subject to get off on) but instead bear a relation to it of their own. Similarly, Jared Sexton celebrates a certain “encounter” of an “abyss into which we’ve been cast and the void that is at the heart of our existence” (Sexton 2017), which seems to slide from Marriott’s abyss (the black hole into which Blacks are ideologically thrust) to the void that, from a Lacanian viewpoint, ideally founds subjectivity. In fact, Sexton takes this encounter even further in locating in Fanon a push “toward the *ex nihilo* capacity for affirmation—‘a “yes” resonating from cosmic harmonies’”—as well as in entertaining the idea that such an analytic experience might be linked with mysticism. The climax of Daniel Barber’s interview of Sexton touches on a “mysticism of the flesh (of the earth)” that “pushes us toward the nothing from which we all emerge[.]”

We can grasp, even more fully, the radical change that a disappearance of such an inferiority complex might accomplish

by reversing the elements of Žižek’s conception of parallax. In *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, Žižek explains parallax basically as the “displacement of an object (the shift of its position against a background) caused by a change in observational position that provides a new line of sight” (Žižek 2021, p. 5)—what Wilderson’s Afropessimism, I believe, is meant to activate. We can observe such a transformation in the viewer’s anamorphic experience with (the cuttlebone in) Holbein’s “The Ambassadors,” as the viewer *looks* in a way that unveils a skull (or two) to confront the viewer’s own nothingness:



“The Ambassadors,” Hans Holbein the Younger, 1533, National Gallery, London, Permission from Art Resource

Such a confrontation is, in other words, what Wilderson’s *Afropessimism* is designed to catalyze, as the black reader, reading awry, encounters Wilderson as another Holbeinian skull. Crucially, as Žižek clarifies, with a nod to Hegel, the change is not a question merely of a different point of view, but “subject and object are inherently ‘mediated’, so that an ‘epistemological’ shift in the subject’s point of view always reflects an ‘ontological’ shift in the object itself” (Žižek 2021, p. 5). For those who read *Afropessimism* psychoanalytically, at the level of the unconscious—awry—Wilderson turns from being mere book author, black-studies theorist, professor, etc. into a figure of social death at “the center of the anamorphic cylinder of the tragedy” (Lacan, 1997, 282), meant to light the resisting revolutionary spark of desire in that reader, upon reflecting the reader’s “own nothingness”:

i) PARALLAX

1) Black object, in the shifting position of observer BECOMES a reader, reading awry and ENCOUNTERS

2) Wilderson as  
Antigone/Lack/Gaze/  
Nothing/Social Death  
to BECOME

3) a Subject of Revolutionary Desire.

Subsequently, *Afropessimism* effects what I call a reverse parallax. Once the Black “object” (here, within this Lacanian paradigm, in the place of the observer/reader) frees itself from the shackles of social death by owning that death, through its immersion within the Real that Fanon and Wilderson point to, claiming as its own base the void it had been forced to serve (parallax), then the “Human” will no longer have the luxury of that

“object” as the confirmation of its existence. The black rug having been pulled out from under it, *it* (the Master) will be forced to metamorphose (reverse parallax). The ship will necessarily sink. Transfiguration of the Black object as it *experiences* the Wildersonian gaze (meaning Wilderson/Antigone as the gaze), and is thereby released from any unconscious sense of self-hatred (again, parallax), in turn will result ultimately in a radical demolition of the subject-object (anti-black) structure that desperately relies on that abjected object:

ii) REVERSE PARALLAX

- 1) Black object, in the shifting position of observer/  
reader BECOMES  
a Subject of Revolutionary Desire, looking at:
- 2) the Human (White or non-Black) THAT BECOMES
- 3) ~~the Human (White or non-Black).~~<sup>4</sup>

Dissolution of the Black object—achieved once that “object” fully absorbs the horrendous fact that it is black social death, as Wilderson insists, that “makes the world a decent place to live,” that black abjection renders it “Humanity’s foil” (Wilderson 2020, p. 323)—will generate a new political-subject-of-refusal propelled by revolutionary desire, fueled by the drive that ties it to Antigone, freed from embodying the Real that constitutes white or non-black subjectivity. And the departure of blackness from this space will effect a second transformation. In a reversal of parallax, a shift in the position of the Black object (after enabling a resisting subject of revolutionary desire) will drastically alter the so-called Human—will effect its demise. Instead of black social

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<sup>4</sup> It might be objected that focusing on the need to dissolve this supposed inferiority complex, as Fanon does, is to put the onus on the Black, and perhaps it is, in the same way that analysts must take responsibility for submitting themselves to analysis.

death, whiteness will necessarily die, as the eye that looks looks at the Human and sees it for what it is: nothing.

For all its pessimism or maybe I should say by virtue of it, *Afropessimism* proclaims that “*social death can be destroyed*”: “like class and gender, which are also *constructs* [and] not divine designations, social death can be destroyed. But the first step toward the destruction is to assume one’s position . . . and then burn the ship or the plantation, in its past and present incarnations, *from the inside out*” (Wilderson 2020, p. 323, my emphases). Herein lies, through appropriation of Fanon’s “zone of non-being,” after all, the potential for a “genuine new departure” (recall Fanon’s qualifier—in “most cases” a genuine departure is impossible)—instigated by the “revolutionary desire” that Afropessimism, in the spirit of Antigone, has the potential to ignite.

The unconscious of the Black object or Slave as it is imbricated with that of the White or non-Black subject or Master must be reconfigured so that the former no longer finds itself to be a nightmare and the latter no longer finds its support in that nightmare—a change the latter will be forced to make once the former breaks the bounds of its objecthood, once the Slave, having vanished as an object and become a political descendant of Antigone, *looks*, turning the Black as gaze to an eye.

#### *4. The Non-Human Subject*

I have occasionally intermeshed Marriott and Wilderson, although Marriott ultimately stresses undecidability, while Wilderson invokes the potential of (black) revolutionary desire and claims that black social death can be defeated. They also differ in their reliance on Lacan (at least in my reading of Wilderson’s *Afropessimism*). In *Lacan Noir*, Marriott, on one side of his professed ambivalence, charges Lacan with ignorance of blackness. To Marriott, Lacan’s joining of the signifier to slavery (Lacan writes that “we are all irredeemably enslaved *as speaking subjects*” [Marriott 2021, p. 4])

encodes a certain ignorance. That is, Lacan neglects “incommensurable differences in how the enslaved body . . . is enunciated as a typology via chains, whips, spikes, nooses, and dogs” (p. 127). The experience of Lacanian lack is taken by most Lacanians to be universal, whereas to Marriott it is white. All desire in Lacan, to Marriott, is “a desire for mastery” (Marriott 2021, p. 127). Psychoanalysis can perform its so-called universalism only by masking its disavowal of racism; the void in psychoanalysis that sutures thought to being is “a black emptiness” (p. 18).

Marriott’s definition of blackness as *n’est pas* might lead one to think he shares Fanon’s and Wilderson’s emphasis on the Real. But that the non-being Marriott locates in the Black has been injected into the black unconscious *ideologically through negrophobia*, to Marriott, keeps *n’est pas* and the Real apart. The black *n’est pas* is “an ontological impurity that is the *trace* of the Other within us,” as Marriott writes with his Derridean pen (Marriott 2020, p. 51); and *this* is how blackness turns into absence. Marriott envisions “the great black hole” as “a mirage” (p. 43)—an illusory “depository of a cultural hatred” (p. 47) and by no means a function of repression, interpellation, an existential situation, or the unsaid—not the Lacanian Real. Perhaps we might think of it as the injection of a pseudo-Real?—whereas in Wilderson the Black is rendered a Real nightmare, which the Black becomes when the White looks in the mirror reflecting a nightmare that is transferred to the black mirror. In fact, we might read Wilderson here as offering a way of understanding a relation between the *n’est pas*—the black hole—which Marriott theorizes is ideologically drilled into the Black psyche—and the mirror stage for Whites and Blacks, as the White passes on unconsciously the nightmare of *n’est pas* to the Black. Wilderson retains Lacanian theory, whereas Lacan is for Marriott part of the problem rather than the means of a cure.

Still, the question might persist as to whether Marriott’s *n’est pas* can be removed (to think in Marriott’s terms) or if the Black can be peeled away from the Real (to think in what I take to be

Wilderson’s terms) in order to give Blacks an experience with the Real—*without reinforcing the structure now in place of the unethical Human*. In other words, *is* lack/desire white? I have argued that such extractions and their consequent transformations are possible, in that what I have outlined entails the movement of blackness out from under the Human, thus dismantling that very concept.

But what could/would blackness then be? Would conceiving blackness as undecidable *at that point* undermine the arduous operations I have laid out in my reading of Wilderson? Or would Fanon’s “invention” have more potential once the individuals deemed to be Black undergo the kind of psychic changes that Wilderson’s book can set in motion, once they expel Marriott’s *n’est pas* or tear themselves away from the Real, which they can only do upon possessing a Nothing of their own? Perhaps Marriott at least must be credited for conveying the difficulty of knowing who will be there in relation to that Nothing. Will it then be possible to solve the dilemma of not wanting to give up blackness but also not wanting, or knowing how, to retain it, how to get beyond that suspension? Could that suspension somehow be the continuing carrier of revolutionary desire? Or must the fundamental fantasy of blackness be entirely traversed?

Marriott stresses the cultural imposition of non-being onto the Black, declining to regard the *n’est pas* as tantamount to the Real, while Wilderson posits Blacks in the Real, and so employs the Lacanian register. Yet, ironically, Marriott hangs on to the non-being of Blacks in his unwillingness to relinquish blackness entirely, as he ponders it as “unthought” as well as in his thought-provoking sense that what precludes our *understanding* of blackness is “*inherent to blackness itself*,” which is what, he claims, “makes blackness both black and undecidable” (Marriott 2020, p. 28, my emphasis). Marriott, we recall, conceives the absolute disappearance of blackness as a lamentable obliteration. Moreover, at times, Marriott’s privileging of the spectrality of black undecidability appears to be for the sake of remaining

open to moments when the prejudice that sentences the Black to abjection—the petrification of social death—yields to the abyssal (qua de-petrification) as the site or non-site in which the *tabula rasa* becomes the potential for transfiguration. Andrew Kaplan locates this idea in Marriott’s “poetics of corpsing,” which Marriott identifies in Césaire and Fanon: “the unflinchingly iterative inhabitation of blackness’s intrinsically failed performance (i.e. social death) can give way to the depetrifying potential of the abyssal as the (non)site in which the politics of *tabula rasa* and invention coincide.”<sup>5</sup>

But that isn’t enough; the emergence of a *tabula rasa* from the abyss requires a transformation, one that ignites the spark of revolutionary desire produced by a rigorous analysis, which is what I think Wilderson offers through his Lacanian text. The sick political structure of (sadistic) Human on top of (not masochistic, but victimized) blackness is a distortion of the Lacanian model of desiring subjectivity and requires the Lacanian ethics of the Real to be restored to health. In other words, the Subject is not “the Human.”

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<sup>5</sup> This is from an email exchange on 12 December 2022 with Andrew Kaplan, whom I thank for invaluable communications over the summer of 2022 on all of this essay’s issues. See his article on related matters: Kaplan 2020.



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We set out from tautology and stutter: “this same skull”; “sir... Sir.” We arrive at recognition: “I knew him.” Name and station are the tokens of possession denoted by apostrophes: the skull belonged to Sir Yorick; Sir Yorick belonged to the king. And as he takes possession of the skull, Hamlet is possessed by memory, which speaks the language of the particular: This? But as Hegel shows in the first chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in his discussion of deictic signs, our efforts to denote what is here and now—*this*, right before our eyes—rely upon and produce the universal. Reference to what is here depends upon its distinction from what is there, just as the identity of an “I” depends on its distinction from a “you.” Confronted with the thing, language says *this*. A clown replies, “E’en that.” *This* and *that* trade places as they occupy the same place, the switching point of the thing as it moves among bodies from there to here and here to there. *This* is *that*, “this same skull,” just as “sir” refers both to Hamlet and Sir Yorick. The obduracy of the material object sustains itself through the flux of the signifier, and the encounter of the thing and the name, sutured in the past tense by the grammar of possession, gives rise to memory expressed in the language of pathos: “Alas, poor Yorick!”

Yorick was a fellow of infinite jest: his tragic finitude is bound with the infinite through comedy. He was a man of most excellent fancy: though he once excelled in imagination, now he hasn’t a thought in his head. The skull of Yorick, the king’s jester, is the synthesis of the finite and the infinite, of matter and imagination, of impassivity and pathos, of tragedy and comedy, of this and that. But this is a synthesis that unbinds what it holds together. Recognition is the element in which the material *becomes* immaterial—memory—just as what is remembered is what is no longer. What is here is not what is there, but a remainder of what it was. And this somber remainder of a person, of laughter itself, is what decides the synthesis of tragedy and comedy on the side of tragedy—an asymmetrical synthesis bespeaking the irrevocable fact of mortality:

HAMLET

He hath bore me on his back a thousand times. And now how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now? Your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning? Quite chopfallen? (5.1.175-182)

Metonymy revives the dead and breathes spirit into the inanimate through the memory of the living: it was once the case that *a table* could be set on a roar by flashes of merriment. But the form of the rhetorical question registers the absorption of the living by death: the skull cannot turn back upon its merriment to mock its own grinning; the reflexivity of self-consciousness has given way to the unanswered question. Sarcasm is the bitterness of sweetness forever lost. Recognition of the living, through the skull of the name, is the recognition that life falls away into the nameless, the vanished lips that once smiled are called “lips” according to what they were, but now their living form is dissolved into dirt, incorporated into what they were not. “Alas” is the name of the memory’s asymmetrical synthesis of the living and the dead, the signifier of symmetry’s tragic remainder. What is recognized is that remainder, at once the same thing and something other than what is said. *This?* is the question. *That* is the answer.

“The being of spirit is a bone.” Hegel’s proposition, which he will call “the infinite judgment,” springs from a critique of the pseudoscience of phrenology, which would assign indications of character to a protuberance or indentation of the skull bone. But the significance of Hegel’s proposition reaches far beyond the critique of vulgar materialist ideology. Hegel *affirms* the proposition as a recognition of the *existence* of spirit, of the fact that *it is*. Let’s review the passage in which it is located in the section of the *Phenomenology* on Observing Reason:

Observation has thus reached the point where it gives expression to what our concept of observation was, namely, that the certainty of reason seeks itself as an objective actuality. —By this it is not meant that spirit, represented by a skull, is declared to be a thing. What is supposed to lie in this thought is certainly not materialism, as it is called. Rather, spirit must instead be something very different from these bones. But that spirit *is* means nothing other than that it is a *thing*. However much *being* as such, or being-a-thing, is predicated of spirit, still, for that reason, this is genuinely expressed by saying that spirit is the sort of thing that a *bone* is. Hence, it must be considered to be of supreme importance that the true expression of this has been found. Of spirit it is simply to be said, “it *is*.” However much it is otherwise said of spirit that it *is*, it has a *being*, it is a *thing*, a singular *actuality*, still it is not thereby *meant* that it is something we can see, or take in our hands, or push around and so forth, but that is what is *said* of it, and what in truth the foregoing has been saying may be expressed in this way: The *being of spirit is a bone*. (*PhS* 343)

What is said is not what is meant. We are not to conclude from the declaration that spirit may be represented by a skull or that spirit may be *reduced* to a thing. As Hegel notes, “spirit must be something very different from these bones.” But if one should not think that spirit is “something we can see, or take in our hands, or push around and so forth,” what is properly *expressed* by the representation of spirit as a skull is that spirit *is*, that it has a *being*. “The being of spirit is a bone” is a true expression of this judgment, but only if it is conceptualized in truth, which is to say dialectically. “This proposition is the *infinite judgment*,” Hegel writes, because it is “a judgment which sublates itself” (*PhS* 344). To say *the being of spirit is a bone* is to enunciate a *speculative* proposition, which must be grasped through the negativity of its articulation, preserving what is meant by canceling the literal sense of the statement—and this very movement of cancelation and preservation is what is properly expressed: the modality of spirit’s existence as material-ideal, as absorbed into

and expressed through material existence, even as it is irreducible to it. Hegel concludes his morbid speculations with a joke: the combination of the higher and lower sense of his proposition in one statement is akin to the way in which nature combines the organ of highest fulfillment (of generation) with the organ of urination. Grasped according to its speculative sense, the infinite judgment is “the completion of self-comprehending life.” But if it is grasped according to its representational content, through mere picture-thinking, it amounts to nothing more than taking a piss (*als Pissen*) (*PhS* 346).

Now the proximity of Hegel’s infinite judgment to Hamlet’s remembrance of Yorick through his skull is not coincidental: Hegel is thinking not only of phrenology but of this scene in *Hamlet*, which he discusses ten paragraphs earlier. “In the presence of a skull,” he writes, “one can surely think of many things, just as Hamlet does with Yorick’s, but the skull-bone for itself is such an indifferent, unencumbered thing that there is nothing else immediately to be seen in it nor to think about; there is just it itself” (*PhG* 333). *This* is indeed what troubles Hamlet, as he picks up the skull and asks, incredulously, “This?” The skull-bone is the token of that with which it is incompatible—Yorick’s infinite jest—yet which it also supported and was indeed inseparable from. Now it has been separated. It occupies space; it is there (or here?), yet all the animation of the spirit that laughed through it is now dearly departed. It’s because Hegel’s meditation is derived, in part, from this scene in *Hamlet* that his dialectical exposition of the infinite judgment so readily helps us understand that scene.

Hamlet’s question when confronted with Yorick’s skull—“This?”—is quite closely related to his more famous question, “To be, or not to be—” (3.1.56). Let us read that question from Hegel’s perspective, rather than from Hamlet’s—or rather from a perspective Hamlet will only attain later, precisely in the graveyard scene. In Hamlet’s soliloquy the opposition is between life

and death, where “to be” is aligned with the former and “not to be” with the latter. The problem then becomes whether consciousness will persist beyond death, through dreams that come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil. It’s “the dread of something after death” (3.1.78) through which conscience makes cowards of us all. But *to be* is also to be a bone. Spirit already bears insensible unconsciousness within it, *as* its mere existence, its thingliness. The infinite judgment reverses the prospect upon which Hamlet broods: rather than life continuing after death, it is the dead matter of living spirit that gives Hegel pause, yet which also announces the highest recognition of self-comprehending life. Later Hamlet will remark, “That skull had a tongue in it, and could sing once” (5.1.71-72). The singing skull is the emblem not only of the dead who were once quick, but also of the quick *as* the dead, singing through their own unhearing bones. Most importantly, the tongue is said to have been *in* the skull. Through its dead objecthood, we are given to consider the living body as an assemblage of parts that will be dismembered by death and decomposition. From the perspective of the contemplated skull, the living body becomes the uncanny, undead marionette of the *danse macabre*. While Hamlet had earlier contemplated the persistence of being even if one chooses “not to be,” now death enters into “to be.”

It is precisely the tradition of the *danse macabre* that Shakespeare’s scene joins as Hamlet considers the possible professions of those whose skulls remain: politician, courtier, lawyer, landowner. The last is to the point, because it is *land* that links the existential pathos of the graveyard scene to the political and historical dimensions of the play. The “great buyer of land” had his “statutes, his recognizances, his fines, his double vouchers, his recoveries” (5.1.98-99)—the legal and bureaucratic machinery of the conversion of land into property. But, when he is dead, he will come “to have his fine pate full of fine dirt” (5.1.101): property, land that can be bought and sold, undergoes its reduction



to earth, the common ground of a common fate. That is the lesson of the *memento mori*. Thus Hamlet queries Horatio, “Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till he find it stopping a bung-hole?” (5.1.193-194). The opening of a barrel may come to be plugged with the body of a conqueror because the material of that body is dust, made noble according to the *station* it attains while alive, reduced to ignobility by death:

Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay,  
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away.  
O, that the earth which kept the world in awe  
Should patch a wall, t’expel the winter’s flaw! (5.1.203-206)

Again, we see the reversal of the “To be, or not to be” soliloquy. Rather than meditating upon the dread of the afterlife, now Hamlet meditates on the earth that the living body already is, dust that will return to dust. Most importantly, what matters here is that the body *occupies space*—both as living conqueror and as dead dirt. This is the minimal level of existence traversing the quick and the dead: the mere fact of occupying space.

If we say “*Hamlet* is a play about what it means to exist,” we may not get too far with many aspects of its complex structure. Rather, we are likely to reduce the play to the existential drama of its protagonist. If we say, “*Hamlet* is a play about what it means to occupy space,” we say something very close to the same thing, but now our perspective opens onto broader vistas—apparently peripheral scenes—while also bringing into focus their intricate connections with central episodes of the play. We cannot recognize what is expressed in Hamlet’s enunciation (Alas, poor Yorick!), nor can we appreciate the full force of its relation to Hegel’s infinite judgment, if we focus only on the graveyard scene, or on its relation to other major speeches by the play’s title character. The title of Shakespeare’s play is a kind of trap, encouraging an identification of play with protagonist

that is, of course, important—but the way in which it is important can only be understood if we go beyond that identification.<sup>2</sup> To fully grasp what it means, in *Hamlet*, that the being of spirit is a bone, we must address the structural complexity of the play, the sense of which hinges upon the relation between its tangent plots and what may seem like its curiously superfluous details. As usual in great literature, and also in philosophy, such superfluity will prove to be of the essence.

For example, after Hamlet kills Polonius, two scenes are devoted to the question of *where* the body is. “What have you done, my lord, with the dead body?” (4.2.3) asks Rosencrantz. “Where the dead body is bestowed,” Rosencrantz informs Claudius, “we cannot get from him” (4.3.13-14). “But where is he?” the King asks Hamlet; the *he* is a corpse, and Claudius has to ask three more times before Hamlet offers the following reply:

In heaven. Send thither to see. If your messenger find him not there,  
seek him i' th' other place yourself. But if indeed you find him not  
within this month, you shall nose him as you go up the stairs into  
the lobby. (4.3.32-36)

Polonius may be in heaven or in hell, but if he cannot be found in either place then his body is under the stairs. Body and spirit are apparently disjoined, but then again they are not: if *his* body cannot be found where his body is not, then *he* is where his corpse is. Polonius is at supper, Hamlet quips, “not where he eats but where he is eaten” (4.3.19). Hamlet proceeds to reason that “a man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm,” and when asked to say what he means he responds: “Nothing but to show you how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar” (4.3.29-30).

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<sup>2</sup> On this point, see Margreta de Grazia’s *Hamlet without Hamlet*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

The king wants to know where someone else's body is—where the physical object may be found—but the dialectician tells him where *his own* body will *not* be found: in its progress through the intestines of his lowliest subjects.

A question about the spatial location of a dead body becomes a scathing reflection on the mutability not only of matter but of rank, linking social and physical positions. The single word that best denotes this complex of physical and social positions would be *station*. The word is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “the place or position occupied by a person or thing”; and also as “a position in a social scale” or hierarchy. It is the bare fact of occupying space—a place or position—that *does not* distinguish “a person or a thing,” nor between persons, regardless of their position within a social hierarchy. So, when Rosencrantz says, “My lord, you must tell us where the body is and go with us to the king,” we get the famous reply:

HAMLET                    The body is with the king, but the king is not  
   with the body. The king is a thing —  
GUILDENSTERN A thing, my lord?  
HAMLET                    Of nothing. Bring me to him. (4.3.21-27)

This exchange bears upon the doctrine of the King's two bodies: on the one hand, the physical existence and historical continuity of kingship through the particular corporeal body of *this* or *that* king; on the other hand, the metaphysical and collective body politic that any particular king enters into and instantiates. But below the level of that historically specific doctrine is the mere fact that to occupy a station (a rank) is to occupy a station (a physical position) in the manner of *either* a person or a thing. Metonymic references to “the throne” or “the crown” make this clear. It is in this latter sense that a king is a thing of nothing: the *station* of the king is there waiting for the one who comes to occupy it, which is why that station can be usurped—with

the “wrong” head under the right crown, or sitting in the same throne that *should* be occupied by a legitimate successor. The traditional function of the *memento mori* is to tell us that the common ground of death unites us all, regardless of station. But before we go to our death, the mere fact of occupying space is what we already have in common not only with our superiors or inferiors, but also with things. A king has his crown, a gravedigger his spade, a scrivener his pen, a courtier his feathered cap, and these metonymic markers of station and of role are at once the implements and indications of *what* we are and the accompaniments of the bare fact *that* we are.

The occupation of space is the overarching concern of the play’s political framework, and it is the minimal condition for an understanding of how the complex structure of the play supports its existential drama. This perspective allows us to offer an account of how the conflict with Norway intersects with the family romance and the philosophical questions articulated by its main characters. Immediately following the scenes concerned with the whereabouts of Polonius’s corpse, Hamlet encounters the army led by Fortinbras, and he asks the Norwegian Captain where they are headed. The Captain replies, “We go to gain a little patch of ground / That hath no profit in it but the name” (4.4.18-19). This is the play’s succinct commentary on the ends of warfare. Property is ground, subsumed by nationhood in name only, and since the little patch of ground at stake in this conflict is relatively worthless (not worth five ducats, the Captain says), *there is no reason* to die for it. Hamlet regards the coming war as a symptom of decadence: “This is th’impostume of much wealth and peace, / That inward breaks, and shows no cause without / Why the man dies” (4.4.27-29). The patch of ground is accorded a negative significance: it *is not* a cause. As a reason to die—which is to say as *grounds* for death—it amounts to nothing.

Indeed, Hamlet will then recognize that it is not the patch of ground itself that is at stake—not its worth, or its possession

as quantity of space—but rather an incorporeal quality that it symbolizes: honor.

Rightly to be great  
Is not to stir without great argument,  
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw  
When honor's at the stake. (4.4.53-56)

For Hamlet, this reflection presents another opportunity to castigate himself for his failure to avenge his father. But behind his own personal drama, with its attendant historical drama of kingship, we can detect a more universal metaphysical problem: the incorporeal quality of honor may be at stake not only in a corporeal *thing* that occupies space, like a straw, but in the bare fact of occupying space at all. Because spirit must have a body, its prerogatives are at issue not only in the physical being of that body, its existence, but are also potentially at issue in *anything that occupies space at all*. The physical existence of anything at all is potentially a metonymy of spirit, and therefore puts honor at the stake. *Possession*—whether self-possession or possession of something other than oneself—is the metaphysical/historical hinge that articulates and secures this relay between the metaphysical being of spirit and its physical existence, which is why the security of possession is always somewhat insecure. The honor of possession is not where it is—in the thing possessed—nor is it not where that thing is. Honor is a question of our *stake* in the thing.<sup>3</sup> Honor is incorporeal, but it seems to require corporeal tokens: like a straw, or like Desdemona's handkerchief in *Othello*. A Capulet can spark a brawl with a Montague by biting his thumb.

In the first scene of the play, Horatio explains the legal basis of King Hamlet's conquest of lands held by Norway in Poland:

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<sup>3</sup> This is why I think the untranslatable expression *die Sache selbst*—which Hegel uses to designate that which spirit cares about, its existential investments—would best be approximated in English by the phrase “the thing at stake.”

our valiant Hamlet  
(For so this side of our known world esteemed him)  
Did slay this Fortinbras; who, by a sealed compact  
Well ratified by law and heraldry,  
Did forfeit, with his life, all those his lands  
Which he stood seized of to the conqueror;  
Against which a moiety competent  
Was gaged by our king, which had returned  
To the inheritance of Fortinbras  
Had he been vanquisher, as, by the same comart  
And carriage of the article designed,  
His fell to Hamlet. (1.1.84-95)

Denmark had acquired land in Poland through King Hamlet's victory over King Fortinbras, through a compact "well ratified by law and heraldry." A little patch of ground, land made property by law, becomes merely ground once more insofar as a nation's *right* to that land is secured by *might*: by material force. It is the force of bodies and weapons—warfare carried out by armies—that decides who gains possession of what portions of the earth. Now, Horatio says, young Fortinbras seeks "to recover of us by strong hand / And terms compulsory those foresaid lands / So by his father lost" (1.1.102-104).

The implications of this history and its bearing upon the present are pressed home in the graveyard scene. "How long hast thou been a gravemaker," Hamlet asks his interlocutor:

CLOWN Of all the days i' th' year, I came to't that day  
that our last king Hamlet overcame Fortinbras.  
HAMLET How long was that since?  
CLOWN Cannot you tell that? Every fool can tell that. It  
was that very day that young Hamlet was born — he  
that is mad, and sent to England. (5.1.133-140)

Every fool can tell time according to Prince Hamlet's date of birth, the same date on which King Hamlet overcame King Fortinbras and gained possession of the Norwegian lands. And ever since

then, the riddling Clown has been at his station, digging graves. A prince is born into the legal inheritance of his father's kingdom, including a worthless little patch of ground in Poland acquired on the same day he came into the world, and now—dispossessed of his inheritance by a treasonous usurper—he meditates upon the reduction of property to earth and of bodies to decomposition. “How long will a man lie i' th' earth ere he rot?” (5.1.154), he asks, and then he reasons:

Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust; the dust is earth; of earth we make loam; and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer barrel? (5.1.198-202)

A little patch of ground can be the object of conquest, but the earth will conquer the conqueror, who becomes a patch of ground used to stop up a hole: to hold the place of nothing. Time is the medium of these transformations: “How long hast thou?”; “How long is that since?”; “How long will a man lie?” Time is the element of earth's conquest of property, wherein titles turn to dust as persons become things, moving from station to station: from social position to physical location, from order of rank to the rank odor of decomposition.

Throughout the play, persons and things trade places. “Who's there?” the play famously opens, and the question is asked by the wrong man: not by the sentinel at his station but rather by the one who approaches him. “Nay, answer me,” the sentinel replies, “stand and unfold yourself.” A person stands in a place wherein a name must unfold that person's identity. But the question *Who's there?* is already a reversal, enunciated by the one to whom it should be addressed, so it solicits a negation, *Nay*. The question goes unanswered, and among the words of which is it composed—Who's there?—*there* is just as important as *who*: it marks the problem of place that unfolds throughout the drama. “Long live the king!” Barnardo replies

when asked to unfold himself, but the king is dead, while an illegitimate usurper occupies his position. The play begins with a changing of the guard: “Who hath relieved you,” Marcellus asks; “Barnardo hath my place,” says Francisco. “What, is Horatio there?” Barnardo asks. “A piece of him,” Horatio replies. A little patch of ground, a piece of a person. The ghost will appear “in the same figure like the king that’s dead” (1.1.41). But the question of whether the same figure amounts to the same thing, the same person, haunts Hamlet as he broods upon the legitimacy of its demand for revenge. The same suit of armour may hold the place of a devil, which “hath power / T’ assume a pleasing shape.” A person is a shape an apparition might assume, a spatial presence whose appearance may be duplicated. So “I’ll have grounds / More relative than this,” Hamlet declares (2.2.538-539). By *grounds* he means reasons. But we see that his reasoning eventually leads to a literalization of this metaphor: not only may the devil assume a pleasing shape, it is also the case that the remains of Imperious Caesar, “which kept the world in awe,” may “patch a wall t’ expel the winter’s flaw.” The *world* is the place of shapes with names and titles; the *earth* is the ground of their indifference, where they interchangeably occupy space.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are interchangeable, reduced grammatically to a single fate when Hamlet compares them to an “enginer / hoist with his own petard” (3.4.207). The maker of grenades is blown up with his own device, taking the place of the intended target. Hamlet replaces the letters carried by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern containing orders to have him killed, describing the accomplishment of his plan to Horatio in some detail:

Up from my cabin,  
My sea gown scarfed about me, in the dark  
Groped I to find them, had my desire,  
Fingered their packet, and in fine withdrew  
To mine own room again, making so bold,  
My fears forgetting manners, to unseal  
Their grand commission. (5.2.13-17)



The ship becomes a delimited spatial universe wherein Hamlet gropes in the dark, as if cloaked in the sea itself. He picks the pocket of his interchangeable former friends, unseals their commission, forges a new document in the fair hand of a professional scrivener, reseals the envelope with his father's signet—which he happens to have in his purse—and returns the packet to its place:

Folded the writ up in the form of the other,  
Subscribed it, gave't th' impression, placed it safely,  
The changeling never known. (5.2.51-53)

The changeling letter is a synecdoche for the dramas of displacement traversing the play, wherein mislaid plans and wayward fates intersect through indirections. "O tis most sweet / When in one line two crafts directly meet" (3.4.209-210), says Hamlet of his plan to redirect the betrayal of his former friends.

When the players arrive at Elsinore—perhaps the most important of the play's superfluous necessities—Hamlet recites a scene from the Aeneid that situates us within the Trojan horse, where Pyrrus, "Black as his purpose, did the night resemble" (2.2.393). The interior of "the ominous horse" is like Hegel's "night in which all cows are black"—the locus of deception wherein purposes are indiscernible from persons and resemblance is identical to the darkness of indifference. The Player picks up where a speech by Hamlet leaves off, narrating the murder of Priam by Pyrrus and the curious suspension of time and of action that proceeds it:

For lo! his sword,  
Which was declining on the milky head  
Of reverend Priam, seemed i' th' air to stick.  
So as a painted tyrant Pyrrhus stood,  
And like a neutral to his will and matter  
Did nothing. (2.2.417-422)

The sword pauses, unaccountably, in mid-air. Pyrrhus is “like a neutral to his will and matter.” The scene freezes, like a painting; Pyrrus stood as if beside himself and did nothing, separated at once from both his incorporeal will and his corporeal matter: nothing more than an image suspended in time. He becomes a shape, a spatial outline, a painted tyrant. Then he goes about his business, slaughtering Priam with a bleeding sword, and Polonius says “This is too long” (2.2.438). Within a superfluous pause in a superfluous speech, holding up the action of the play before the play within a play, we find the *neutral* incarnated as a suspended shape that did nothing—that was simply there, for a moment in time, before proceeding with the inevitable. That which is “too long” takes up space; time is properly registered when it grinds to halt, is experienced as duration or as a pause. This effect is crucial to the feeling of Shakespeare’s play, which is so long we might experience it, retrospectively, as a kind of tableaux—not just action, but time become space, as space is suspended in time.

The play’s great emblem of such suspension is the “envious sliver” that supports Ophelia upon the pendant boughs of a willow tree as she hangs fantastic garlands of flowers from its branches—until the sliver breaks and she drowns. Why is the sliver envious? We can give a precise answer. It is envious because it *does* support her: she cannot decorate with crownet weeds the same branch that bears her weight, since it is underneath her feet. Her death is an anthropomorphic drama, wherein nature so craves the ornaments we fashion for it that it resents our occupation of the space where they might otherwise be. Nature wants the art we have to give, but it grows weary of supporting our weight and our activities; it wants the place where we are for the beauties that we proffer. The very presence of the human body, in nature, is an impediment to nature’s union with the superfluity of ornament. Because our bodies are *necessary* to the production of ornament, they contradict the very contingency which is the substance of its beauty. Thus,

an envious sliver broke,  
When down her weedy trophies and herself  
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,  
And mermaidlike awhile they bore her up,  
Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds,  
As one incapable of her own distress,  
Or like a creature native and indued  
Unto that element. But long it could not be  
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,  
Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay  
To muddy death. (4.7.171-181)

Song is the magic cape, says Thomas Pynchon, but the tragic fact is that Ophelia's clothes can only support her song for so long. "Awhile they bore her up...But long it could not be." The same garments that keep her afloat, for a while, pull her down to muddy death. They spread wide, augmenting the space her body occupies, like a flower in bloom, and then pull the song she sings under the surface, back to the earth from which it stemmed and flourished. Earlier Ophelia offered, in song, a devastating figure of her father's death as spatial absence.

And will he not come again?  
And will he not come again?  
No, no, he is dead;  
Go to thy deathbed;  
He never will come again. (4.5.184-188)

The dead are not only those who are gone, but those who will not come again: who will never again be *here*.

Thus Laertes cries, as Ophelia is lowered into the grave, "Hold off the earth awhile, / Till I have caught her once more in my arms" (5.1.239-240). He leaps into the grave, so as to hold his sister in place, and he and Hamlet launch into a contest of spatial hyperbole:

LAERTES Now pile your dust upon the quick and the dead  
Till of this flat a mountain you have made  
T' o'ertop old Pelion or the skyish head  
Of blue Olympus.

HAMLET What is he whose grief  
Bears such an emphasis? whose phrase of sorrow  
Conjures the wand'ring stars, and makes them stand  
Like wonder-wounded hearers? This is I,  
Hamlet the Dane. (5.1.241-248)

It is not enough to bury the dead, or to be buried with them. The *place* of that burial must take on impossibly monumental proportions, outdoing even the heights of the home of the gods. Hamlet recognizes in the grief of Laertes “that within which passeth show”—he recognizes the infinite scope of grief enunciated by his double—and he declares it his own. He is finally in position to be the answer to his own question: “I, / Hamlet the Dane,” is the one “whose phrase of sorrow / Conjures the wandr’ing stars, and makes them stand / Like wonder-wounded hearers.” Again: that which wanders is made to stand, movement is captured by stasis, time suspended in space, like the wonder-wounded hearers who listen to the play fixed in place by its phrase of sorrow. The grave is the spatially delimited site of infinite mourning and cathartic rivalry, and here the theater becomes a grave called The Globe. As Hegel understood perfectly, self-consciousness demands recognition in order to recognize itself; Shakespeare had already dramatized the articulation of the “I” through a rivalry over who has most completely suffered the reality of death.

I have been tracing figures of the spatialization of spirit in *Hamlet*, of the way in which the displacement of space by persons and things bespeaks the thingliness of our existence, and of the way in which this motif weaves together different aspects of the play, from a little patch of land in Poland, to the hiding place of Polonius’s body, to the envelope containing the destiny of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to the envious sliver that breaks

*Alas, poor Yorick! ... The Being of Spirit is a Bone*

under Ophelia, to the grave in which she comes to rest. As I move toward a conclusion, let me turn to a remarkable portrayal of *Hamlet's* graveyard scene by Eugene Delacroix.



Eugène Delacroix, *Hamlet and Horatio in the Graveyard*, 1939, Oil on Canvas

I notice one thing above all about this painting: that the feather in Hamlet's cap and the shape of the cloud above him have the same form, the same outline. Just as they are in the description of Ophelia's death, nature and fashion become curious counterparts, while the encounter of spirit and bone plays out its drama. That which is most artificial—the ornament of an ornament, the feather or the flourish of one's cap—is akin to nature insofar as each is an other of consciousness and of the body. What we wear is what we will become: matter. But here that thoughtless substance is fashioned, worked by spirit and by history into decorous form, even as the clouds are by Delacroix. The feather in the cap says as surely as the deep and distant substance of the cloud: what we are looking at is not only the mimetic representation of a scene but a material thing, a painting. It's their doubling by one another—the artistic act performed by Delacroix—that makes this unavoidable. Nature and artifice find their synthesis in the bristles of the brush, right at the surface of their encounter with the texture of the canvas. That's where we can find spirit and bone not faced off in a tete-à-tete—there where we can see them—but integral in their movement, assimilated by it, mediating the absolute judgment as material image in the process of its making. Delacroix's doubling of cap and cloud gives us the key to the torn and troubled skies we find in so many of his paintings. All those riven skies in their moody majesty are signs of that within which passeth show, but they are not quite drawn back into that interiority. They remain exterior, mysterious, unassimilable, and that's why they look the way they do. The riddle is that their ungraspable mystery depends on its recognition while repelling recognition, like the way the ornaments of our garments decorate the body and lend it their signature without yet being one with it, such that they may hang, for example, unregarded upon a hook—merely existing.

The dialectical problem of exteriority is made manifest by Delacroix's painting, and it is inscribed at the heart of Shakespeare's play. What is within resists expression through that

which is without; what is without resists absorption by that which is within. Yet we can know this; we can come to think the concept of this irreducibility of bone to spirit and of spirit to bone, even as we think their being as one. Doing so through Hegel's infinite judgment requires us to wrestle with the way in which spirit is a thing even as it is not, a speculative contradiction bearing upon the historical spiritualization of ground by culture and the reduction of culture to ground.

This approach to the play allows us to grasp the meaning of its final imperative, spoken by Fortinbras:

Let four captains  
Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage,  
For he was likely, had he been put on,  
To have proved most royal; and this passage  
The soldier's music and the rite of war  
Speak loudly for him.  
Take up the bodies. Such a sight as this  
Becomes the field, but here shows much amiss.  
Go, bid the soldiers shoot. (5.2.379-386)

Hamlet *would* "have proved most royal." But on the palace floor, the bodies show much amiss: that the time is out of joint, that something is rotten in the state of Denmark. They mark the skewed intersection of time with space, of history with the ground that will be called "land" or "nation." On the palace floor, the bodies are not where they should be: on the battlefield. So they must be placed where they are: on the stage. The stage is the site of the re-placement of bodies, the reenactment of their lives and their deaths. Music and the rite of war are requested for Hamlet's passage to the stage, the sound of spirit and the sound of leaden gunshots. High on a stage, where the bodies will be placed in view, Horatio will "speak to th' yet unknowing world / How these things came about" (5.2.362-323). At the end of the play, it is as though we do not yet know what we already know; the bodies are not where they should be, nor

where they are: they still have to be carried to the stage. *Drama* will be—it is—the speculative actualization of the play’s movement, the being-where-it-is-not of story, and sorrow, and time. In dramatic art we come to see that bodies are not identical with persons—an actor on a stage may play a part—yet the body is precisely the non-identical site of that performance, of the contradictory identity of what we are with who we are not. Hamlet is the name of both Prince and play, but the word “Hamlet” cannot be written both in and out of italics at the same time, cannot be inscribed, at once, as the name of the drama and of the character within it. The bone of the signifier resists, yet bears within it, the identity of *who* and *what* it names. Each and every time, through the performance of the play, we have to undergo that displaced synthesis of content and form. We have to watch and to listen to what is right there in front of us, conceptualizing what stands and unfolds itself in time, the drama of speaking bodies as they come to know what the poet Joe Wenderoth calls “the true silence of the tongue,”<sup>4</sup> as they come to think the void of the speaking tongue’s eventual absence from the skull, the hollow absence of the song its silence once could sing.

Confronted with a skull bone and a name, the voice of tragedy says “Alas, poor Yorick!” But through the experience of tragic art—through our immersion in its pathos at the place of its unfolding—we may come to know the meaning of its matter: *The being of spirit is a bone*. To know tragic art in that way is indeed to think the unfolding of its drama as the highest fulfillment of self-comprehending life. Delacroix’s painting freezes the scene at the pregnant moment where the name is spoken and the skull is passed from one to another. But if we know the play, we can recognize and feel therein the complex articulations of the drama’s unfolding, the movement of the whole through a still image. *This?* E’en that. That is to say, spirit.

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<sup>4</sup> Joe Wenderoth, “Language” in *If I Don’t Breathe How Do I Sleep*, Seattle: Wave Books, 2014, p. 16.



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# His Master's Missing Voice<sup>1</sup>

*Eric L. Santner*

This may seem like a trivial matter in comparison with all the changes taking place in contemporary language use with respect to gender and sexuality, but at present, though it's still acceptable to say "good boy" or "good girl" to one's dog, there is no longer a good word to refer to *oneself* in relation to one's dog. In English, the options are pretty much "master," "owner," or, somewhat embarrassingly, "mommy" and "daddy." In German, the traditional term is *Herr* (or the feminine *Herrin*), a word also used, of course, to refer to the ultimate lord and master. Stray dogs are referred to as *herrenlos*, dogs lacking a master. The vague discomfort many now feel with all these words suggests that the historical attenuation of the traditional figure of the master has come to infect inter-species relations. Dominion over animals is simply no longer admissible.

Among the most creative and generative responses to this situation has been Donna Haraway's *Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*. There Haraway, who calls herself a "caninist" rather than "humanist," proposes,

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<sup>1</sup> Although my approach to Kafka is different, I have profited enormously from Aaron Schuster's work on Kafka's "Researches of a Dog." He gave a talk on the story at the University of Chicago a number of years ago, published short versions of his research in journals, and has now brought together his years of thought on the story in a remarkable new book, *How to Research Like a Dog: Kafka's New Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2024).

if only in passing, the word “guardian” as a possible placeholder for the gap left by master-owner-mommy, a term that sustains the asymmetries that of necessity color the companionship between dogs and humans, the significance of the significant otherness—Haraway’s term—constitutive of the species relation at issue. I’ll return to Haraway’s exhilarating text later in the discussion (Haraway 2003).

In the following I’d like to offer some remarks on Franz Kafka’s late, unfinished prose work, *Forschungen eines Hundes*—in English, *Researches of a Dog*—which is, at some level, a thought experiment concerning the prospect of a fully *herrenlose Hundeschaft*, or at least one in which the name of the master has been fully foreclosed without, or without yet, returning in the real as an emergent companion species demanding the invention of new names all around.

## 1

The story is presented as a kind of memoir of an aging dog reflecting on his choice as a young dog to pursue the life of the mind, one dedicated to research, to a certain kind of theoretical activity, rather than sharing in the common life of dogs. He confesses that this choice set him on a difficult path: “Why won’t I behave like the others, live in harmony with my kind, silently accept whatever disturbs that harmony, overlook it as a little mistake in the great reckoning, and turn forever toward what binds us happily together and not toward what, time and again, irresistibly, of course, tears us out of the circle of our kind?” (Kafka 2006, p. 133; Kafka 1994, p. 50)<sup>2</sup> In hindsight, the narrator-dog seems to realize that such

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<sup>2</sup> Subsequent references are made in the text with the page number of the translation first (Kafka 2006), followed by the page number of the original (Kafka 1994).

disturbances to the harmony of dogdom, of *Hundeschaft*, point not to contingent and determinate errors, but to a more fundamental errancy grounded in a structural glitch in the constitution of the species: “on closer scrutiny I soon find that something was not quite right from the beginning, that a little fracture [*eine kleine Bruchstelle*] was in place.” He notes that “a slight uneasiness,” *ein leichtes Unbehagen*, would come over him not only amid the collective but also in more intimate settings, indeed that the mere sight of another dog could throw him into a sense of helplessness and despair (p. 132; p. 48). Call it *Unbehagen in der Hundekultur* (with a touch of canine self-hatred).

He goes on to recall the event that first set him on the course of his canine studies career. It was an encounter with a group of seven dogs who engage in a kind of dance set to a piece of clamorous music that seems to come from nowhere, a music *ex nihilo*. “They did not speak, they did not sing, in general they held their tongue with almost a certain doggedness [*mit einer gewissen Verbissenheit*], but they conjured forth music out of the empty space.” He recalls “the way they raised and set down their feet, certain turns of their heads, their running and their resting, the attitudes they assumed toward one another, the combinations they formed with one another like a round dance” (p. 134; pp. 51–52). At a certain point the music becomes overwhelming: “you could attend to nothing but this music that came from all sides, from the heights, from the depths, from everywhere, pulling the listener into its midst, pouring over him, crushing him, and even after annihilating him, still blaring its fanfares at such close range that they turned remote [*in solcher Nähe, daß es schon Ferne war*] and barely audible” (p. 135; pp. 52–53). The young narrator-dog retreats to a pile of wooden planks and from his hiding place observes how the performance takes a new and horrifying turn; the seven dancing dogs “had truly cast off all shame” and stood upright on their hind legs. “They were exposing themselves and openly flaunted their nakedness, they prided

themselves on it, and whenever they obeyed their better instincts for a moment and lowered their front legs, they were literally horrified, as if it were a mistake, as if nature were a mistake, and once again they rapidly raised their legs, and their eyes seemed to be asking forgiveness that they had had to desist a little from their sinfulness [*daß sie in ihrer Sündhaftigkeit ein wenig hatten innehalten müssen*]” (p. 136; pp. 54–55).

The young narrator-dog’s obsession with this for him deeply enigmatic, not to say, traumatic, encounter is what ultimately alienates him from dogdom and sets him on his course as a researcher with the aim of, as he puts it, solving it “absolutely by dint of research, so as finally to gain a new view of ordinary, quiet, happy, everyday life.” As he then adds, “I have subsequently worked the same way, even if with less childish means—but the difference is not very great—and I persist stubbornly to this day” (p. 138; pp. 57). Be that as it may, the dogged pursuit of a sort of absolute canine knowledge begins with questions close to hand, questions pertaining to the most basic needs of canine life. “I began my investigations at that time with the simplest things... I began to investigate what dogdom took as nourishment” (p. 138; pp. 58). The research concerns the question of the source of food, namely where food comes from. Does it come from the earth? Does it come down from the sky? Can dogs influence the appearance of food? Though these are questions that have apparently concerned canine scholars for generations, our young researcher, admitting the limits to his capacity for proper scientific study, pursues such questions more or less on his own without consulting the authoritative, call them *caninical*, sources. A first conclusion would have it that dogs’ main foodstuff indeed comes from the earth but that, for still unknown reasons, the earth needs dogs to help with its production: “we find this food on the ground, but the ground needs our water.” He adds that the appearance of food has been known to be accelerated by means of “certain incantations, songs, and movements” (p. 139; p. 59). Later in the

story, our canine researcher entertains an opposing opinion, one seemingly supported by empirical evidence, that food comes not from the ground but rather from above and is only brought down to earth by way of said canine rituals (p. 151; p. 77).

At this point in the story if not much sooner, the reader recognizes its fundamental conceit, namely, that the dogs live amid human beings, who for some reason remain invisible to them. Put another way, the dogs live as if human beings did not exist and are thus forced to contend with a multiplicity of phenomena that must remain enigmatic to them or can be explained only by way of empirically noted regularities: dogs pee; dogs find food on the ground; dogs bark, howl, moan (so-called incantations); dogs find food on the ground. The story's conceit becomes completely obvious when the narrator-dog, discussing the odd variety of occupations in which dogs are employed, mentions the air dogs, the *Lufthunde*. This term, adapted from *Luftmensch*, the Yiddish expression for a dreamy, impractical person with no visible means of subsistence—a kind of redoubling of the drift of diasporic life—clearly refers here to small lapdogs who instead of being walked are carried around by their invisible masters. Known to the narrator only by hearsay, he expresses his incredulity that “There was supposed to be a dog, of the smallest breed, not much bigger than my head, even in advanced age not much bigger; and this dog, naturally a weakling, to judge by appearances an artificial, immature, overcarefully coiffed creature, incapable of taking an honest jump—this dog, the story went, was supposed to move about most of the time high in the air while doing no visible work” (p. 143; p. 66). In hindsight, it becomes clear that the encounter that set him on his path as a researcher was with a group of trained dogs performing, perhaps in a park or public square, to the accompaniment of human musicians. We feel confident that the answer to that first enigma, namely “Who was forcing them to do what they were doing here?” (p. 136; p. 54), is a straightforward one: their human trainers and masters.

What remains unclear is whether such enigmas are shared by the lapdogs and dancing dogs, who seem to be fully integrated into the world of humans. Does our narrator-dog belong, perhaps, to a separate order of canines, that of *stray dogs*, dogs abandoned by human masters, dogs without papers, undocumented, “stateless” dogs, as it were? Be that as it may, from the perspective of our first-person—or first-canine—narrator, *Herrenlosigkeit* is an ontological determination of *Hundeschaft*, one that is constitutive of the “canine condition” as such. It is not just that the significance of the significant otherness of human beings has changed but rather that this dimension of otherness is fully foreclosed. For the dogs, it would seem, the Lord and Master is dead.

To return to the main question the narrator-dog pursues, namely, where food comes from, the story would seem to suggest that the *Bruchstelle* or fracture in the constitution of dogdom is connected to the lack of a concept of *providence*, that is, that food is *provided for them* by human beings, that they are, in their species-being, tied, by way of linked evolutionary histories, to the *oikos*, dependent on their masters for care and nurturance. One might think of it as a thought experiment: what happens when a region of being is foreclosed from one’s picture of the world? I want to propose that Kafka is revealing the sorts of uncanny enigmas and paradoxes that emerge once divine being—once revelation—has been foreclosed from human life, no longer figures as a central point of reference and orientation in the world, once man himself becomes in this radical sense *herrenlos*. The texture of ordinary life comes to be ruptured by a series of impossible questions that, as it were, hound human life without hopes of “domestication” by either the natural or human sciences. One might think in this context of the perplexity Freud expressed in *Unbehagen in der Kultur* with respect to the commandment to love one’s neighbor as oneself. Neighbor-love appears as bizarre and mysterious as the spectacle of the seven dogs dancing to music that seems to come from nowhere, as the



appearance of food for a dog whose “ontology” has no place for the being of human being and who barks and howls into an empty sky, *einen herrenlosen Himmel*.<sup>3</sup>

2

As I've noted, the narrator-dog in Kafka's story considers himself poorly trained and without special talent for the research he undertakes (he later speaks of his “lack of propensity for science, scant intellectual power, poor memory and, above all, inability to focus consistently on a scientific goal” [p. 160–61; p. 92]). Nonetheless, he devises a series of experiments meant to grasp the causal chain that leads to the appearance of food, to catch it in action, as it were. After several efforts with uncertain outcomes, he decides to undertake a more radical experiment: to withdraw from the society of his fellow dogs and, more importantly, to fast, as if only the

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<sup>3</sup> In the second chapter of his *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith, one of the towering figures of the Scottish Enlightenment, seems to suggest that political economy is born with the “insight” that the institution of the division of labor can no longer be thought by way of appeal to divine providence but only by way of two options: as an invention of human wisdom (Smith rejects this option) or as a self-organizing system emerging in the course of human history on the basis of the “propensity in human nature ... to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another.” (Smith 1979, p. 17) Immediately after this famous pronouncement, Smith goes on to deny such a propensity not just to animals in general but seemingly to dogs in particular who, precisely as that species of domestic animals kept as pets, stand in such close companion species relations with humans. Providence is famously brought down to earth and transcendence is rendered immanent, as a spectral supplement to the intentional life of human beings: the hand invisibly, uncannily guiding economic self-organization. Max Weber, for his part, famously argued that the invisible hand is only a faint, haunting remnant of the true *spirit* of capitalism that entered human life through a radical religious reformation. The energies of that spirit pertain not to the pursuit of self-interest but rather to the Christian's ceaseless devotion to the amplification of God's glory on earth. For Weber, modern capitalism was not so much egological as doxological.

most radical ascetic practice—starvation—could clear the space for true knowledge about what keeps dogkind alive.<sup>4</sup> At the point where our canine *hunger artist*—Kafka wrote the story bearing that title the same year he wrote *Researches*, 1922—has reduced himself to a minimum of bare life—we might say, to life in the neighborhood of zero—he awakens to find himself confronted by another dog who demands that he remove himself from the area. In the course of the dialogue that ensues, the strange dog declares his breed—“I am a hunter” (p. 158; p. 89)—and continues to insist that our narrator-dog is interfering with his work and must leave. At a point of stalemate something remarkable occurs that, though the narrator-dog will later attribute it to his “overstimulation at the time,” “nevertheless had a certain grandeur and is,” he adds, “the sole reality, even if only an apparent reality, that I salvaged and brought back into this world from the time of my fast” (p. 159; p. 90). It was a moment of ecstasy, of *Außer-sich-sein*, accompanied by “infinite anxiety and shame” produced by a second encounter with music *ex nihilo*: “I noticed through intangible details ... that from the depths of his chest this dog was getting ready to sing” (p. 159; p. 89–90). Though the hunting dog appears to remain silent, music emerges nonetheless: “What I seemed to perceive was that the dog was already singing without his being aware of it—no, more than that: that the melody, detached from him, was floating through the air and then past him according to its own laws, as if he no longer had any part in it, floating at me, aimed only at me” (p. 159; p. 90).

By this point in the story, the reader is already clued in, already prepared to attribute the music not to the narrator-dog’s hypersensitivity brought on by fasting but rather to human hunters blowing their hunting horns (it’s worth noting that the

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<sup>4</sup> I’m alluding here, of course, to the Brecht-Weil song “What Keeps Mankind Alive?,” which would be sung some six years later at the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm. The German title is “Ballade über die Frage: Wovon lebt der Mensch?”

hunting dog identifies himself not as a hunting dog, a dog in the service of a master, but as a hunter in his own right). And though this musical epiphany remains empty of content, the narrator-dog, as already noted, nonetheless registers its uncanny force as an interpellation addressed to him only, now as a kind of overwhelming Orphic voice (one is here reminded, perhaps, of the man from the country standing before the law, *Vor dem Gesetz*, the gates of which, as he learns in his last moments of life, were meant only for him): “I could not resist the melody that the dog now quickly seemed to adopt as his own. It grew stronger, there may have been no limits to its power to increase, it was already on the verge of shattering my eardrums [*schon jetzt sprengte sie mir fast das Gehör*]. But the worst of it was that it seemed to be there for my sake alone, this voice, whose sublimity made the woods grow silent, for my sake alone” (p. 159; p. 90).

At this point it is hard, at least for me, not to hear in this voice resonances with the debate between Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem concerning the status of “revelation” in Kafka’s writings. The central point of contention between the two friends concerns the status of theological trace elements in Kafka’s work. Scholem insists that Kafka’s work is suffused with the radiance of revelation, but a revelation, as he puts it, “seen from the perspective in which it is returned to its own nothingness” (Scholem 1992, p. 126, letter of July 17, 1934). Scholem will later characterize this “nothingness of revelation” as “a state in which revelation appears to be without meaning, in which it still asserts itself, in which it has validity but no significance [*in dem sie gilt, aber nicht bedeutet*],” a revelation “reduced to the zero point of its own content, so to speak” (ibid., p. 142, letter of September 20, 1934).<sup>5</sup> For Kafka, what I said with respect to Freud’s

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<sup>5</sup> Samuel Beckett’s *Worstward Ho* provides an entire series of “worst words” for what Scholem was after, for example: “Least never to be naught. Never to naught be brought. Never by naught be nulled. Unnullable least.” (Beckett 1996, p. 106)

relation to the commandment of neighbor-love needs a slight but significant revision. A divine commandment is one that only truly carries force for a person of faith, for someone who recognizes the word of God in the commandment. Kafka seems to offer another possibility, namely, that it is possible to register the force of a commandment the content of which approaches zero.<sup>6</sup>

The canine version of this *Nichts der Offenbarung*, this “nothing of revelation” conveyed by a disembodied voice, a floating signifier of transcendence (that could nonetheless take up residence in a particular dog, become the music of the Other in it), leads to a new turn in the researches of the narrator-dog. After this second musical encounter of the story—call it a *Musiktrauma*—he feels new life entering his body and, more importantly, a new sense of his proper vocation, a call to engage in a new branch of scientific research: musicology, *Musikwissenschaft als Beruf*. More importantly, he finally realizes that the science of nutrition and the science of music overlap at a crucial juncture, one about which he already had some inklings at the time of his first musical encounter: “Of course, there is some overlap between the two sciences [*ein Grenzgebiet der beiden Wissenschaften*] that even then aroused my suspicions. I mean the doctrine of the song that calls down food from above” (p. 160; p. 92). Again, the straightforward reading would be that the various sorts of vocalizations produced by domestic animals can move their masters to feed them. The mystery here is, of course, that it is a mystery for the dogs how this works once the domestic sphere has become *herrenlos*. These last thoughts about the border zone of the two sciences lead immediately to the narrator-dog’s concluding words that repeat the theme of his lack of talent for proper science. But now, at the very

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<sup>6</sup> In a brilliant lecture on Heidegger, Dieter Thomä argued that Heidegger’s entire philosophical project could be understood as a series of attempts to distill into a pure imperative, into a pure call without content, the force of Being in history. See Thomä 2015.

end of his autobiographical reflections, he seems ready to fully embrace this lack as rooted in an instinct for a different mode of inquiry, for the development of an entirely new kind science, a kind of *new (canine) thinking*: “It was my instinct that, perhaps precisely for the sake of science but a different science than is practiced today, an ultimate science, led me to value freedom above all else. Freedom! Of course, the freedom that is possible today—a stunted growth [*ein kümmerliches Gewächs*]. But nevertheless freedom, nevertheless a possession” (p. 161; pp. 92–93).

At the conclusion of his inspiring reading of Kafka’s “caninical” text, Mladen Dolar suggests that it was Kafka’s neighbor, Freud, who had already begun to develop the warp and woof—hard not to say woof-woof—of this ultimate science of at least a kind of freedom, a freedom rooted in that border territory where nutrition and music, food and voice, seem to converge and diverge at the same time, where the locus of nutrition—mouth, tongue, teeth, throat—become, by a kind intermittent fasting, the locus of the articulation of sounds (as every child is taught, one shouldn’t speak with one’s mouth full). Giving a psychoanalytic twist to Deleuze and Guatarri’s characterization of this “deterritorialization” of the mouth, Dolar puts it this way: “By speech [the] mouth is denaturalized, diverted from its natural function, seized by the signifier (and ... by the voice, which is but the alterity of the signifier). The Freudian name for this deterritorialization is the drive... Eating can never be the same once the mouth has been deterritorialized—it is seized by the drive, it turns around a new object which emerged in this operation, it keeps circumventing, circling around this eternally elusive object.” (Dolar 2006, pp. 186–87) Our efforts to reterritorialize this object, to integrate the alterity of the voice into our life in the space of meaning never comes off without a remainder. As Dolar puts it, “[b]ut this secondary nature can never quite succeed, and the bit that eludes it can be pinned down as the element of the voice, this pure alterity

of what is said. This is the common ground it shares with food, that in food which precisely escapes eating, the bone that gets stuck in the gullet.” (Dolar 2006, p. 187)<sup>7</sup> According to the conceit of Kafka’s story, we might say that here the drive functions as if human life had absorbed into its own flesh the negative theology that had formed the horizon of a previous form of life, as if the unnamable object of that theology had now entered into the life substance of human being. Apophantic theology thereby becomes the psychotheology of everyday life, in which our satisfactions always leave something to be desired, they remain, at some level, a dog’s breakfast.

In her own efforts to theorize the ontological mongrelization of every life form, the symbiogenetic constitution of every species in its relation to multiple others (including the millions of microorganisms that populate macroorganisms), Haraway herself indicates that at least part of the otherness at stake in the significant otherness constitutive of all companion species relations escapes the sciences of both nature and culture, and perhaps, even, those pertaining to the exemplary species of what Haraway, blurring the boundaries between the two seemingly independent realms, calls “natureculture”: the cyborg. At a certain point in her manifesto, Haraway indicates that the dimension at issue may be irreducibly theological or at least that one might need theology to keep it in view, to attend to it, be observant of it in the relevant ways. One thinks here, perhaps, of Walter Benjamin’s famous allegory in which a nineteenth-century orientalized cyborg, the mechanical chess player who, in the allegory, stands in for historical materialism, wins each match only insofar as he is manipulated by a hidden dwarf who represents, for his part, the resources of theology. As Benjamin puts it, “[t]he puppet, called ‘historical materialism’ is

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<sup>7</sup> The “anal” complement to this “oral” object might be characterized as the indigestible remainder that we always at some level retain whether we want to or not.

to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is small and ugly and has to keep out of sight" (Benjamin 2003, p. 389).<sup>8</sup>

To pick up the thread of the discussion, I'm suggesting that, for both Haraway and Kafka, theology becomes relevant in its perhaps most *kümmertlich* form, that of negative theology. But this is a negative theology that has now migrated into and constitutes the amorous flesh of companion species relations:

The recognition that one cannot *know* the other or the self, but must ask in respect for all of time who and what are emerging in relationships, is the key. That is true for all true lovers, of whatever species. Theologians describe the power of the "negative way of knowing" God. Because Who/What Is is infinite, a finite being, without idolatry, can only specify what is not, i.e., not the projection of one's own self. Another name for that kind of "negative" knowing is love. I believe those theological considerations are powerful for knowing dogs, especially for entering into a relationship, like training, worthy of the name of love. (Haraway 2003, p. 49.)<sup>9</sup>

### 3

Foucault's last lectures at the Collège de France were dedicated to, among other things, an attempt to think through the legacy of the "courage of truth" associated with ancient Cynicism. The Cynics, whose name, whatever its real origin, was understood in relation to *kunikos*, a word signifying "doglike," became important to Foucault because of the way in which they shifted

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<sup>8</sup> Instead of small and ugly, *klein und hässlich*, one might insert Kafka's characterization of modern freedom as *ein kümmerliches Gewächs*.

<sup>9</sup> Perhaps those absent trainers of the dancing dogs, lap dogs, and hunting dogs in Kafka's story were not yet capable of love, of entering into a relation with the significant otherness of their companion species, and thereby lost their own significance for the dogs.

the locus of *parrhêsia*—forthright truth-telling, frankness, free-spokenness—from that of true discourse and knowledge to that of the true life. The Cynics, by the very way they lived, insisted on “the permanent, difficult, and perpetually embarrassing question,” namely, “that of the philosophical life, of the *bios philosophikos*” (Foucault 2011, p. 234). Whereas “all philosophy increasingly tends to pose the question of truth-telling in terms of the conditions under which a statement can be recognized as true, Cynicism is the form of philosophy which constantly raises the question: what can the form of life be such that it practices truth-telling?” (Ibid., p. 234) The radical nature of the answer given by the Cynics was sufficiently scandalous that their efforts to conduct what they took to be the true life, the *bios philosophikos*, acquired, to resort once more to my hopefully not too annoying pun, *caninical* status. Paraphrasing an ancient source on the *bios kunikos* of the Cynics, Foucault writes,

First, the *kunikos* life is a dog’s life in that it is without modesty, shame, and human respect. It is a life which does in public, in front of everyone, what only dogs and animals dare to do, and which men usually hide. The Cynic’s life is a dog’s life in that it is shameless. Second, the Cynic life is a dog’s life because, like the latter, it is indifferent. It ... is not attached to anything, is content with what it has, and has no needs other than those it can satisfy immediately. Third, the life of the Cynic is the life of a dog, it received the epithet *kunikos* because it is, so to speak, a life which barks, a diacritical (*diakritikos*) life, that is to say, a life which can fight, which barks at enemies, which knows how to distinguish the good from the bad, the true from the false, and masters from enemies. ... Finally, fourth, the Cynic life is *phulaktikos*. It is a guard dog’s life, a life which knows how to dedicate itself to saving others and protecting the master’s life. Shameless life, *adiophoros* (indifferent) life, *diakritikos* life (diacritical, distinguishing, discriminating, and, as it were, barking life), and *phulaktikos* (guard’s life, guard dog’s life). (Ibid., p. 243)



To live the life of a dog was not only to be a martyr of truth in the sense of bearing witness to truth in the conduct of life; by embodying, by fleshing out the “grimace of the true life” (ibid., p. 227), the Cynic’s life was meant to serve as an imperative aimed at all others *to change their lives*. This demand—call it Cynicism’s tough (neighbor-)love—was encapsulated in the formula said to have been addressed to Diogenes at Delphi to “change the currency,” that is, to undertake, to put it in Nietzschean terms, a *transvaluation of values*. One effect of this transvaluation was that the Cynic could now lay claim to the title of true kingship. “The king and the philosopher, monarchy and philosophy, monarchy and sovereignty over self are frequent themes. But in the Cynics they take a completely different form, simply because the Cynics make the very simple, bald, utterly insolent assertion that the Cynic himself is king” (ibid., p. 274–75). As such, Foucault continues, “vis-à-vis kings of the world, crowned kings sitting on their thrones, he is the anti-king who shows how hollow, illusory, and precarious the monarchy of kings is” (275). As the true yet unrecognized king, as a king whose royalty remains hidden, as the “king of poverty ... who hides his sovereignty in destitution,” he becomes, as Foucault puts it, “the king of derision” (ibid., p. 278).

Though Foucault never makes the connection, it is hard not to hear in this brief account echoes of Richard’s famous speech on the Welsh coast in Act 3 of Shakespeare’s *Richard II*:

For God’s sake let us sit upon the ground  
And tell sad stories of the death of kings,  
How some have been deposed, some slain in war,  
Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed,  
Some poisoned by their wives, some sleeping killed—  
All murdered. For within the hollow crown  
That rounds the mortal temples of a king  
Keeps death his court, and there the antic sits,  
Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,  
Allowing him a breath, a little scene

To monarchize, be feared and kill with looks,  
Infusing him with self and vain conceit,  
As if this flesh which walls about our life  
Were brass impregnable, and humoured thus  
Comes at the last and with a little pin  
Bores through his castle wall—and farewell king. (3.2.155-70)<sup>10</sup>

Foucault twice makes use of the metaphor of the broken mirror, the sort that recalls the scene at Flint Castle where Richard requests a mirror to view, as it were, the royal remains of his unkinged face:

Is this the face which faced so many follies,  
That was at last outfaced by Bolingbroke?  
A brittle glory shineth in this face;  
As brittle as the glory is the face,  
[*He throws down the glass*]  
For there it is cracked in a hundred shivers. (4.1.285-89)

The metaphor of the broken mirror—along with that of the derisive grimace—is meant to capture the doggedly critical stance of Cynicism toward the conventions of philosophy: “Cynicism is thus this kind of grimace that philosophy makes to itself, this broken mirror in which philosophy is at once called upon to see itself and fails to recognize itself. Such is the paradox of the Cynic

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<sup>10</sup> In his *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, Robert Musil has the character Clarisse comment on a debate between her husband, Walter, and Ulrich, the “man without qualities” about the “impossible” relation between art and life. “‘And yet,’ Clarisse remarks, ‘it seems very important to me ... that there’s something impossible in every one of us. It explains so many things. While I was listening to you both, it seemed to me that if we could be cut open our entire life might look like a ring, just something that goes around something.’ She had already, earlier on, pulled off her wedding ring, and now she peered through it at the lamplit wall. ‘There’s nothing inside, and yet it looks as though that were precisely what matters most.’” We might say, the hollow crown has entered into, become “encysted” by, and “encysts” in *every body* (Musil 1995, p. 401).

life... ; it is the fulfillment of the true life, but as demand for a life which is radically other” (Foucault 2011, p. 270).<sup>11</sup>

Foucault does, indeed, make use of Shakespeare to flesh out the legacy of the Cynic conception of kingship, one that includes, as we have seen, elements of derision, hiddenness, and destitution. For Foucault, it is *King Lear* rather than *Richard II* that best displays these elements in their royal aspect, to which he adds the related themes of banishment, homelessness, and errancy. “At the point of confluence of all this you could obviously find the figure of King Lear. King Lear is ... the highest expression of this theme of the king of derision, the mad king, and the hidden king” (Foucault 2011, p. 286). Noting that the play’s point of departure is “a story of *parrhêsia*, a test of frankness,” Foucault characterizes Lear’s fate as a series of reversals. “King Lear is precisely someone who is unable to recognize the truth that was there. And on the basis of this failure to recognize the truth, he in turn is unrecognized” (ibid., p. 286). We might say that Lear’s reduction to a kind of radical creatureliness is presented as the (broken) mirror image of his kingship. The deaths with which the play ends represent, for Foucault, “the fulfillment of his wretchedness, but a fulfillment which is at the same time the triumph and restoration of the truth itself” (ibid., p. 286).

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In his speech given on the occasion of receipt of the Georg Büchner Prize in 1960, Paul Celan characterized Büchner as a poet of creaturely life, as “someone who does not forget that he speaks

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<sup>11</sup> The demand to change one’s life emerging in and through the gaze from a broken mirror brings to mind Rilke’s poem “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” the last lines of which are “... for here there is no place / that does not see you. You must change your life. (... denn da ist keine Stelle, / die dich nicht sieht. Du mußt dein Leben ändern.)” (Rilke 1984, p. 61) There the gaze emanates not from a broken mirror but rather from a broken, headless statue.

from the angle of inclination of his very being, his creatureliness [*dem Neigungswinkel seines Daseins, dem Neigungswinkel seiner Kreatürlichkeit*].” (Celan 2011, p. 409) In the speech, Celan cites various passages from Büchner’s writings that testify to this dimension, to this singular torsion of one’s being, as what is ultimately at issue in poetic creation, in *Dichtung*, in contrast to art, to *Kunst*. Art, like beauty for Kant, remains at the level of the *sensus communis*, the level of general social intelligibility, while the writing and reception of poetry are rooted in one’s singularity and in what can be revealed of and in relation to it.<sup>12</sup> Among the passages Celan cites are the penultimate lines of Büchner’s play *Danton’s Death*, in which the figure of Lucile, whom Celan refers to as *die Kunstblinde*, someone blind to art, in a suicidal gesture at the foot of the guillotine at the Place de la Révolution, cries out “*Es lebe der König!*” (“Long live the king!”). Celan characterizes this utterance as the “counterword,” *das Gegenwort*, that breaks with the theatricality, the art and artfulness, of the *political animal*. As Celan clarifies, “here there’s no homage to monarchy or to any preservable Yesterday... Homage here is to the *Majesty of the Absurd*, testifying to human presence [*die Gegenwart des Menschlichen*].” He further adds, “And that, ladies and gentlemen, has no fixed name once and for all time, yet it is, I believe ... poetry” (Celan 2001, p. 16; my emphasis). The “rhyme” of *Gegenwort* and *Gegenwart*, counterword and presence, along with the use of the verb *zeugen*, though rightly translated here as “testifying,” also signifies the act of procreation, suggests that poetry is the site of a kind of natality, an emergence to presence, of what, with respect to the rule of social classifications and statuses, can only be registered

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<sup>12</sup> Using the terms proposed by Roland Barthes in his small treatise on photography, one might say that art belongs to the domain of the *stadium*, while poetry traces and projects meridians among dispersed *puncta* (see Barthes 1982). Here one might think of meridians not only in their geographical sense but also with respect to what they signify in acupuncture: the pathways along which vital energy flows through the body.

as anarchic and “royally”—we might add, “cynically”—absurd. Perhaps most importantly, for Celan, the clearing of a uniquely human *Gegenwart* by way of a *Gegenwort* is where poetry and politics do make a kind of contact: “it is an act of freedom. It is a step” (ibid., p. 403). Or as Kafka’s Cynic put it, “Freedom! Of course, the freedom that is possible today—a stunted growth [*ein kümmerliches Gewächs*]. But nevertheless freedom, nevertheless a possession” (Kafka 2006, p. 161; Kafka 1994, pp. 92–93).

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Toward the end of Rilke’s novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, we find a scene that Celan may have had in mind when he wrote these words. In it, Rilke’s protagonist finally encounters the blind newspaper salesman he had worked so hard at not truly observing: “Immediately I knew that my picture of him was worthless. His absolute abandonment and wretchedness, unlimited by any precaution or disguise, went far beyond what I had been able to imagine. I had understood neither the angle of his face [*den Neigungswinkel seiner Haltung*] nor the terror which the inside of his eyelids seemed to keep radiating into him.” Malte registers this moment as a kind of ontological proof of the existence of God; its demonstration takes place not by argument but in and through the revelation of the *creature as neighbor*: “My God, I thought with sudden vehemence, so you really *are*. There are proofs of your existence. I have forgotten them all and never even wanted any, for what a huge obligation would lie in the certainty of you. And yet that is what has just been shown to me.” (Rilke 1990, pp. 210–211) Here Rilke brings together two aspects of what it means to be *observant*. The capacity to be truly observant of one’s neighbor qua neighbor seems here to go hand in hand with a minimal sort of religious observance. For Rilke, these two modes of being observant are brought together by a kind of *poetic observance*.

Haraway, in her own way, brings these modes of attention, of being observant, together by way of a concept that has been central to my work for many years, that of the flesh. One might say that the flesh was already there in the “real presence” that emerges at the place of the void across which the love relation—including the love of companion species—takes hold, the real presence opened by apophantic nomination. As Haraway puts it, such communion in the flesh ramifies fractally into “the imagined community that can only be known through the negative way of naming, like all ultimate hopes.” (Haraway 2003, p. 62) Haraway makes the theological legacy transmitted in her key terms explicit: “My soul indelibly marked by a Catholic formation, I hear in species the doctrine of the Real Presence under both species, bread and wine, the transubstantiated signs of the flesh. Species is about the corporeal join of the material and the semiotic...” (ibid., pp. 14–15).

But ultimately, as was the case for Kafka’s dog, Haraway makes use of this legacy (among others) to invent another science, a new thinking formed on the very basis of this fleshy jointure, one dedicated to the perpetual work of remodeling its apparent plasticity, work that to a large extent takes place in and through poetic speech. Here it is not so much the work of the concept as the play of tropes, or perhaps better, an activity at the jointure of both, that allows for action at the point at which—and these are the last words of the manifesto—“the word is made flesh in mortal naturecultures” (ibid., p. 98). Put somewhat differently, the negative way of naming inherited from apophantic theology is, for Haraway, really another term for the work of tropes, the way poetic figures swerve toward and around something unnamable in the object, the way in which figures serve to “encyst” (my term) the unnamable in the flesh of relation. Haraway’s own master trope is *metaplasma*, which signifies the transposition of the letters, syllables, or sounds of a word or of words in a sentence. As she puts it in the context of the companion species relation front and

center in her text, “[t]he term comes from the Greek *metaplasmos*, meaning remodeling or remolding... I use metaplasms to mean the remodeling of dog and human flesh, remodeling the codes of life, in the history of companion-species relating” (ibid., p. 19).<sup>13</sup>

To return to Celan’s invocation of the majesty of the absurd in his own efforts to say what is distinctive about poetic speech, its capacity, namely, to produce *Gegenworte* testifying to the *Gegenwart*, the real presence of the other in the fleshly torsion of one’s creatureliness, we might say that such speech “encysts” a *surd*, a voiceless breath in the voice marking the place of an unnamable void shared by the speaker of the poem, its subject matter, and its addressee, a void opening the site of what Celan calls a *Begegnung*, an encounter. “The poem is lonely,” Celan writes; “It is lonely and underway. Whoever writes one stays mated with it [*bleibt ihm mitgegeben*]... But in just this way doesn’t the poem stand, right here, in an encounter—in *the mystery of an encounter?*” As Celan continues, the crucial dimension at issue here is that of a certain

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<sup>13</sup> While working on this text, I came upon a review of a memoir by the French anthropologist, Nastassja Martin, who was mauled by a Kamchatka brown bear while doing research on the Even peoples in Siberia. The reviewer, Leslie Jamison, who cites Haraway in her review, is more fascinated than disturbed by the ways in which Martin transforms a considerable trauma—the bear tore out a chunk of her jaw, resulting in the need for numerous surgeries—into an erotically tinged companion-species encounter, one taking place emphatically in the flesh. “Throughout her memoir ... Martin never calls this encounter an attack. Instead, she describes it as a meeting, an implosion of boundaries, a melding of forms, and most notably, ‘the bear’s kiss’: ‘His teeth closing over me, my jaw cracking, my skull cracking ... the darkness inside his mouth.’ Her word ‘kiss’ is both emotionally subversive—almost erotic—and also insistently physical. Their contact involved ‘the moist heat and pressure’ of his breath, the dark interior of his mouth. ‘His kiss?’ she writes. ‘Intimate beyond anything I could have imagined.’” (Jameson 2022, p. 27). I for my part am more disturbed than fascinated by what sounds to me like a case of companion-species discourse gone terribly awry. With Haraway’s work on cyborgs in mind, I’m reminded of J. G. Ballard’s novel, *Crash*, in which a group of people rehearse erotic relations with machines by way of car crashes.

kind of attention, that is, a poetic mode of observance mindful of existential singularity and temporal, historical contingency:

The poem wants to reach the Other, it needs this Other, it needs its Over-against [*es braucht ein Gegenüber*]... For the poem making toward an Other, each thing, each human being is a form of this Other... This attentiveness a poem devotes to all its encounters, with its sharper sense of detail, outline, structure, color, but also of “quiverings” [*Zuckungen*] and “intimations” [*Andeutungen*]*—*all this, I think, is not attained by an eye vying (or conniving) with constantly more perfect instruments. Rather it is a concentration that stays mindful of all our dates. (Celan 2001, pp. 409-10)

Celan concludes this section of his speech by citing three significant others, two of whom we’ve already encountered: “‘Attentiveness’ [*Aufmerksamkeit*]*—*allow me here to quote a saying by Malebranche from Walter Benjamin’s Kafka essay*—* ‘Attentiveness is the natural prayer of the soul’” (Benjamin 2003, p. 410). We might add, the *Aufmerksamkeit*, the mode being of observant, that is possible today*—*a stunted growth [*ein kümmerliches Gewächs*]. But nevertheless *Aufmerksamkeit*, nevertheless a possession” (Kafka 2006, p. 161; Kafka 1994, pp. 92–93).

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# Earthlings and Spacemen: Life-and-Death Struggle

*Bara Kolenc*

## 1. *Space Odyssey*

There are two fantasies building up the West's collective unconsciousness today. One is the fantasy of the ultimate recovery of the "humanized" planet—a fantasy of a *return to Paradise*. The other is the fantasy of *Noah's Ark*—the beginning of space imperialism. The function of both is, of course, to cover the real with the phantasmal shield, for sustaining life in space is far from possible and, likewise, recovering humanity-friendly conditions on Earth is proving difficult. We might suggest, though, that these two fantasies point to the emerging class division of the 21st century: the few who can, hypothetically, count on the space asylum, and the rest who cannot—*spacemen* and *earthlings*. Masters and slaves.

We know the figures of the masters: Elon Musk (Tesla, SpaceX), Jeff Bezos (Amazon), and Richard Branson (Virgin Galactic), the three richest men in the world,<sup>1</sup> the three space dreamers and the three space investors.

The figure of the master, however, is not the same as his symbolic place. The master's figure is the king, symbolic place is the place from where the figure is being moved.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> According to Forbes' Real-Time Billionaires list (<https://www.forbes.com/real-time-billionaires/#5ffc02213d78>).

<sup>2</sup> Here, we are speaking about Lacan's differentiation between the imaginary and the symbolic. As shown in his optical model of a phantom bouquet,

The master has instituted himself by risking his life. With this—and with the slave getting terrified of death and thus, in a forced choice, choosing life, but an impoverished life, a life without freedom—the master-slave dialectic has been established *qua* symbolic relation.<sup>3</sup> Now, the real question is: is the master ready to risk his life to maintain the symbolic order (and his own symbolic position within it) or is he not? It is not about the life of the figure on the chessboard—a risk that might be compared to the investment risk about which the capitalist masters, today turning into spacemen, like to boast and by which they justify their position, stating something like “I risked everything I had (that is, all my means of survival, that is, my life), so I am rightly the king of the world and you have nothing to reproach me for.” It is not this kind of abstracted, symbolized risk of life—but it is the *real* risk of life (confronting one with the horrifying inconceivability

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imaginary is always structured by the symbolic (cf. Lacan 1988). The game of chess can well be interpreted as a metaphor of the master-slave dialectics or a “wheel of history”—as was rather popular among the proponents of historical materialism (remember Benjamin’s comparison of historical materialism to “The Turk,” the fraudulent, always winning chess automaton that allegedly defeated Benjamin Franklin and Napoleon Bonaparte). In such interpretations, the pieces on the board serve as imaginary representations of symbolic places understood as positions in the social structure. But the key to Lacanian reading is, in contrast, the idea of an always failed representation. In the manner the symbolic structures the imaginary, there is always a certain blinding effect at work. If there is anything fascinating about chess, therefore, it is the way in which the symbolic struggles with the imaginary: the potency of how symbolic places and structures that exist strictly as relations without any positive content can show themselves not only as figures but also as moves, that is, as spatio-temporal constellations. A game of chess should therefore not be taken as a metaphor for symbolic relations in the social structure, but rather as their metonymy: it doesn’t represent them, but functions exactly in the same way.

<sup>3</sup> The main point of reference in this article is Hegel’s famous supposition of the life-and-death struggle in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and its interpretation put forth by the Ljubljana School (cf. Dolar 1992, Žižek 1998). The Ljubljana School leans in large part on Lacan’s own interpretation (he himself, again, is leaning on Kojève’s), especially in his theory of the four discourses (cf. Lacan 2007).

of the real, that is, the void), like the risk of the chess player in occupied Sarajevo during the Balkan war from Josip Osti's poem who would not move to the basement during the bombing attack so as to be able to continue the game, to defend its symbolic order: "without knowing what happened / the other continued to move the figures / defended and attacked / already with a dead opponent / fought" (Osti 1993, pp. 98–99). A rhetorical question pops up here: which billionaire is ready to die for capitalism?

The thing is that as soon as the master is established as a symbolic place, he<sup>4</sup> no longer needs to be justified in the real. He no longer needs to prove—like Zelensky—that he is willing to sacrifice his life. Even more: the more he wants to prove that he is willing to risk his life (say, for the nation), the more suspicious he appears. People speculate, for example, that "he must be cheating, only performing his warrior's and leader's bravery, while in reality, he is bribed and protected by the Americans." Moreover, even if he proved his willingness and eventually died for Ukraine, still nobody would accept it, assuming his death must have been a scam.

The master is the *dead-living* because his physical death changes nothing—even if he is dead, he keeps on living: it matters little if the master dies or not as long as his symbolic function is sustained. It is only symbolic death that kills the master.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For ease of reading, from this point onwards in the text, male pronouns shall also be considered to include both sexes.

<sup>5</sup> Symbolic death, of course, is not a physical death that is elevated to the level of the symbolic—with ceremonies, funerals, gravestone inscriptions, and so on—but just the opposite, an erasure from the symbolic order, a *damnatio memoriae*. Symbolic death is a removal of master-signifiers, their excommunication (as it is done, for example, with the surnames of the "enemies of state" in all different systems—one of the many examples is the case of Nikolai Yezhov, Stalin's head of secret police (NKVD) nicknamed by historians as "The Vanishing Commissar"). In the internet era, symbolic death seems to be difficult to achieve—everyone knows that even a verbal massacre (which is very popular in today's era of rumors, gossip, and the reign of opinions), which seeks to destroy

The function of the master in a socio-economic order is maintained by his symbolic place even after the physical death of the figure associated with that place. Examples are numerous: after the death of a great leader, master-signifiers of political dynasties—such as the Kennedys or the Kim family—consolidate the abstracted, contentless positions of power; the “great entrepreneurs,” like Steve Jobs, John D. Rockefeller, Henry Ford, or Walt Disney, are kept alive as the “fathers” of companies, which are fueled by their fathers’ “personality” (that is, by their specific symbolic and imaginary features) long after their death; the same goes for the iconic founders of the fashion empires—the “kings and queens” like Karl Lagerfeld, Coco Chanel, Vivienne Westwood, or Christian Dior; and so on.

The slave, on the other hand, is the *living-dead*. Even when living, he is already dead—sticking to the sorrow of his own finitude, he is subordinated to death as to his absolute master.<sup>6</sup> The slave, however, does not only fear his own physical death but equally also the symbolic death of the master: the slave might well feed his masochist enjoyment by wishing for his master’s physical death, but once the master dies, the slave will do everything to keep him alive in the symbolic (take, for example, the conspiracy theories about Hitler’s death, or the famous Balkans conspiracy about Tito’s death).

Of course, the life-and-death struggle is nothing but a mythical presupposition, a natural assumption of the always already

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an individual’s dignity, does not contribute to their symbolic death, but, on the contrary, even revives them. However, operations with “big data” and numerous options for big-scale manipulation can make the internet, especially with the development of AI, the perfect field of ideological censorship—not only for a symbolic death but even for a symbolic genocide.

<sup>6</sup> As Dolar writes in his *Samozavedanje: Heglova Fenomenologija duha II*: “The master appears as the postponement of this absolute master and thus subject to economy in his symbolic presence” (Dolar 1992, p. 29). Here, the master-slave dialectics is set as something that has always already been defined by the symbolic order and what, at the same time, determines the symbolic order itself.

established master-slave dialectics. What sustains the master as a master is his very symbolic place: just as money begets money, positions of power consolidate positions of power. The master solidifies his symbolic place with his imaginary features—the master is the one who shows himself as a master (as wealth equals power, imaginary features of the master are mainly the material representations of his super-wealth like megayachts, private jets, and private spaceships)—as well as with master signifiers that maintain his power in the realm of the discourse, e.g. his name (Zuckerberg, Putin), and the names of the company, products, or state that are put in associative bond with his name (Musk's masterstroke was to name his company after Tesla, by which he repeatedly triggers the subconscious idea of his alleged intellectual supremacy); altogether, they create a signifying cluster associated with wealth, power, and excessive enjoyment. We come to a certain perverse inversion here: the imaginary features and the master signifiers indicating wealth, power, and excessive enjoyment, which in reality are the effects of the exploitation of the slave, appear as the very cause of the right to exploitation, that is, as the very thing by which he justifies his wealth, his excessive enjoyment, and his right of exploitation.

The slaves, in contrast to the masters, have no publicly recognizable figure and no master signifiers to keep them present and powerful in the realm of discourse. To receive recognition, the master must keep the slave alive—but this is a recognition of someone whose place in the symbolic is weak. It is purely an empty place, the place of the subject who establishes himself as an ephemeral, barred entity ( $\$$ ) emerging through the quilting points in speech ( $S_1$ ). It is not difficult to see that, just as the master maintains his symbolic place by a certain self-referential logic (the positions of power consolidate the positions of power), the same self-referential logic repeatedly prevents the slave from entering the symbolic. The cunning thing here is that the only master-signifier that is connected to the slave and that, as a kind

of permanence, embeds him in the symbolic network is the one that defines the very impossibility of the slave's inscription in the symbolic. The self-referential logic preventing the slave's inscription in the symbolic stems from the simple fact that the master-signifier connected to him is in itself a contradiction. It is a name that institutes the very absence of a name: *the anonymous*. This master-signifier functions as a barricade that inscribes the slave in the symbolic precisely by cutting him off.

From the master's point of view, three things are important: first, the slave is inscribed in the symbolic, because this is the condition of the master's recognition and his own presence in the symbolic, second, the symbolic place of the slave is as fragile as possible because this is how the slave is kept on the other side (of the discourse), and third, that the slave exists as a living being, that he is physically alive, i.e. functional as a working force, on sale as a commodity, and consuming in order both to maintain his means of subsistence and to feed his enjoyment (which goes, as Freud famously noticed, *sensu stricto* against the preservation of life).

While modern slaves are bound by fear of death—and with the danger of the global environmental and social catastrophe existential threats are all the more visceral for those inhabitants of Earth who cannot count on escaping into space (in accordance with the leftist chase of the universal political subject, we can say that *earthling* is the universal political subject of the now)—the masters of the 21st century are not concerned with physical death at all. Not because they have overcome their fear of death (this is only their mythical justification, which does not need to be proven), but because they mean to overcome death itself. Their masterplan is twofold; they plan to overcome death by fleeing into space and thus avoiding the cataclysm of the planet on the one hand, and by achieving biological immortality on the other. The immortal Master living on Mars—this must be the ultimate dream of the spacemen. Branson, for example, is hellbent on establishing a human colony on Mars in about twenty years, while Grimes,



the mother of Elon Musk's children, who recently renamed herself as *c*, speaks about reaching immortality by self-replicating herself with the help of the AI, and, at the same time, of dying on Mars—holding on to Branson's plan—if her self-replicating fails and she is still to die at the end of her biological life.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. *Life as a Commodity*

The life-and-death struggle, which is inherent to the establishment of the master-slave dialectic *qua* symbolic relation, is, with the development of biotechnology, pushed over some unexpected edge: technology now allows humans not only the *indirect* production of life through the production of the means of subsistence (maintaining thereby favorable conditions for biological reproduction), as was the case in the industrial era, but weighs towards a *direct* production of life. As the first phase of sexual reproduction is already completely in the hands of technology with the process of artificial insemination—accompanied by a perverse legal business of private semen banks, where a woman

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<sup>7</sup> Simoniti reads this possibility as a peculiar *reductio ad absurdum* of Fichte's imperative to subdue the world: "In Fichte's time, a man died, but he could always count on humanity continuing, and this was especially developed by Hegel with the idea of a spiritual community that preserves the memory of its deceased member. Lately, however, it seems that unconsciously we are almost betting on the opposite card, whereby the race will go extinct, but it may still be possible to survive as an individual. For it is precisely at the moment of the world's end approaching that an elitist life-extension industry is developing, promising ten, twenty, fifty more years, or even relative immortality in the future. We could therefore conceive the scenario in which we will achieve individual immortality the moment we experience collective death; so, while in ourselves immensely young and healthy, we will nonetheless die as a race which runs out of oxygen and overheats in its own atmosphere. It is also possible that humanity will not take every member to the grave after all, as a few people might escape this planet and live out their lives of somewhat more asocial infinity on some spaceship, hoping to colonise another world." (Simoniti 2022, p. 196)

can buy semen as a product on a sales shelf with an indication of the particulars of the semen's owner (not its donor because he is selling it), such as skin color, provenance, education, intellect, and even a photograph of him as a child—ectogenesis is also seeing major improvements with the invention of a complete external womb. While, at this moment, the mother's body is still a necessary domicile for the embryo for at least a few months, the biotech machinery will soon be able to grow human embryos outside of the human body, the whole way from its conception to birth. With the recent technology of volumetric and bioprinting, lab-grown organs and organoids (eyes, hearts, liver, skin, bones, muscles, and even brains in an early embryonic stage) are allowed to be printed from a patient's own cells, facilitating thereby the true revolution of regenerative medicine: from the bioprinted cells, stem cells are created, which can develop into various cell types and eventually into tissues and organs. In some other direction than the growth of "organs without bodies," genetic research for the prevention of aging has reached a crucial milestone with a recent successful experiment in reversing the process of aging in mice.

This, of course, does not lead to a happy ending in the alleged ultimate success of medicine reaching the final goal of general human immortality, bringing us equality and eternal peace. Overcoming death as the internal limit of physical life and directly controlling the production of living human beings does not mean the end of the life-and-death struggle. On the contrary, as always already symbolized, the master-slave dialectic, which is instituted on this struggle and this struggle represents its condition of possibility, will maintain its logic even when on the physical scale an individual's death could be technically postponed unto infinity and the master-slave dialectic would lose its raw naturalist justification.

Insofar as from the viewpoint of the aspiration to immortality aging is perceived as disease, disease, on the other hand, is seen as obsolescence, a malfunction. A human body must thus, on the one

hand, be eternally young, immortal, and well-functioning so that it can be enjoyed indefinitely, and, on the other hand, it must be equally well-functioning and incorrupt, but mortal, so that it can work efficiently and, when it breaks down, can be replaced by a new life. Marx's interpretation of the substitution of machines for human labor has been given a further upgrade here. Not only in the direction that human labor is ever more replaceable by machines (in the 21st century not only physical human labor but also intellectual work has been replaced, with the revolution of the AI ahead), but also in the direction that a human being as such, on the other hand, has been transformed into a machine—not only in the way that they have become mechanical, cyborgian, but even more so in this way that their biological, organic life has become the “life of a machine,” that is to say, technologically controlled, repairable, and with spare parts. This life, as commodified, is the bearer of nothing but its own functionality (expediency in serving the master) and perishability on the side of the slaves, and of its infinite reparability and self-sufficiency on the side of the masters.

When life as such becomes a commodity, the slave, who was, in a capitalist production process, alienated from his life, his work, and the products of his work, is now alienated also through his work on his own life—he literally produces himself, and like his other products, which must have a shelf-life for production to continue, he must also have a shelf-life himself. The gap between today's masters and slaves is the gap between those to whom belongs *the right to immortality* as a radically naturalized (i.e. absolutely profaned) form of freedom and those who *process their own life as a thing*, as a commodity, which, as part of capitalist production, is created for death.

This very gap points to the fact that in capitalist production, a human's life factually splits into *two lives*: the life of a slave and the life of a master. Because they differ not in certain qualities or particularities but in their structural determinations, they make two radically different forms of life. The two lives that capitalism

creates are rooted in the fictitious split between production and consumption, which creates the impression that capitalism is an equal give-and-get relationship: I work (I give), I receive payment, which I spend on my own needs (I get). But the truth is, of course, that the relationship, for workers, takes the form of give-and-give, while for capitalists it is get-and-get. Not only is the production itself—in this case, the worker’s labor—in fact already a form of consumption because the worker “consumes the means of production with his labour, and converts them into products with a higher value than that of the capital advanced” (Marx 1976, p. 717)—Marx calls this *productive consumption*—but also what appears as *individual consumption*, i.e. the fact that the worker “uses the money paid to him for his labour-power to buy the means of subsistence” (Ibid.), is in fact already a production. This means, in real terms, that the capitalist “profits not only by what he receives from the worker, but also by what he gives him” (Ibid.). The fictitious split between production and consumption, which determines the worker’s life as fundamentally different from that of the capitalist, works successfully towards exploitation because it rests on an actual difference perceived by the worker—the difference between the worker’s productive and individual consumption: “In the former, he acts as the motive power of capital, and belongs to the capitalist. In the latter, he belongs to himself, and performs his necessary vital functions outside the production process. The result of the first kind of consumption is that the capitalist continues to live, of the second, that the worker himself continues to live” (Ibid.).

From a broader perspective, that is, from the perspective of the capitalist production itself, “the capital given in return for labour power is converted into means of subsistence which have to be consumed to reproduce the muscles, nerves, bones and brains of existing workers, and to bring new workers into existence” (Ibid.). As Marx never tired of repeating, the production of capital has as its fundamental and most necessary condition the

incessant *reproduction of a worker*: “Within the limits of what is absolutely necessary, therefore, individual consumption of the working class is the reconversion of the means of subsistence given by capital in return for labour-power into fresh labour-power which capital is then again able to exploit. It is the production and reproduction of the capitalist’s most indispensable means of production: the worker” (Marx 1976, pp. 717-718). The fact that the worker enjoys his individual consumption, i.e. that he carries out his individual consumption in his own interest, and not to please the capitalist, of course, does not change anything from the point of view of capital and exploitation—all enjoyment is masochistic enjoyment in any event: “The consumption of food by a beast of burden does not become any less a necessary aspect of the production process because the beast enjoys what it eats” (Marx 1976, p. 718).

As technology itself, according to Marx, is a means of the “large-scale industry,”<sup>8</sup> its recent development towards complete biotechnological management of human life directly confirms his thesis of two forms of human life under capitalism. The shift from the indirect to the direct production of life brought about by biotechnology seems radical: technology not only indirectly stimulates a worker’s life in the form of healthcare, good nutrition, etc, or, conversely, destroys it through poor working conditions, as was the case before the biotech era, but it literally *produces* that life. It can (or soon will) artificially create a human being and

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<sup>8</sup> Large-scale industry, says Marx, “tore aside the veil that concealed from men their own social process of production” (Marx 1976, p. 616). Because of this veil, the individual branches of production were puzzles to each other—this is why, says Marx, they were called “mysteries” (*mystères*). The principle of large-scale industry, which is “to view each process of production in and for itself, and to resolve it into its constituent elements without looking first at the ability of the human hand to perform the new processes” brought into existence the “modern science of technology” as a “systematic specialised application of the natural sciences” (Ibid.).

reproduce them directly without human sexual reproduction (by cell division on the one hand and by artificial “sexual” reproduction on the other). Moreover, it can prevent a human being from dying—not only temporarily, but for eternity, as it were—and it can, on the other hand, make them perishable, that is to say, it can set them an expiration date. However groundbreaking and, for that matter, horrifying or exciting this may seem, it is rather obvious that, from the point of view of capitalist production, the shift from indirect towards direct production of life is not at all a radical leap, but rather a logical, that is, a necessary continuation. In this way, capital has ensured itself the most consistent provision of its condition of possibility: the maintenance and reproduction of the working class.

In the background of the biotechnological development, another crucial shift happened in the 1970s: a living being was allowed to be registered as a patent.<sup>9</sup> This, as precedence, provided

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<sup>9</sup> The story of Ananda Mohan ‘Al’ Chakrabarty (1938–2020) is the proto-story of a science whose field of knowledge as absolute knowledge, i.e. absolutely independent knowledge, has surrendered itself to the mechanism of capital. It is the story of a scientist who is, after all, nothing but a serf to the oil industry, against which his intelligence, his personal integrity and his ethics are utterly powerless. As summed up in the *Nature Biotechnology* journal: “Al’s scientific journey continued for another five decades. As a research scientist at General Electric’s Research & Development Center, he did not enjoy his initial project: to convert cow manure to more proteinaceous cattle feed using bacteria. At the same time, serious oil spills were becoming more regular and having adverse impacts on the environment. On weekends and evenings, he began studying degradative pathways of hydrocarbons in *Pseudomonas* with the hope that one day a genetically modified form of the bacteria would help clean up oil spills. By inserting into the bacteria multiple circular DNA molecules (known as plasmids), each with genes encoding different enzymatic functions in hydrocarbon degradation, he and his team were able to create a new variety of *Pseudomonas* that could degrade crude oil in Petri dishes. This was a eureka moment for Chakrabarty, who was especially excited to present his findings at scientific meetings and conferences. But his bosses at GE had a different idea. Compelled by the potential commercial application of Chakrabarty’s discovery, they wanted him to file a patent on his bacteria. Chakrabarty filed a patent

not only a technological but also a legal (which today reads as “ethical,” although we know from Hegel that the rule of law is exactly a complete emptying of the ethical substance) basis for understanding life as a commodity. The masters of capitalism are committed to law, which is put in place to protect private property expressed in the form of *rights*—both for Hegel and Marx, this is one of the fundamental missions of law in general.

The dark history of capitalism is not only the history of colonialism and legalized slavery (not only black slaves in the Americas but equally also white human trafficking in Europe, especially with children and women), but it is also a history of legal exploitation of workers in the name of their freedom. With forced laws that are sometimes instituted, says Marx, capital creates capitalists’ “proprietary rights over the free worker” (Marx 1976: 719). It is precisely in light of the fact that the law protects the capitalist’s rights (i.e. the property) that the principle of patents operates today. A patent, as it works in the US legal system, confers the inventor’s right “to exclude others from making, using, offering for sale, or selling the invention throughout the United States or importing the invention into the United States.”<sup>10</sup>

With the institution of intellectual property, a patent is protected against its commercial use (abuse). This right, however, is limited to 15–20 years—a patent has an expiration date. After that period, it is free to go into business. Patent protection in the US, therefore, promotes scientific and technological development, but

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application in 1972 with the help of GE attorney Leo MaLossi, knowing full well that the US Patent & Trademark Office had never before granted a patent on a living organism. After eight years of legal battle, the US Supreme Court ruled in a 5–4 decision that his invention was indeed patent eligible, granting him the first ever US patent on a living organism.” (Davey, N., Rader, R.R. & Chakravarti, D. Ananda Mohan ‘Al’ Chakrabarty 1938–2020. *Nature Biotechnology*, 39, 18–19 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41587-020-00785-4> <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41587-020-00785-4>)

<sup>10</sup> United States Patent and Trademark Office. <https://www.uspto.gov/patents/basics/manage#rights>

not as the common good of society, but rather as the legal base of private business.

Once a lifeform is patented, as happened for the first time in the history in case of Chakrabarty, the ethical barrier that has hitherto told judges and juries, as an unwritten ethical law, that life cannot be patented, falls. Hypothetically (i.e. legally), a new species or even a new race (we are not far here from some sort of biotech eugenics) could be made intellectual property, that is, sold to a company for commercial use. With this, any form of life can turn into a commodity, which Marx defined as “an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind” (Marx 1976, p. 125), and which has a use-value and an exchange value. While a patent itself might well be what Marx called a pseudo-commodity, that is, a kind of thing that is not a product of human labor but can be traded as if it were nonetheless a commodity as long as property rights can be attached to it, the living being when directly produced, on the contrary, is a commodity proper. The differentiation between commodities and pseudo-commodities, however, has weakened nowadays in the face of increasing technological labor, i.e. technological self-reproduction, which progressively excludes human labor.

What appears to be Marx’s uncanny ability to predict the future — *Marx the Prophet* — is in reality his insight into the structural predispositions of capitalism. Today, we look at things from a crooked perspective: what we see as a consequence of capitalism is in fact its fundamental condition. The history of capitalism has shown the proper features of Hegel’s dialectics, meaning that what appears to be its developed phase has been included in its very beginning: the fundamental predisposition, the sine qua non of capitalism, is *exponential growth*. This is due to its elemental economic equation based on the surplus value. The practical realization of this equation is the invention of a new form of production, which is not conservative (that is, preserving both the equilibrium between work as a contribution of the worker to the



common social well-being and a reward he receives for it, and the equilibrium between what is taken from nature and what is given back), as all the previous forms of production, but revolutionary: “Modern industry never views or treats the existing form of a production process as the definitive one. Its technical basis is therefore revolutionary, whereas all earlier modes of production were essentially conservative” (Marx 1976, p. 617).<sup>11</sup> What is absolutely crucial here is that it is exactly this revolutionary fundament of technological production that produces the two forms of life in capitalism and forms the class division, which does not—as it might have seemed in the optimism of the 1960s—tend toward the well-being of one single class, the golden middle class, but is exponentially, as it were, increasing the gap between the two classes: the masters and the slaves. Earthlings and spacemen are the name of this gap. They are the name of its inability to ever be sewn or transgressed within the reign of capital.

Revolution (i.e. permanent re-invention) is inscribed in the technological and productive basis of capitalism—therefrom also stems its magic ability to (somewhat in advance) appropriate each social uprising. The real problem, of course, is not that “capitalism and neoliberalism dialectically take on itself every resistance or digression,” as is the well-known self-victimizing mantra of the leftist scene, but in the very nature of this resistance and

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<sup>11</sup> Or, as put forth in the famous lines of the *Communist Manifesto*: “The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form, was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.” (Marx 1973, pp. 70-71)

digression. The thing is that the true revolt that is to overturn the capitalist system must systematically transform the form of production in the first place. Here, the key is to bear on the apparent paradox of *progressive conservatism*—strange as it may sound, today one must be revolutionary in the way that they are strictly conservative. What is of utmost importance is a differentiation between the level of ideology, that is ideas and beliefs, and the level of production: instead of ideological conservatism in combination with productional progressivism (which is today called the right wing), one must be a proponent of ideological progressivism exactly in the manner of arguing for (and inventing!) a new conservative form of production.<sup>12</sup>

In the present state of the world, we can clearly see two things:

Firstly, a certain maximization of what follows from Marx's recognition of the structural, that is the *inner determinations* of capitalism. Exponential growth, on the one hand, freely continues its path: an accelerated increase in the exploitation of natural resources (the material footprint of raw material consumption from 1910 was 10 billion tons per year, while today it is as large as almost 100 billion tons per year), exponential growth of the world population (1.5 billion in 1910, 8 billion today), and a fast-growing inequality from the 1960s on (today, the 1% of the "super-rich" owns 50% of the world's total wealth while 50%

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<sup>12</sup> Exactly this, bringing forth a new conservative form of production that would realize progressive ideas and would also include technological and cultural development of all kinds, was, for Marx, the goal of proletarian revolution. Of course, Marx was wrong in that capitalism would turn into communism by structural necessity—here was his idealistic note (however, it is time to return idealism to its positive value). Socialism, especially the great Yugoslavian experiment with self-management, to a certain extent managed to bring the new conservative form of production into practice. Today, of course, not only the internal limit but also the external one (that is, the limits of the planet) must be taken into consideration for the invention of such a form of production. Today, ever more elaborated studies and local practical attempts with both marxist and anarchist orientation are working toward this direction.

of world population altogether owns 1% of it).<sup>13</sup> What grew proportionally with the latter is the extent of what Marx called the *surplus population*, which we call today “the unemployed,” “the migrants,” and the “third world population.” The growth of the surplus population is inscribed in the very conception of capitalism as proportional to the growth of capital. This is so, says Marx, according to the *general law of capitalist accumulation*: “The greater the social wealth, the functioning capital, the extent and energy of its growth, and therefore also the greater the absolute mass of the proletariat and the productivity of its labour, the greater is the industrial reserve army. The same causes which develop the expansive power of capital, also develop the labour power at its disposal. The relative mass of the industrial reserve army thus increases with the potential energy of wealth. But the greater this reserve army in proportion to the active labour-army, the greater is the mass of a consolidated surplus population, whose misery is in inverse ratio to the amount of torture it has to undergo in the form of labour. The more extensive, finally, the pauperized sections of the working class and the industrial reserve army, the greater is official pauperism. *This is the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation*” (Marx 1976, p. 798).

On the other hand, by breaking certain technological and ethical boundaries, the exponential growth of capital was also able to do what was unimaginable for Marx but what equally stems from its inner determinations: direct production of life, turning a living being into a commodity, linking man and machine in biotechnological “living machines,” and creating artificial intelligence which is likely to overrun humanity on all scales of our cognitive abilities. Recently, we have been experiencing the most radical turning points to hit humankind in its long history. They are radical because they shatter the fundamental determinations of

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<sup>13</sup> For more data and further references see Jason Hickel, *Less Is More* (Hickel 2022) and World Inequality Lab.

the (Western) man that have hitherto seemed irrefutable: 1. Man is the master of nature, which is an inexhaustible resource. 2. Man is subordinate to nature only in that he is himself a living being and is therefore subject to individual death. 3. What justifies man's lordship over nature is that he is the most intelligent being on Earth.

Secondly, we can see the effects of a certain transformation of what was, from its very outset, set as the "outside" of capitalism. The idea that capitalism has no outer limit has been the argument used for decades both by capitalism's eager proponents and its eager critics: for its proponents, capitalism was "the great equalizer," the practical institution of freedom and the ultimate transgression of ideological differences, which is the final stage of human economic and cultural development that will last forever (cf., e.g., Fukuyama), while for its critics, its alleged infinity was named the greatest misfortune of humanity, as it involves in its structure the impossibility to be transgressed (cf., e.g., Jameson). However, the alleged infinity of capitalism, which is not only contained in its conceptual assumptions (infinite openness of the market, infinite freedom, infinite development) but is also visible in its material, physical expansion, has, as has been shown in the recent decades, an outer limit, which, of course, is turning into its own inner negation. There was, from the very outset, something that was set as "the otherness" of capitalism. Marx's entire concept of *alienation* rests upon it: what is left on the other side is that from which humanity has alienated, what Marx calls the "external nature," inorganic and organic, and life forms of all kinds, including the life of a human. From a Hegelian perspective, the perspective of the development of consciousness through the self-development of the spirit, this otherness is included in the very process of its becoming. What we should also learn from Hegel, though, is that what consciousness sets as its otherness has a dialectical development on its own, which is, in the form of a double negation, intertwined with the dialectics of consciousness itself. This dialectics of both consciousness and its radical otherness is

fundamental and has its ontological counterpart in the dialectics of being and non-being, as presented in the first chapters of Hegel's *Science of Logic*. This means that what is left on the other side also transforms and changes in its own path and in resonance or an echo to the human economic and technological doing.

What we witness today is how this transformed otherness started showing its immense power and posited itself as the *outer limit* of capitalist human development. What we experience lately on a daily basis are the limits of the bearable human life on the planet. Here of course, the main question remains whether what clearly shows itself as the outer limit of humanity (and of many other forms of life on Earth) is also the outer limit of capitalism—in pace with Jameson's proverbial saying that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. The reason why the modern masters are nowadays turning into spacemen lies exactly in their striving to preserve capitalist apparatus regardless of the unbearability of human life on the planet (an unbearability that can be, again, used to their advantage). As humanity, that is, the industrial reserve army, is a necessary condition for capital growth, we could of course say that the threat to humanity represents a direct threat to capitalism. However, there are two questions that exceed our prophetic abilities: 1. Is there a future of capitalism without humanity? 2. Are the limits of the planet truly the limits of capitalism? As the first question is the question of technology, the second is the question of the dialectics of digital capitalism.

What we can say for sure is that what we are experiencing today is the immense *roar of otherness*: extensive dying-off of the numerous life forms, the exhaustion of what capitalism called "natural resources," the heating (or, as recently named, the "boiling") of the planet and the related climate changes, and, least but not last, the waste. The sensuous thing, which, along with life, plays an integral role in Hegel's master-slave dialectics as the object of consciousness, is in capitalism, on the one hand, included

in the production process and turned into a commodity, but on the other hand, as a used commodity with no more use value and therefore no more exchange value, turns into waste. Garbage is (literally) a plastic representation of what has set itself as the outer limit of capitalism. It is a concrete exemplification of the transformation and development of what was, as its pure externality, long inexistent from the perspective of capital.

### 3. *Dialectic of Garbage*

Capitalism is, as we know, a morbid practice. It feeds on dying and its products are corpses of all kinds. In contrast to the crafts and the goods created by humans for their own use or delight, into which their makers have breathed life and which are made to be, to last, the products of industrial production are made to die, that is, to expire or to break down—as has become explicitly obvious with the practice of planned obsolescence. Humanity has surrounded itself with corpses of things and a human life is one spent among garbage dumps. The development of capitalism can be easily seen through the *dialectic of garbage*. From the being-in-itself of early industrial capitalism, where tones of industrial leftovers stood in the open and transformed the natural landscape as part of the state of things but were, as absolute otherness, completely unnoticed, unthought of, and uninteresting, to the being-for-itself of the early postindustrial capitalism and consumerism, where the leftovers of the consumed goods were noticed and considered as a disrupter of the clean and orderly world and have been, as such, literally suppressed: the rubbish was compacted, hidden from view, buried in caves, or dumped in remote, third-world places. Here, otherness was recognized but neglected as a pure externality: in a form of self-deception and self-blinding, it was made invisible. And finally, in the last turn, we came to the perverse inversion of being-in-and-for-itself of

late, postindustrial capitalism and consumerism, where garbage was recognized as our very otherness, as our internal externality. In the psychoanalytical rubbish processes dealing with dung and manure, it was dug out and dealt with, worked through the (re)cycling mechanisms of the human mind and garbage industry. The waste was made present, and presentified, together with guilt and fear imposed on the consumer slaves and with the obscene anal enjoyment of the magnificence and sublimity of human leftovers, which transcends nature in the colorfulness of contingency, as is the case, for example, in “poorism” as the hottest form of tourist tours to the rubbish dumps (which are considered to be sexy and photogenic) in the guise of a do-gooder mission.

In our time, the dialectic of garbage has come to an end. We are at the beginning of a new dialectical turn; a turn that will be either a turn of garbage without man or a turn of man without garbage. The hand-painted message on the railing of a precipitous road somewhere in southern Dalmatia is in this sense indicative: *Don't throw litter (\*into the precipice)! If you do toss it, jump also yourself.*

#### *4. Consumption Machines*

In industrial production, the sensuous, natural thing has alienated itself from the worker and taken on a life of its own (as Marx showed beautifully in his writings on commodity fetishism), only to become bound to him again as the worker's inner otherness — the *waste*. At the same time — and this is the flip side of the dialectic of garbage — the worker, whose own life has become a commodity, is turning into a thing: he himself is a product, as well as a piece of junk.

Apart from the reproduction of the worker, the second fundamental condition (and law) of industrial capitalism is, according to Marx, *the self-reproduction of the machines*. What we see today

as so-called “planned obsolescence”—the fact that appliances, machines, smart machines, and computers of all kinds are made to break down shortly after the expiration of their warranty—is not some isolated phenomenon of capitalist greed, but is instituted in the machines’ law of self-reproduction. It is a logical and inherent consequence of this law.

The first thing Marx dismantles when he talks about machines is *a dream about machines replacing human labor*. The kernel of this dream, which is gaining popularity again today, in particular with the recent emergence of simple AI tools like ChatGPT, is the idea of the worry-free life of a human, the master, who enjoys the full service of robot slaves. Marx traces the sprout of this dream back to Aristotle’s *Politics*: “If every tool, when summoned, or even by intelligent anticipation, could do the work that befits it, just as the creations of Daedalus moved of themselves, or the tripods of Hephaestus went of their own accord to their sacred work, if the weavers’ shuttles were to weave of themselves, then there would be no need either of apprentices for the master craftsmen, or of slaves for the lords” (Aristotle 1946, p. 10).

This dream is, says Marx, at least in the framework of capitalism, complete nonsense. This is because of a certain paradoxical dialectic of the machines, which concerns what Marx calls the *moral depreciation of the machine* and which plays a key role in the very mechanism of industrial capitalism. Besides the material wear and tear of the machines, the machine depreciates also morally, meaning that as soon as the machine starts operating, its exchange value begins to decrease. The weird thing that happens with a machine at the very moment it is put in place is a certain transposition of its value: “however young and full of life the machine may be, its value is no longer determined by the necessary labour-time actually objectified in it, but by the labour-time necessary to reproduce either it or the better machine” (Marx 1976, p. 528). This means that every machine, besides being a working force, is itself also a product, a commodity. Because the



exchange value of the machine depends not only on the labor-time the machine needs to produce a certain commodity, say, a toothbrush, but also on the labor-time it can produce itself, a certain *machine urge to self-reproduce* is inscribed in their capitalist use. Out of this, it follows that the machine is the “imminent competitor of the worker” not only because it can do in one hour what a worker can do in one week, or, what is the same, because it can do in one hour what will, in the same time frame, be done by 40 workers, but also because it competes against its own capacity for the ever-faster production of itself. This means that, by capitalist necessity, machines as self-producing commodities tend to exclude the worker from the production process.

But there is yet another thing: as machinery comes into general use in a particular branch of production, says Marx, the following law asserts itself: “surplus value does not arise from the labour-power that has been replaced by the machinery, but from the labour-power actually employed in working with the machinery” (Marx 1976, p. 530). This means, of course, a drastic devaluation of human labour, which is, because of the machines’ moral depreciation, exponential. With the mechanization and computerization of capitalist society, human labor is exponentially losing its value. The machines, says Marx, far from taking the burden off man’s shoulders, install the “economic paradox that that the most powerful instrument for reducing labour-time suffers a dialectical inversion and becomes the most unfailing means for turning the whole lifetime of the worker and his family into labour-time at capital’s disposal for its own valorization” (Marx 1976, p. 532).

While the dream of machines replacing humans is an illusion altogether, the fear that machines will displace humans is equally unfounded. Quite the opposite: it is far more likely that workers will ultimately replace the machine—precisely by becoming machine-like themselves. As the essence of the machine is that it is both a commodity and a labor force, a human becomes machine-like as soon as their body serves not only as the labor force, as was

the case in industrial production, but, in the postindustrial biotech era, their life itself turns into a commodity. With this, the worker is suddenly caught in the dialectic of the self-reproduction of the machines—he himself is subject to material and moral depreciation.

However, there is one thing that fundamentally distinguishes the worker from the machine. Machines are means of production and of *productive consumption*. But the key to capitalism is also *individual consumption*, which in late capitalism, where the consumer's need is replaced by the invocation of desire and by the injunction to enjoy, reaches far beyond satisfying the worker's primary needs. Enjoyment, of course, has no necessary connection with one's physical well-being. Both desire and enjoyment are insatiable—they are mechanisms that are asymptotically approaching an ever-elusive goal, that is, they are infinite: in contrast to the finite pleasure as the measure of the fundamental well-being of an organism connected to its basic needs being met. A crucial element of capital growth is the capacity of spending—having an ever-increasing population that is capable of continuous, endless spending is clearly the prospect of postcapitalist consumerism. What post-capitalist production tends towards, ultimately, is efficient incision between the *worker's productive consumption*, where the worker self-reproduces like a machine, that is, both as a working force and as a commodity, they repair their own body with the help of (reproductive) medicine, creates their own life, and programs their own death, and their *individual consumption*, where they enjoy indefinitely and, as enjoyment is nothing but a radical transgression of the biological determinations of one's own body, work for capital without being in any way distracted by their own life. It is precisely on this line that the delicate masters' management of the slaves as producers on the one hand and as consumers on the other hand takes place. It is all about fine-tuning the ratio between the slave's concern for self-preservation (promotion of self-care, body fitness, healthy food, nutritional additives, medicines, cosmetics, etc.), which contributes to the capitalist's

gain from the labor force, and the slave's destructive enjoyment, where the slave fills the master's pockets as an individual consumer (video games, social media addictions, pornography, all sorts of digital industries, the preponderance of private or intimate communication, as well as civil issues, political organizing, art, shopping, and the rest of the endless list).

People in digital capitalism differ from a machine exactly in their capacity for enjoyment, which gives them a special place in the mechanism of capital: they are not just machines, but machines driven to spend money—a *consumption machine*. They are biotech creatures that are not fundamentally determined by the fact that they live, feel, and think, but by the fact that they produce, enjoy, and consume. This creature is no science fiction: a brain-computer interface, developed by Elon Musk's Neuralink, was recently given approval from the US Food and Drug Administration to begin trials in implanting computer chips into human brains.

### *5. Life as a Substance*

In his analysis of the chapter on self-consciousness in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Dolar draws attention to the fact that Hegel's notion of life has a certain double meaning. On the one hand, it is bound up with *substance*, and it represents the endless flux of births and deaths pervading all there is, but on the other hand, it is also bound up with the *subject*, where it means something that ends in death. Dolar names the first *life as a substance* and the second *life as a living thing*.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> "Life can be observed from two sides, the 'substance' side and the 'subject' side. On the one hand, it is an eternal cycle, self-reproducing and self-preserving as continuity through self-dissolution. On the other hand, the living individual establishes himself precisely by confronting the totality of life as discontinuity." (Dolar 1992: 15)

Taking a closer look, we can see what is going on in the background of biotechnological development: while turning life into a commodity, the capitalist machinery aspires to take control not only over life as a living thing, that is, over the specific lives of individuals, but also over life as a substance, that is, over the entire process and the mystery of what *is* life. However, just as the alleged eternity of capitalism is grounded in the adamant idea of the eternal being of perishing,<sup>15</sup> so is the idea of some eternity of life beyond death—terrestrial or, for that matter, spatial—grounded in the fallacy that within life, which is the flow of passing and

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<sup>15</sup> In the insistence on the qualitative difference between being and nothing, which for Hegel is a fundamental fallacy but at the same time also one of the most adamant ideas of philosophy, being is thought to be eternal and absolute, while nothing is perceived as an absolute negation of being and its attributes. Accordingly, this fundamental fallacy brings along another falsification: the insistence on a qualitative difference between finitude and infinity. Here, the finite is considered to be restricted and perishable, pertaining to nothingness, while the infinite is unlimited and eternal, pertaining to being. “The falsification [*die Verfälschung*],” states Hegel, “that the understanding perpetrates with respect to the finite and the infinite, of holding their reciprocal reference fixed as qualitative differentiation, of maintaining that their determination is separate, indeed, absolutely separate, comes from forgetting what for the understanding itself is the concept of these moments” (Hegel 2010, p. 116). The most infamous example of such a qualitative difference between the finite and the infinite, which Hegel explicitly criticizes, is the idea that *everything perishes yet it is the very perishing that is eternal*. In this view, the *eternal being of finitude* is insisted on, which is precisely its *transitoriness* [*die Vergänglichkeit*]: “Their transitoriness would only pass away in their other, in the affirmative; their finitude would then be severed from them; but this finitude is their unalterable quality, that is, their quality which does not pass over into their other, that is, not into the affirmative; and so finitude is eternal” (Hegel 2010, p. 102). It is not hard to see that this is exactly the idea adopted by capitalism—the limitless production of finite things doomed to extinction (the sooner they spoil the better) is made *the eternal being of capitalism*. The idea of novelty promising progress towards the absolute wellbeing of humanity is promoted only to hide the morbid fact that it is decay and breakdown that are the drivers of capital—*capitalism cannot die precisely because it itself feeds on dying*, on finitude. For a detailed elaboration on this topic, cf. Bara Kolenc, “Is It Too Late?” (Kolenc 2020).

becoming, there is an unchangeable, absolute being that can be grasped and held to as its very essence. But insofar as death is the destruction of life on the level of life as a living thing, it is the very condition of life as a substance. As was clear to both Hegel and Freud: the essence of life is death, the vanishing that alone makes becoming possible.<sup>16</sup>

By turning life—or rather, a human being as a living thing—into a product, which is the ultimate goal of the biotechnological revolution, the space masters are trying to rise above death as a sorrowful determination of the existent things, and, with this, also above the very dialectic of life and death. They aspire to transcend *life as a living thing* by taking it in hand, by technically managing it, and thus to become, not only symbolically but also physically, the masters of *life as a substance*. But they essentially fail.

In Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, for the consciousness experiencing the dialectic of master and slave, its privileged object is life, this movement of becoming and passing away that is in

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<sup>16</sup> Freud's category of life can be said to have two dimensions: *life that wants life* and *life that wants death*. Or, more precisely, the category of life is divided into *the general concept of organic life*, which contains both the aforementioned sides, including death—where death is not the antithesis of life but its event, one chapter of a never-ending *perpetuum*—and *the specific concept of life that opposes death*, i.e. the side designated as “life that wants life.” Speaking in the categories of the dualism of the principles, life in the narrower sense of the word is that force that abides by the pleasure principle, that stems from the principle of constancy and opposes the principle of inertia; in the broader sense of the term, on the other hand, life is a fluctuating movement of both these principles. From this point of view, the phenomenon of life is an expression of both the necessity of the continuation of life and the necessity of death. However, in the broader conceptualization of life, Freud's crucial innovation lies in that—regardless of the notion of life as some kind of immortal movement, where death is included in life as its event—death also represents life's horizon, a perspective never to be reached. That which life unsuccessfully strives for is to end: *the goal of all life is death*. Lacan, following Freud, tacitly develops the following distinction: life as such, life in the organic sense, is embraced entirely by the self-preservation trend, while the proclivity for death is precisely that which transcends the organic and invades it from the domain of speech.

itself self-sufficient. Consciousness, whose object is self-sufficient, is self-sufficient itself. However, in order to arrive at its truth, it must receive recognition from another self-sufficient entity, which must also be a thinking entity. And here comes the life-and-death struggle. The main question of this struggle is not who will win, but for which of the two entities is life more essential than recognition. The choice is as follows: either I exist as a non-self-sufficient entity because in not being recognized I cannot come to my truth, or, in order to get to my truth I am willing to give up the very thing that sets me up in my existence, i.e. life. That which sets me up in my existence must become insubstantial to me, I must go into death, into my own existential annihilation (of life as a living thing), in order to arrive at my essence and to continue on the path of self-development (of life as a substance).

But the dialectic of master and slave is a stalemate, an unresolvable situation (and it is precisely in this unsolvability that the fundamental social scheme is also found) because the struggle between life and death must not end in a fatal outcome, which alone would make it possible to radically affirm the insubstantiality of existence as opposed to the essentiality of self-consciousness arriving at its own truth, which conditions the possibility of its further development. The closest approximation to death, to the complete self-annihilation that is the path to freedom, is thus only a fundamental, existential fear, a fear of death as the absolute master in which “all of one’s being trembles.” This radical annihilation, however, is not experienced by the master, even if he is the one who was ready to risk his life, but by the slave.

Although turning life into a product seems like a titanic victory for the master, the mastery of humanity over nature, it is, in truth, nothing but a confirmation of the masters’ subservience to the concern for their own lives. Because they do not risk their life but rather try to possess it, the biotech space masters do not pertain to true sublation. Hegel says it all: “it is only through staking one’s life that freedom is established” (Hegel 2018b, p. 78). Only in staking one’s life, namely, with Hegel’s words, “the essence for

self-consciousness is proven to be not *being*, not the *immediate* way self-consciousness emerges, not its being absorbed within the expanse of life” (Hegel 2018a, p. 111), but rather, and this is crucial, that “there is nothing present in it itself which could not be a vanishing moment for it, that self-consciousness is only pure *being-for-itself*” (Ibid.). The self-conscious needs to recognize its very being as something vanishing and perishable. It needs to take upon itself the fact that it is its own mortality, its subjection to the sorrow of finitude, that is the stepping stone on the road to freedom. Trying to avoid mortality, to transcend the vanishing inscribed in the very being of subjectivity, is an essential failure of this fundamental recognition.

The space masters of today can be, therefore, seen as the true slaves: the slaves of their addictions, of their obsessive enjoyment, and of their possessive bondage to their own physical existence, which is symptomatically disclosed in their excessive engagement with their physical appearance, in a cult of youth, in promoting aging as illness, and in their investments in research on extreme longevity. Enslaved by the falsification of capitalism about the idea of the eternal being of perishing, they are caught in a fantasy that eternal life can be achieved beyond the dialectic of life and death. But the truth is that it is not beyond, but rather within finitude that infinity can ever be achieved: only by risking life can one kill death.

## 6. *Envoi*

For Lacan, the crucial trouble of the Western world is a certain disappearance of truth. All the four discourses that institute today’s society revolve around a certain robbery of knowledge, that is, the master stealing knowledge from the slave and establishing a *tyranny of knowledge*, which “makes it impossible that in this place, over the course of the movement of history, as we were perhaps hoping, the nature of truth might appear” (Lacan 2007,

p. 32). The germ of truth, says Lacan, is not to be searched for in the realm of knowledge, but it is “to be produced by what has come to be substituted for the ancient slave, that is, by those who are themselves products, as we say, consumables every bit as much as the others” (Ibid.).<sup>17</sup> This truth, however, is always to some extent ineffable as it emerges in the notch between the symbolic and the real, traversed and stapled by desire, that is, by the subject’s (im)possible relation to its object.

As Dolar points out, the notion of *life* is a central concept for Hegel, with which he aimed to oppose the to-date metaphysics

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<sup>17</sup> In his twelfth seminar, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan famously connected Marx’s surplus value and surplus enjoyment: “Of course, it wasn’t Marx who invented surplus value. It’s just that prior to him nobody knew what its place was. It has the same ambiguous place as the one I have just mentioned, that of excess work, of surplus work. ‘What does it pay in?’ he says. ‘It pays in *jouissance*, precisely, and this has to go somewhere.’ What’s disturbing is that if one pays in *jouissance*, then one has got it, and then, once one has got it it is very urgent that one squander it. If one does not squander it, there will be all sorts of consequences” (Lacan 2007, p. 20). The question of whether the dialectic of master and slave still works for Lacan in today’s capitalism, or whether it is the tyranny of knowledge at work in the dominant discourse of the university today (meaning 50 ago, as Lacan was talking about this topic between 1968 and 1972) that has completely restructured capitalist relations, is answered by Samo Tomšič in his book *The Capitalist Unconscious*: “The university discourse was not Lacan’s final word on capitalism. A further development took place in 1972 when he determined the foreclosure of castration as the defining feature of capitalist discourse, and in a conference in Milan proposed its formula, which many consider an independent structure, the fifth discourse” (Tomšič 2015, pp. 219-220). What Tomšič puts forth is that the “fifth discourse” is actually a transformation of the discourse of the master set around the foreclosure of castration: “Lacan’s formula of the capitalist discourse continues the line according to which capitalism essentially tends towards the foreclosure of castration. Its worldview strives to heal the subjective split by way of the fetishisation of the object, which would establish a univocal relation between the subject and *jouissance*. Of course, the foreclosure of castration does not imply that *jouissance* becomes accessible. On the contrary, the foreclosure radicalises the deadlock of *jouissance* and turns the superego into an insatiable demand for *jouissance*.” (Tomšič 2015, p. 226)



leaning firmly on the opposition between subject and object, between interiority and exteriority as the “paradigm of all other divisions” (Dolar 1992, p. 12). In Hegel’s conception of life, in contrast, “the subject is included in its object,” says Dolar, which means that “outside and inside, and identity and difference pass directly into each other” (Ibid.). Dolar also points to the connection or a transition between the concept of life as a substance, which is the subject, and its realization in the concept of spirit: “The great advantage that Hegel sees in the concept of life is that it allows for the first realization of the slogan ‘the substance is the subject’. It will turn out, however, that this realization is not yet sufficient and that the concept of life, if it is to fulfill this lofty task, must undergo another reflexive turn—and this is precisely what the phenomenological ‘deduction’ of self-consciousness from life aims at: it is only in self-consciousness that life comes to its truth and thus becomes spirit, and it is only spirit that is the true medium of the realization of the Hegelian project, and it is only for the ‘spiritual substance’ that it is really true that the substance is the subject” (Ibid.).

*Life as a living thing* has become part of the mechanism of capital. Following Marx, we could say that man, in capitalist production, has become alienated from his own life, and that what is at work between “historical man” and “external nature” is a devastating process of mutual annihilation. On the other hand, a Hegelian critique of capitalism would go the other way: the problem of today’s world is not that we have become alienated from the nature to which life as a living thing allegedly belongs, but it is the very substancelessness of human society. What we need to reappropriate, therefore, is not “nature” (which is itself a mythical construct, that is, a name of a human deviation from other forms of life on the planet, while a return to whatever nature in itself is supposed to be is not possible anyway according to the irreversibility of the human imprint on the environment), but *life as substance*, that is, the life of substance—the spirit.

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# Caesar's Wounds: On the Absolute Master

*Gregor Moder*

Historical and dramatical accounts diverge in details, but it seems that Julius Caesar is dead. According to Shakespeare and Plutarch, he was killed on the senate floor by a handful of conspirators who wanted to defend the Roman Republic against the rule of a tyrant, of a would-be king. Marcus Junius Brutus, surrounded by other conspirators proudly displaying their bloody hands, takes to the streets of Rome and publicly explains the reasons for their deed. His ancestors once expelled the last king from Rome and helped found the Republic, and he personally enjoys great respect as a public servant. As such, Brutus is sure to win the approval of the people—and he does, initially. However, he and the other conspirators make one fatal mistake: they agree that General Mark Antony, Caesar's closest ally, should lead the funeral procession and that he, too, should be allowed to speak to the people of Rome. Brutus and most of the other Republicans assume that Mark Antony is a soldier whose oratory skills are no match for those of seasoned senators. Moreover, they seem to rely too much on the assumption that people are naturally opposed to tyranny and love their own freedom. Obviously, Brutus did not read Spinoza, for otherwise he would have known better, namely, that men often fight as stubbornly for their servitude as if it were their salvation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza writes: “The greatest secret of monarchic rule, and its main interest, is to keep men deceived, and to cloak

In William Shakespeare's dramatization of the historical events, Mark Antony delivers a speech worthy of a Mephistopheles. He uses many excellent rhetorical devices and strategies, masterfully plays with his audience's expectations, and ends up stirring a revolt against Brutus and the Republicans. The scene is quite long and in many ways constitutes the climax of the dramatic action. I would like to focus on one particular part of the speech.

I come not, friends, to steal away your hearts.  
I am no orator, as Brutus is,  
But, as you know me all, a plain blunt man  
That love my friend, and that they know full well  
That gave me public leave to speak of him.  
For I have neither wit, nor words, nor worth,  
Action, nor utterance, nor the power of speech  
To stir men's blood. I only speak right on:  
I tell you that which you yourselves do know,  
Show you sweet Caesar's wounds, poor poor dumb mouths,  
And bid them speak for me. But were I Brutus,  
And Brutus Antony, there were an Antony  
Would ruffle up your spirits and put a tongue  
In every wound of Caesar that should move  
The stones of Rome to rise and mutiny. (*Julius Caesar*, 3.3.209-222)

What I find interesting about this rhetorical strategy is what might be called a denegation of oratory skill. Mark Antony is, ostensibly, a straight talker, "a plain blunt man," and certainly "no orator, as Brutus is." Mark Antony uses a strategy that is very familiar to us from the experience of contemporary populists—they steal the people's hearts by declaring that they have not come to steal away hearts, that they do not even know how to make speeches, that they can only speak from the gut.

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in the specious name of Religion the fear by which they must be checked, so that they will fight for slavery as they would for their survival [salus]" (Spinoza 2016, p. 68).

This rhetorical strategy is remarkable in many ways. Mark Antony does not simply say that he wishes for the Roman people to rise up against the Republicans. He does not let his desire for power be known, and he does not even speak in his own name. He employs a rhetorical structure that legitimizes the speaker vicariously, with borrowed authority. The speaker merely assumes the position of a close friend of the deceased, and it is in Caesar's name, not in his own, that Antony makes his claim to power. More specifically, since he is not an orator, he functions merely as the voice of Caesar's wounds. It is, Mark Antony claims, the wounds themselves that speak—or would speak if they could—and stir the people to revolt. From the perspective suggested in this scene, political power, or put plainly, Antony's control over the Roman populace, is expressed through rhetorical or even theatrical structure. In Shakespeare's dramatization, which was based on Plutarch's report, it seems that power requires a theatrical form in order to become real or actualized. The presence of the political master survives in the name of Caesar only; it takes the form of the borrowed name of a dead tyrant and is an appearance, a representation, an avatar. According to this rhetorical strategy, there is no master as such; there is no single person who may or may not appear to us as a master. The master exists only as his own appearance, as his own deadly wound.

There is another moment in Shakespeare's play in which the performative nature of political power is made palpable. In one of the early scenes of *Julius Caesar*, the senators are discussing the future of Rome, and the world, behind the scenes of a grandiose public event in Caesar's honor. In the background, they hear three shouts of public jubilation, and it turns out later that it was some kind of political performance. Antony offered Caesar a mock crown three times, as if in jest, but Caesar refused it, three times. This performance, described by one senator as "mere foolery" (1.2.234), and accompanied by Cicero muttering something in

Greek (1.2.277-283), drew great applause from the crowd.<sup>2</sup> Public officials who dare express republicanism are swiftly “put to silence” (1.2.285); Caesar rules *de facto* as king. Plutarch reports that the two tribunes who dared remove royalistic decorations from the statutes of Caesar were “deprived of their offices” (Plutarch LXI 5, p. 587). By saying that they were “put to silence,” Shakespeare adds an even more sinister tone to this incident. Be that as it may, what interests me here is that Caesar gains public approval and public consent precisely through the public show of *rejecting* the crown. In other words, Caesar legitimizes himself as king by publicly expressing outrage at this honor. Suetonius adds a further detail that fully supports this negative procedure: “Caesar sharply rebuked and deposed them, either offended that the hint at regal power had been received with so little favour, or, as he [Caesar] asserted, *that he had been robbed of the glory of refusing it*” (Suetonius LXXIX 2, p. 103, my emphasis). Clearly, there is glory in refusing regal power, and it seems plausible that Caesar was after it. Shakespeare makes great dramatic use of the theatricality of these events, but it seems that perhaps these events themselves were already theatrical; the point is that the legitimization of political power takes place as a strange kind of performance. The figure of the master (specifically, of the king) takes shape through its own negation.

The second point I want to make about Mark Antony’s speech is the intertwinement of the dimensions of power and truth. Antony rests his argument upon the tacit assumption that truth does

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<sup>2</sup> Plutarch does not doubt that this show of theatrics was arranged by Antony and Caesar in advance, that it was a preconcerted experiment: “[Antony] carried a diadem, round which a wreath of laurel was tied, and held it out to Caesar. Then there was applause, not loud, but slight and preconcerted. But when Caesar pushed away the diadem, all the people applauded; and when Antony offered it again, few, and when Caesar declined it again, all, applauded. The experiment having thus failed, Caesar rose from his seat, after ordering the wreath to be carried up to the Capitol” (Plutarch LXI 3-4, p. 585).



not require any embellishment, that making beautiful speeches and using the right words is not how truth is told. The strategy he uses is the strategy of *nuda veritas*, the naked truth, where it is the facts themselves that speak, and what the facts say directly 'speaks louder than words.' Ancient Greek rhetoricians called this kind of public speech *parrhesia*, which can be roughly translated as saying everything (without restraints, freely). Following this form, Antony speaks "right on," and only "*shows* sweet Caesar's wounds." If we take what he says and how he says it at face value, if we don't immediately assume he is a Mephistopheles simply manipulating his audience—which, of course, he is—his theory of truth is perhaps surprisingly Platonic. In *The Symposium*, which is structured like a contest in giving speeches about love, of eulogies to the God of Love, Socrates begins his own speech by saying precisely what Mark Antony is saying: he declares himself completely inept at giving speeches. Socrates comments on the beautiful oration delivered by his predecessor Agathon:

I was afraid Agathon would conclude his speech by challenging mine with the eloquence of Gorgias, that brilliant orator, and – like the Gorgon – would turn me into stone, unable to utter a word. It was then I realised what a fool I had been in agreeing with you to take my turn and deliver a eulogy of Love, and in saying I was an expert on the subject of love, despite, as it turned out, knowing nothing about how to compose a eulogy of anything. For *in my naivety I thought I had only to speak the truth* about the subject of the eulogy. [...] It now seems that the original proposal was not that each of us should really praise Love but that we should *give the appearance of doing so* (*Symposium*, 198c-e, my emphasis).

The difference between truth and appearance could not be more pronounced. Socrates even seems to explicitly invoke the style of *parrhesia* when he says that he will speak "in whatever words and phrases happen to come into my head at the time" (199b). In fact, Plato has consistently made the claim, throughout

his body of work, that the truth will always defeat the appearance, that it ought to defeat it, and his epistemology as well as his political theory depends on the task of defeating it. The whole notion of the quarrel between philosophers and poets over representation (*mimesis*) is Plato's way of arguing that truth has its value beyond appearance and that all embellishments and poetic artistry must cede ground to truth.<sup>3</sup>

The question of good statesmanship is, for Plato, undeniably a question of knowledge, and by extension, a question of truth. This is why, in the *Statesman*, the discussants go to great lengths to distinguish true political art from mere imitations. Plato writes:

Then those who participate in all those governments—with the exception of the scientific one—are to be eliminated as not being statesmen, but partisans; and since they preside over the greatest counterfeits, they are themselves counterfeits, and since they are the greatest of imitators and cheats, they are the greatest of all sophists (*Statesman*, 303c).

The epistemological point is also a political claim: in political matters, just as in matters of science, truth should triumph over appearances, true knowledge over sophistry. Plato is accordingly somewhat suspicious of great oratory skill displayed in political matters. The oratory skill can be useful inasmuch as it “partakes of the kingly art because it persuades men to justice and thereby helps to steer the ship of the state.” However, “the power of persuading a multitude or a mob by telling edifying stories”

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<sup>3</sup> Bara Kolenc even argues that Plato fears *mimesis*: “As soon as a copy appears, it retrogradely touches the model, which inadvertently gets infected with the effect of its own copy. [...] The original affected by copies cannot preserve the identity with itself, it is corrupted, dirty, and could in the end also be lost since the loss of purity could seriously jeopardize its position of the origin. This means that *mimesis* is not at all as innocent as it would seem at first sight; it does have a certain power and perhaps even a crucial role in the constitution of the world.” (Kolenc 2014, p. 214)

must be subordinated to the art of statesmanship, which solely holds “the power of deciding whether some action, no matter what, should be taken, either by persuasion or by some exercise of force, in relation to any person, or whether to take no action at all” (*Statesman*, 304a-d). The relationship between rhetoric and truth is just as complex as the relationship between poetry and truth, but ultimately, any value we may ascribe to rhetoric or poetry depends, for Plato, on whether or not they serve science and truth. Whether he wanted this or not, with his profound suspicions about oratory skill and with the general idea that truth is the ultimate authority, Plato promoted an entire tradition of appreciation for straight-talkers in the political domain. What Shakespeare shows us in Mark Antony—in a clear rebuke of this tradition—is how the procedure of talking straight can very easily be used by populists to legitimize their positions, to usurp power. The sophist can always don the mask of the philosopher.<sup>4</sup>

Plato was well aware of this difficulty. In *The Symposium*, Socrates distances himself from his own speech not only on the

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<sup>4</sup> Shakespeare's relation to Platonism is a complex matter. My position is that he employs Platonic tropes, themes, and even philosophical concepts, but always playfully and sometimes even ironically. Sonnet 130, *My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun*, is perhaps one the most beautiful sonnets ever written, but it achieves its stunning effect by playfully perverting and even negating the conventions and tropes of the sonnet form. I argue that a similar case can be made about Shakespeare's relation to Platonism, especially with regard to the Platonic stance on oration. In *Julius Caesar*, Mark Antony proceeds precisely by decrying his own oratory skills, but finishes in a grandiose rhetoric finale, not unlike what the poet does in sonnet 130, where the final couplet returns to the sonnet form with the forceful “*And yet by heaven, I think my love as rare, As any she belied with false compare.*” That said, I fully acknowledge that this is an open debate, and that one could also argue for a certain naivety in Shakespeare's relationship to language. Jure Simoniti, for instance, argues that the central fantasy of language is the notion that the meaning *precedes* words, and writes critically: “The entirety of Shakespeare's oeuvre, perhaps its naivety, could be reduced to the tension between the inflation of verbosity on one side and the incessant search for the thing that keeps silent on the other” (Simoniti 2023, p. 75, footnote).

formal level, by refusing to employ an embellished language and structure, but also on the level of the content. When he finally delivers his understanding of love, Socrates does not even speak in his own name, but simply recounts the teaching he was given in youth by a mysterious female priest called Diotima (*Symposium*, 201d ff.). The authority of truth thus functions as a kind of borrowed authority: one does not simply speak the truth, one only lends one's voice to it. Ironically, in a kind of revenge of the appearance, Shakespeare has Mark Antony use precisely the same procedure for the people of Rome as the one Socrates does for his audience of aristocrats. Antony does not only deny his own oratory skills but also claims to be nothing but a mouthpiece of some mysterious, other-worldly authority; he is simply giving voice to the "poor poor dumb mouths," which are Caesar's wounds.<sup>5</sup> Evoking the image of putting "a tongue in every wound of Caesar," he is turning those wounds into an almost erotic object.<sup>6</sup> Shakespeare demonstrates efficiently and brutally that the fact that authority is bound to the category of truth, just as Plato suggested, does not mean that one can simply disassociate appearances from political power. One cannot simply 'ban' thespians from entering the political domain. Power seems to open

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<sup>5</sup> The motif of Caesar's wounds is not Shakespeare's invention. Plutarch reports: "But when the will of Caesar was opened and it was found that he had given every Roman citizen a considerable gift, *and when the multitude saw his body carried through the forum all disfigured with its wounds*, they no longer kept themselves within the restraints of order and discipline" (Plutarch LXVIII, p. 603, my emphasis).

<sup>6</sup> During the presentation of an earlier draft of this article (in Ljubljana, 2022), Frauke Bernd suggested that the strike of eroticism in the treatment of Caesar's wounds implied in Antony's oration bears some resemblance to the depiction of the wound of the resurrected Jesus Christ in Caravaggio's *Incredulity of St. Thomas*—Jesus leads Thomas' finger deep into his wound—which dates to almost the same period (c. 1600-1601; *Julius Caesar* is believed to have been written in 1599 and was published in 1623 in first folio). While I do not intend to pursue any parallels between Caesar and Christ here, one can certainly say that Caesar's death is depicted as martyrdom in Antony's speech.

up a space where even truth requires its own appearance, its own manifestation, its own stage. Thus it is never enough to speak the truth in order to win an argument, political or otherwise. One must also give the appearance of speaking the truth.

There is one final point I want to make about the quoted section of Antony's speech. The immediate context in which he assumed the role of the speaker is Caesar's death. Antony thus draws his authority from the fact that his oration comes as part of a funeral procession, with the shadow of the recently deceased leader supporting every word he utters and every action he pursues. This allows us to explore one further aspect of the master: if Julius Caesar is one of the historical names for the master, then it is not so much as a living person with certain affirmative qualities, but precisely as someone dead.

Historians usually do not consider Caesar a monarch, even though he was obviously keen on ruling as one. Plutarch remarks poignantly: "of the power and dominion which [Caesar] had sought all his life at so great risks, and barely achieved at last, of this he had reaped no fruit *but the name of it only*" (Plutarch, p. 605, my emphasis). It was Octavian who, after having defeated first the Republicans with the help of Mark Antony and then having defeated Mark Antony himself, became the undisputed single ruler of the Roman world and the first true Roman Emperor. Nevertheless, Octavian formulated his claim to power as Caesar's heir, adopting Caesar's *name*—and so the title of the emperor in many European languages, including Slovenian, is simply a derivation of Caesar's name. Quite literally, Octavian Augustus ruled as '*a Caesar.*' The second Caesar, but the first undisputed emperor. This is not the only time the *name* of Caesar plays a significant role in historical reports; both Plutarch and Suetonius relate an episode when commoners hailed him as king, and he replied, making yet another pursuit of gaining glory from rejecting the honor, that "his name was not King but Caesar," (Plutarch LX 2, p. 583; compare Suetonius LXXIX, p. 103). Caesar's heirloom

was, in a certain sense, *nothing but his name*, and subsequent Caesars donned that name to rule as his heirs, Augustus literally, others metaphorically.

Hegel famously described this interplay between Caesar and Augustus, the difference between Caesar and Caesar, between the original mutation and the series, as a historical repetition: Caesar had to be repeated, so to speak, in Augustus and other emperors, so that the Roman world would accept the rule of one as something necessary, and not a mere coincidence in the person of Julius Caesar (GW 27,2, p. 723). Interestingly, Hegel might have been inspired in this thought, at least partly, by Shakespeare's impassive and impartial dramatization of Plutarch's report.<sup>7</sup> Speaking about the cunning of Reason, Hegel argues that, in history, ideas are enforced or gain reality only through and by the death of individuals, that it is the blood of individuals that is sacrificed on the altar of the idea. In the example of Julius Caesar, we can see very clearly how it was precisely the death of the individual Caesar that helped establish the concept of Caesar as the name of the master, the name of the undisputed emperor (GW 27,3, p. 805).

I believe that William Shakespeare captures this Hegelian point beautifully in Antony's speech; as mentioned before, Caesar does not matter so much as a living individual; he functions as the figure of the master precisely insofar as he is dead, precisely insofar as unlimited political power was his *heirloom* rather than his actual *possession*. In fact, Julius Caesar as 'the king that never was' is a very effective figure of the master and Hegel's concept of the World-Historical Individual should be understood accordingly.

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<sup>7</sup> It is not just that Hegel, much like other German thinkers of the period, read Shakespeare with enthusiasm and appreciation—this is well known and well documented. As if following Aristotle's suggestion that dramatic poetry is more philosophical than historiography, Hegel even refers to Shakespeare as a source in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*: "Brutus bei Plutarch und Shakespeare. Als Römer ist sein Charakter herrlich, aber in den ungeheuren Irrthum und das Verbrechen verfiel er." (GW 27,2, p. 723)

Even though this point is not completely unequivocal in Hegel's *Lectures*, I argue that one does not become a World-Historical Individual because they have a set of qualities or because they have achieved great feats during their lifetime; what makes such an individual what they are is that great historical feats and transformations became associated with them, or more specifically, *with their name*. As living individuals, they may have not even survived this process.<sup>8</sup>

### *The Absolute Master*

In the course of his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, Hegel refers to death in reference to the figure of the master only obliquely. But elsewhere, he does it much more directly. Notably, in the passage on “master and slave,” or “lord and bondsman,” in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where death takes center stage. In the following paragraphs, I will first sum up the basic structure of that famous passage in very general terms, and then focus on the question of death.

Recall that the passage recounts the “*Independence and Dependence of Self-Consciousness*.” The entry point for the discussion is the duality of self-consciousness, the fact that it is *one* and at the same time *twofold*. It is one, but it is duplicated, doubled, and it performs for us, in this process of self-othering and

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<sup>8</sup> Occasionally, Hegel seems to deify Caesar personally and count his achievements as personal greatness, arguing that he was correct to grab all power: “Caesar hat einen neuen Schauplatz der Weltgeschichte eröffnet. [...] Den Boden der Weltgeschichte hat er also gegründet.” (GW 27, 2, p. 723) However, the ultimate verdict of someone's greatness depends not on their specific achievements, but on whether or not those achievements coincide with the purposes of the world spirit: “Der große Mensch in der Weltgeschichte ist nun der, welcher ein Solches sich zum Zweck macht, das auch der Zweck des Weltgeistes ist, das an der Zeit ist.” (GW 27, 4, p. 1173)

self-externalization, the theater of *recognition*. Self-consciousness implies, for Hegel, that “self-consciousness is faced with another self-consciousness” (Hegel 1977, p. 111). Hegel stages a kind of mortal combat between the two, arguing that each has to stake its own existence in order to prove to the other as well as to oneself that they are indeed self-consciousnesses. This is quite essential for Hegel, as he writes: “They must engage in this struggle, for they must raise their certainty of being *for themselves* to truth, both in the case of the other and in their own case” (Hegel 1977, p. 114).

It is therefore a question of *proving oneself* to oneself as well as to the other. The natural existence must be *despised* in order for self-consciousness to prove itself. But then, how does the figure of the master even come into play? Perhaps surprisingly, master and slave emerge as the result of an *unsuccessful*, or rather, incomplete life-and-death struggle. Only the extreme opposites die, and natural death does not produce recognition. Hegel writes:

For just as life is the *natural* setting of consciousness, independence without absolute negativity, so death is the *natural* negation of consciousness, negation without independence, which thus remains without the required significance of recognition. (Hegel 1977, p. 114)

Hegel describes death in this passage as a *natural* negation of consciousness, and its philosophical significance is the same as that of life. Just as natural life is independence without absolute negativity, so natural death is negativity without the independence of life. Natural life does not suffice to attain recognition; however, natural death does not help either. This may seem rather obvious, but it is actually a nuanced point. It is only the *natural* death that does not bring recognition; death in the philosophical sense, death as something that operates on the level of spirit, is a different matter entirely — as we will soon look into more closely.

The relationship between the master and the slave thus emerges through an incomplete life-and-death struggle, it emerges



among the living. Initially, their relationship is defined by the fact that one self-consciousness decided to cling to dear life after all, and it is called the bondsman or the slave consciousness. The other self-consciousness, whose independence is now recognized in a mediated way by the first one, is the lord or master consciousness. Hegel describes the relationship between them as concerning the thing, the object of desire, and, by extension, the work and the enjoyment of the fruits of that work.

Therein lies the most important point of the relationship between the two self-consciousnesses: for because the master only retains the *dependent* aspect of the thing (the end product of work), because they have put the slave consciousness in between themselves and the thing, it turns out that the status of independence or self-sufficiency between master and slave is actually inverted. It turns out that it is the slave or the bondsman who is truly independent with relation to work and its fruits: "The truth of the independent consciousness is accordingly the servile consciousness of the bondsman." (Hegel 1977, p. 177) For my purposes here, what matters is only how Hegel justifies this reversal of roles. In a very well-known passage, one that has worked its way even into the *Communist Manifesto*, Hegel writes:

For this consciousness [of the bondsman] has been fearful, not of this or that particular thing or just at odd moments, but its whole being has been seized with dread; for it has experienced the fear of death, the absolute Lord [Master]. In that experience it has been quite unmanned, has trembled in every fibre of its being, and everything solid and stable has been shaken to its foundations. But this pure universal movement, the absolute melting-away of everything stable, is the simple, essential nature of self-consciousness, absolute negativity, *pure being-for-self*, which consequently is *implicit* in this consciousness. (Hegel 1977, p. 117)<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Compare the phrases "everything solid and stable has been shaken to its foundations" and "the absolute melting-away of everything stable" with a

What I want to focus on in this beautiful passage is the idea that death is the Absolute Master. This is quite distinct from death as mentioned in the previous passage, the *natural* death, death that did not bring any recognition. In this passage, death, or more precisely, the overwhelming experience of the fear of death, is precisely that which produces self-consciousness in its purest form. This is death not as a natural process, but as a social and political force.

Hegel is speaking about the fear and trembling, about an *Angst* that is not simply an occasional fear of something particular in someone's life—this consciousness's "whole being has been seized with dread"; it was anxious *um sein ganzes Wesen*. This notion of anxiety in existentialist proportions was notably picked up by Heidegger in his *Being and Time*. Moreover, Heidegger follows Hegel in distinguishing between death as a naturally occurring, mundane experience on the one hand and death as a phenomenon *par excellence*, as precisely that existential disposition that determines the temporality and finality of human existence on the other hand. But perhaps there is also a point of distinction in Heidegger's understanding of death; for him, death and anxiety seem to always function as instances of isolation of self-consciousness. For Heidegger, the split of self-consciousness (of *Dasein*, as he calls it) does not appear along the lines of dependency and independency, which are reflexive categories, but rather along the lines of the authenticity and inauthenticity of being. It is only from the point of view of the inauthentic mode of existence that human beings are simply said to die; death is thus obscured as a phenomenon precisely in its mundaneness. From the perspective

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passage where Marx and Engels describe the perpetual changing of the system of production and with it the system of social arrangements under the Bourgeoisie in the *Manifesto*: "Everything fixed and stable vanishes, everything holy and venerable is desecrated, and men are forced to look at their mutual relations, at the problem of Life, in the soberest, the most matter of fact way." (Marx and Engels 2015, p. 263)

of Dasein's authenticity, which is to say, when we analyze Dasein in its phenomenological and ontological distinctness, death becomes the privileged site of inquiry which enables Heidegger the determination of Dasein as being-toward-death: death as the ultimate possibility of Dasein, the possibility of its own impossibility. However, by grounding this phenomenological analysis in the experience of anxiety and of the ultimate "mine-own-ness" (*Jemeinigkeit*) of death, Heidegger appears to codify his concept of death within the framework of ethical individualism.<sup>10</sup> Even when he discusses social phenomena such as the call of conscience, his account can only serve as a basis for individual morality, for personal responsibility, where one's highest duty is to one's own authentic self, and only as a consequence also to the community. In Hegel's philosophy, in the section on master and servant, on the contrary, death is something inherently social and even political: death does not only serve as a framework of a life and death struggle, but also as the force—*qua* the Absolute Master—that forms what appears to be the fundamental social and political bond between the master, the servant, and the object of desire/thing. If death is the absolute master, then any historical figure of the master is only possible through the mediation of death.

In a different section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, this social, ethical, and political nature of death comes even more to the foreground. Chapters on ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) discuss Sophocles' *Antigone* and other Greek plays and myths where the burial rites figure as the fundamental ethical injunction of every family, granting the deceased family member the status of someone who belonged to the spiritual (social, political) community. The burial rites have precisely the function of denying

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<sup>10</sup> Heidegger writes: "Mineness belongs to existing Da-sein as the condition of the possibility of authenticity and inauthenticity. Da-sein exists always in one of these modes, or else in the modal indifference to them." (Heidegger 1996, p. 49)

that a person died but a natural death—the burial rites add to the natural death a movement of consciousness, and of an action, a deed. Hegel writes:

This universality which the individual as such attains is *pure being, death*; it is a state which has been reached immediately, in the *course of Nature*, not the result of an action *consciously done*. The duty of the member of a Family is on that account to add this aspect, in order that the individual's ultimate being, too, shall not belong solely to Nature and remain something irrational, but shall be something *done*, and the right of consciousness be asserted in it. (Hegel 1977, p. 270)

Someone died—and their death had a meaning, a social and political significance. The ritual of burial is the essential work of the family because it is in this ritual that the family achieves its purpose beyond the natural bond between family members.

There is also a similar process underway in the institution of political community (*Gemeinwesen*), which, as Hegel insisted, must be upset by the government from time to time by war so that the systems of particular interest that constitute the community do not become fixed and so that the individuals “are made to feel in the task laid on them [namely, in war] their lord and master [ihren Herrn], death” (Hegel 1977, p. 273). This is Hegel's functional explanation of war, which he consistently argued for. In his *Philosophy of Right*, for instance, Hegel is quite explicit about the ethical and historical importance of wars: “To be sure, war produces insecurity of property, but this real insecurity is nothing other than a necessary movement. [...] Wars occur when the nature of the case requires. The seeds burgeon once more, and talk is silenced by the solemn recurrences of history” (Hegel 2008, p. 308).

In short, death has a social and political importance for Hegel, and it is far from an isolating force where one finds oneself ultimately alone in their authentic experience of being. When Hegel considers death as the absolute master, which he does consistently,

it is more than just a convenient phrase he uses for dramatic effect. It indicates that any other figure of the master, like a monarch, is necessarily a kind of appearance, enabled only by the mediation of death. One must note here that the idea of the political master as essentially an appearance does not simply mean a *false* appearance, as if there existed a true master somewhere, in hiding. To return to a point I made with regard to Julius Caesar (both the play and the historical figure), it simply means that there is something irreducibly theatrical in the way the master exists.

In a footnote to the *Capital*, Marx gives us an example of some Hegelian determinations of reflection that can perhaps serve as his own phrasing of the relationship between the lord and bondsman: "One man is king only because other men stand in the relation of subjects to him. They, on the other hand, imagine that they are subjects because he is king." (Marx 1976, p. 149) For Marx, perhaps even more clearly than for Hegel, the structure of servitude or bondage is an imaginary structure, and what I call an appearance or theatricality of political power is analyzed in the Marxist tradition as ideology. In *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare gives us his own version of the idea that relations of domination are an ideological formation, and that what keeps us in chains is nothing but our "servile fearfulness" (*Julius Caesar*, 1.1.76). Cassius, a republican senator, formulates this point clearly:

But life being weary of these worldly bars  
Never lacks power to dismiss itself. [...]  
That part of tyranny that I do bear  
I can shake off at pleasure. [...]  
And why should Caesar be a tyrant then?  
Poor man, I know he would not be a wolf  
But that he sees the Romans are but sheep.  
He were no lion, were not Romans hinds. (*Julius Caesar*, 1.3.96-106)

For Cassius, as for Marx, the burden of tyranny is borne by the bondsman himself, and what makes the tyrant a tyrant is

precisely the fact that the bondsman still clings to “these worldly bars,” to dear life.

It has become somewhat fashionable, following the ‘performative turn in humanities,’ to describe all social life as in a sense theatrical, since all social and political practices can be considered performances of sorts, where every actor is given a specific role to play. If we put it this way, however, then the concept of the master I am proposing here would not designate simply another such performance, but rather the very operator according to which all other performances are executed, the element of the curtain falling in the theater of everyday life. This means that within the Hegelian theory of society, we cannot abide without the master, without such an operator of our social interactions. It seems that for Hegel, throughout his body of work, but especially in his *Philosophy of Right*, this also meant that, quite literally, a political community requires a figurehead, a monarch. We may find Hegel’s position on this question rather unsatisfying, unimaginative, or conformist, to say the least.

But perhaps it could be demonstrated that the relationship between what Hegel conceptually attributes to the institution of the *monarch* and his concept of the *master* is actually a complicated one. One indication in this direction can be formulated with the help of a quip Napoleon uttered when addressed by the emissaries from a recently captured Erfurt, who addressed him as “*notre prince*” — “our prince,” “our ruler,” but perhaps we can translate it here as “our monarch.” Napoleon told them: “*je ne suis pas votre prince, je suis votre maître*” (“I am not your monarch, I am your master”). Hegel discusses this anecdote in order to distinguish between the monarch and the conqueror: “The monarch comes on the scene as the head and a part of the constitution, but it has to be said that there is no constitutional identity between a conquered people and its prince. A rebellion in a province conquered in war is a different thing from a rising in a well-organized state.” (Hegel 2008, p. 275). Regardless of

this specific context, the distinction between a monarch and a master that is implied in Napoleon's quip is perhaps an example that allows us to claim that Hegel's political theory is not entirely unfit for the contemporary understanding of how the master functions. Arguing in favor of the concept of the master should not be confused with arguing in favor of monarchy or dictatorship.

Let us return one final time to Julius Caesar. Was he a conqueror or a prince? In a sense, he was both: the province he had to ultimately conquer in war was the very homeland, Italia. Nevertheless, the distinction still applies. The function of the master must be considered as strictly separate function from the one of the monarch. So when the people greeted him as king, what else could he have responded but that "he was not king, but Caesar?"

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# The Master, the Slave, and the Truth upon a Membrane

*Jure Simoniti*

Would it be possible to give a new answer to the question of where the iconic status of Hegel's master–slave or, more accurately, lord–bondsmen dialectic comes from? Why is it that, more than two hundred years after the publication of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, we still cannot let go of the image of two individuals caught in the struggle for life? What is so magical about this philosophical allegory that it stimulates endless re-interpretation?

I will argue that the archetypal staging in which the master ends the struggle by risking his life is primarily not about providing some sort of “transcendental form of sociality,” but rather serves to unfold an entirely novel measure of truth.<sup>1</sup> What really goes on behind the social imagery of hierarchical roles and failed mutual recognition is the breaking apart of the most natural and spontaneous “scene of truth,” that of ideas of the mind directly and parallelly corresponding to things of the outside world. As I will try to demonstrate, Hegel invented a new logical space of truth, which neither refers to anything *an sich* nor to anything *für uns*. Instead, it is a truth that requires an event to occur, for only an incident that shatters the coordinates of its own emergence can

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to deny the political implications of the lord-bondsman dialectic. The thesis is rather that the path to “social theory” in Hegel is paved through the detour of pure ontology, that is, through complete devastation of any metaphysical or alethic form.

mark the place where truth ceases to be either simply objective in the sense of referring to the incarnated order of things out there, or simply subjective in the sense of deriving the constitution of reality from the inner set of concepts or cultural and language forms. In my reading, the clash between two consciousnesses, ending in the asymmetry of the master and the slave, represents a *paradigm of an event* in philosophy, an occurrence which is not derivable from any previous principle or state of affairs, but rather changes the game once it takes place. Its eventual character consists in forming a membrane between the outside and the inside world, on which both the “objectivist” claims of classical metaphysics and the “subjectivist” prerogatives of Kantianism cancel each other out and lose their hold.<sup>2</sup>

It is precisely in the invention of a new “dimension of truth” that Hegel might prove to be most modern. He could be claimed to have revealed a world so bereaved of any objectively given or subjectively transcendental truth that it condemns us to events in which we, on the one hand, butt against the Real beyond any human form and, on the other hand, are left with nothing but the imperative to create Ideas.

### 1. Begierde as the Implosion of Subjectivity

When speculative realists appeared two decades ago, they seem to have made the entire Western philosophy reducible to one of two grand alternatives: either classical metaphysics or Kantianism, that is, either the daringness of philosophy to think the world

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<sup>2</sup> It should be mentioned that Mladen Dolar’s philosophy cultivates this sensitivity for truth in its perhaps inevitable dimension of emerging in *the logical space of neither-nor*, that is, at the interstice of two massive ontological spaces, where both the one and the other collapse and in this mutual offset produce their own surplus of necessity. The argument for the truth upon a membrane could also be said to unfold in this “space of neither-nor.”

as it is in itself, full of substances and primary qualities, or the limitation of philosophy to the inner circuits of subjective representations and the confinement of thought to its correlation to things. These options already miss the true point of the Kantian move, which, if understood properly in its historical context, was arguably realist.<sup>3</sup> Hegel was, of course, put in the Kantian slot. However, it could be contended—especially on the basis of the master–slave dialectic—that what distinguishes Hegel from his idealist predecessors is exactly his going beyond the polarity of the metaphysics of things in themselves versus the correlationism of things for us.

To discern the absolute invention at work in this “iconic scene,” one might do well to reconstruct in broad strokes the historical process of transitions that led to its emergence. Hegel is commonly said to represent the climax and conclusion of German idealism. He entered the philosophical stage at the moment when the old guarantees of meaning had already bid goodbye, and a new source of truth was being sought after. With Locke’s empiricism, the eternal concepts of rationalism, being derived from the ideas in God’s mind, had proved to lack any ontological justification. Thereupon, with Hume, the world shirked from manifesting any logical order; one could no longer rely on things being assembled into substances and causal chains. Kant’s solution to this predicament was to shift the origin of the ideal conceptual forms to the inside of the subject, and simultaneously to limit their reach solely to the objects of possible experience. Thus, in the aftermath of Kant, the great philosophical alternative was between the metaphysics of the world in itself and the philosophy of the

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<sup>3</sup> Inasmuch as he is placed against the background of the rationalist idealizations of things and the empiricist deconstructions of forms of knowledge, Kant provides the conceptual underpinning of the world acting according to the laws of Newtonian physics, the world of necessary, contiguous causality. I have developed a “realist” reading of Kant, as well as of Hegel, in *The Untruth of Reality: The Unacknowledged Realism of Modern Philosophy* (Simoniti 2016, pp. 7–59).

I, between dogmatism and transcendental philosophy, between theory and practice, between substances and freedom, finally, between Spinoza and Fichte.<sup>4</sup>

The scales were suddenly tipped from the objective order of things toward their subjective appropriation. But just as God's will to create the substances had once been considered to be the first cause and, as such, beyond any other, previous reason, so now Kant's spontaneity and Fichte's *Tathandlung* had to stand out of the chain of sufficient reasons in order to vindicate their necessary ideality. The subject was devised as *grundlos* and a *causa sui*. This, however, raised another set of problems. Hume has bequeathed to us an entirely unfounded, hazardous, desolate world. But if the transcendental subjectivity is the only force to pull us out of this chaos, who entitles it to do so? Who endows it with its innate dispositions and its inner organization? If Kant hinged the determinacy of the world upon a set of *a priori* conceptual forms, ones *subsisting* in the timeless interiority of the subject, then the question might arise as to who vouches for the qualities of this categorical apparatus. Should it be accepted as *given*? And what is it that imbues Fichte's I with the innate right to subdue the outside world? Might it be that Kant's transcendentalism and Fichte's practical license fall under the heading *trockenes Versichern*, "bare assurance," in Hegel's terminology?

This is the background against which Hegel's almost literary strategies presumably make most sense. In the reading that I will propose, the master-slave dialectic was contrived precisely so as to *counterbalance* the German idealist slant toward the subjective predetermination and appropriation of being. With regard to Kant's table of categories and Fichte's original positing, the authentic purpose of Hegel's "struggle for life" is to reveal the

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<sup>4</sup> "There are only two systems, the critical and the dogmatic," Fichte stated (Fichte 1982, p. 118, note 5). Critical systems were Kant's and Fichte's, while Spinozism was considered to be the most consistent dogmatic system of philosophy.

initial groundlessness, nullity, and contingency of human conceptuality, which is yet to be constituted and made necessary in the process to follow. To put it differently, the infamous fight for life and death not only discloses a world that allows itself to be conquered by man because it has no ideal value in itself, but also gives insight into the construction site of human ideas that have not always been there.

This, at least, is what the inner dramatic structure of Hegel's own argument seems to intimate. The entire *Phenomenology* is propelled by one long striving toward abolishing the dichotomy between subject and object. Self-consciousness marks the first, provisional end-point. The three forms of consciousness before that, i.e., sense-certainty, perception, and understanding, were still caught in the juxtaposition of the two poles, of the I standing against the world. But now understanding, *Verstand*, steps behind the curtain of phenomena, sees the void there, and fills it itself. The fundamental split of German idealism appears to be superseded. Truth no longer has the form of certainty about something other; instead, the only object of consciousness is now the consciousness itself. As Hegel puts it, "consciousness is to itself the truth" (Hegel 1977, p. 104). And more starkly: "With self-consciousness, then, we have therefore entered the native realm of truth" (ibid.).

The path of knowledge thus gives the impression of being accomplished and having come to its end. Yet this seemingly successful closure only opens another abyss, one traversed by agitation and negativity. Instead of being happily enclosed in its own self-recourse, Hegel portrays self-consciousness as a character of great inner unrest. Already by definition, the Hegelian self-consciousness is conceived as a "return from its otherness," which is the sensual world, so it can never exist as a pure "worldless" entity in the vein of an immediate sense of selfness, the Cartesian self-evidence of the ego, or an intellectual intuition. On the contrary, self-consciousness is originally processual, reactive, a constant movement of suspension of the opposition between

the outside world and its own inner, hard-won identity. It is for this reason that Hegel gives it a negative name; he calls it *Begierde* or “desire.”

*Begierde* is constantly devouring and annihilating her object, but the more world she eats up, the bigger the hole in her interior. As eternally unfulfilled, she is a veritable image of discontent. Just as Nietzsche named the Earth a hiatus between two nothingnesses, *Begierde* could be said to be an interval between two voids, between the obliteration of the outside world and the growing vacuum of the inside. But why is it that Hegel presents self-consciousness first as *Begierde*? It seems that he needs the dissatisfaction of desire to meet two conditions. On the one hand, the Hegelian subject is originally placed into the world and can never take off from the ground of the earth. She cannot withdraw to the Cartesian quiet chamber, rise to the logically displaced sphere of the Kantian transcendental deduction, or assume Fichte’s aprioristic and unabashed stance of the self-positing of the I; she is not even Hume’s immobile self as a “theatre of perceptions.” *Begierde* is rather akin to the Heideggerian *In-der-Welt-Sein*, a concrete, local embodiment fraught with its *Makel der Bestimmtheit*, the stain of determinacy. On the other hand, she is also essentially a return from her otherness, a movement of sublating her creatural conditions, and as such immanently lacks any substantial identity. Not only is she a mere this-worldly entity, but not even as much as that.<sup>5</sup> *Begierde* expresses precisely the coincidence of worldliness and its deficit, of immanence and something less than it.

In a nutshell, consciousness in the form of *Begierde* is both pronouncedly mundane and, in a sense, out of place. In the process of the world vanishing into its gaping mouth, *Begierde* also experiences that it possesses no intimate place to retreat to, no inner Archimedean point to hold on to, no timeless past. It

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<sup>5</sup> This is a typical Hegelian trick: even though there exists no other world, this world is still lesser than it purports to be.

is this ever-increasing inner vacuity that makes it redouble into two agents, two self-consciousnesses. *Begierde* is structurally dependent on the form of alterity, but it also abolishes every alien thing coming its way. So only a being that is itself endowed with negation and harbors the same void will put forward something *Begierde* will not be able to swallow. This entity is another consciousness: "On account of the independence of the object, therefore, it can achieve satisfaction only when the object itself effects the negation within itself" (ibid., p. 109). From there it notably follows: "*Self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness*" (ibid., p. 110).

This configuration then leads to a combat between the two entities that are both self-negating and negating any form of otherness. Since it is not a clash of two simple, animalic desires, but of two essentially self-repudiating beings, it turns into a battle for prestige, or, in Hegel's words, into the struggle for recognition. The winner is not the one who devours the other and stays alive, but, quite the contrary, the one who actually does to herself what she should have done to the other:

The *presentation* of itself, however, as the pure abstraction of self-consciousness consists in showing itself as the pure negation of its objective mode, or in showing that it is not attached to any specific *existence*, not to the individuality common to existence as such, that it is not attached to life. (Ibid., p. 113)

The one more disposed to accomplish this negation onto oneself, the one willing to risk one's own life and dare one's own death, wins in the end. As a result, the one who goes further in waging one's life becomes the master, and the other, who still clings to the shreds of her biological life, the bondsman or the slave.

The story goes on. The recognition is unequal, the master regresses to a self-indulgent subject, caught in her own barren enjoyment, while the slave, who hangs suspended between her attachment to the empirical world and recognition withheld by

the master, advances to being the heroine of the subsequent ascent to absolute knowledge. But the question to be answered is, what does Hegel really want to convey through this dramatic, almost grandiloquent theatrical scene?

## 2. *Two Worlds Collapsing Into One*

Over the last century, we witnessed an abundance of analyses trying to address this very issue. There were the Marxist readings, such as Lukács's, the French, those of Kojève and his disciples Sartre, Lacan, and Derrida, the German of Gadamer and Honneth, the American of McDowell or Brandom, and many, many more. Most of the interpreters could not resist the temptation to place this dialectic into a, let us say, *extra-philosophical* frame of meaning. They recognized in Hegel's metaphor either a deduction of the transcendental form of sociality, an establishment of the primary social nucleus, a prototype of the social contract, or a genealogy of domination and bondage. The interpretations were conducted predominantly in terms of philosophical anthropology, social theory, and some sort of philosophical pragmatics. In this regard, most have perceived it as a theory of the provisionally failed, but ideally to be accomplished recognition between rational beings (partially Kojève, and the tenor of Honneth, McDowell, or Brandom fall under this heading). Some have also read it historically, as a reconstruction of the genesis of the relations of labor, mostly between wagedworkers and capitalists (Marx and Lukács), some existentially, as an enactment of the human drama of realizing one's mortality and overcoming it intersubjectively (the deepest layer being explored by Kojève, but Sartre would fit into this category as well), some anthropologically, as the story of the anthropogenesis of man as a creature of lack emerging out of nature as the sphere of fullness (Kojève, Bataille, Sartre, the



early Lacan),<sup>6</sup> some pragmatically, as an account of collectively making sense of and rationalizing the world (McDowell and Brandom certainly go in this direction), some psychologically, as a reconstruction of the emergence of the sense of self and freedom (Gadamer makes some such points), some structurally, as the emergence of two irreducible symbolic positions (Lacan with the master-signifier, but indirectly also Derrida and Bataille).

What is perhaps common to all these readings, or most of them, is that they could be brought under the denominator of “interpretations of immanence.” As I see it, the magical X, the never fully accountable surplus that makes us return to Hegel’s master and slave time and again is the fact that it is *a story of pure immanence giving birth to its own self-transcendence* without invoking any transcendent element, be it any religious or normative notion, any kind of Platonic or Scholastic idea, any Aristotelian final cause, any intervention of a rationalist God, any of the pseudo-theological concepts of post-metaphysics, such as Kant’s perpetual peace or Fichte’s conscience, but also any of the post-Hegelian poetic, at times obscure ideas in the vein of Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* or Heidegger’s *Ereignis*. In contrast to previous as well as later theories of society and subjectivity, the Hegelian narrative seems to be more terrestrial, slender, and constrained: there is only *Begierde* and its self-sacrifice, nothing more. By way of its own negativity, an almost pre-human, biological *Life* spawns

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Dolar: “The way that Kojève reads Hegel, and then Bataille, Sartre and in many respects Lacan largely on the Kojévian tracks, consists in (tacitly or overtly) setting up a massive opposition. On the one hand there is life, nature, the biological basis etc., which are qualified by continuity, self-reproduction, ultimately a being without a lack or negativity. On the other hand, there is the emergence of the human, of human reality, of the ‘for itself’ (to speak with Sartre), of sovereignty (to speak with Bataille), of the subject (to speak with Lacan), of desire, and this emergence instills lack and negativity into the previous continuity of being. This is not a stance that Hegel would endorse at any time. First of all, Hegel doesn’t start with life as some primary given from which one would have to deduce subjectivity, be it as a cut” (Dolar 2023).

a sort of self-referential closure in its midst and then disgorges a rudimentary form of the social bond. Hegel thereby provides an atheist, albeit artistically unusually appealing account of how a world without gods, without any mythical, ideal, or metaphysical superstructure, can nevertheless produce something well-nigh transcendent, namely the miracle of self-consciousness and intersubjectivity.

However, it seems that all these “interpretations of immanence,” as justified as they may be in their own right, are still somewhat undernourished in light of the overly stark accents of the Hegelian drama. The devouring of *Begierde*, her annihilation of everything, the inner discontent, the redoublement into two, the struggle, the risk of death, the severing of all ties with being, “the absolute melting-away of everything stable” (Hegel 1977, p. 117), and the resulting mastership and bondage may be motives too excessive and trenchant to be conceived of within the framework of historical, sociological, anthropological, existential, ethical, pragmatic, psychological, or cognitively subjectivist immanence alone. To put it bluntly, *Begierde* taken merely in her worldly, intersubjective dimension would probably never come up with the idea of staging the event of her own possible death. So why does she do it? Other “social theories” seem to be content with much gentler metaphors and arguments to perform the rite of passage into sociality. In Hobbes or Spinoza, one only has to sacrifice one’s natural freedom by way of rational consideration, and in Fichte, it suffices for the other subject to summon us, and we answer her call. Hegel, on the other hand, demands a destitution of the subject as thorough as this:

For this consciousness has been fearful, not of this or that particular thing or just at odd moments, but its whole being has been seized with dread; for it has experienced the fear of death, the absolute Lord. In that experience it has been quite unmanned, has trembled in every fiber of its being, and everything solid and stable has been shaken to its foundations. (Ibid., p. 117)

It thus may well be that something else is at work here, something that goes beyond the mere games of mundane interests and intersubjective recognitions. An element should therefore be identified that will be able to gather enough energy to spark off the overwrought theatrics of sacrifice and nothingness in Hegel's narrative. But what element might this be?<sup>7</sup>

My guess is that the key to understanding the entire dynamic of the lord and the bondsman lies in the following passage:

It is in self-consciousness, in the Notion of Spirit, that consciousness first finds its turning-point, where it leaves behind it the colorful show of the sensuous here-and-now and the nightlike void of the supersensible beyond, and steps out into the spiritual daylight of the present. (Ibid., pp. 110–111)

As this quotation intimates, Hegel's move consists in collapsing two worlds into one, and truth may well be the name of

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<sup>7</sup> This line of questioning brings to mind Jan Assmann's wondering about the brutality and savagery in the Jewish texts of the Bible, where God commands man to commit atrocities as monstrous as murdering his brothers, friends, and neighbors. Assmann famously opens his paper with the question, "Why do the biblical texts describe the foundation and the enforcement of the monotheist religion in such violent images?" (Assmann 2005, p. 18; my translation). He then demonstrates that the semantics of such ferocity come from the political texts of the Assyrians, where the king demanded exclusive submission from his subjects, and were later adopted by the Jewish theologians so as to be projected onto the new bond between God and man. The explanation is that in monotheism God remained alone, deprived of all his relations to other gods, and it was up to man to substitute for the erstwhile company of gods with the utter renunciation of his own person, one achieved by means of conversion and penitence. In short, the monotheist "language of violence" shows that we have gone beyond the common pagan conflation of religion and sociality, and have entered the realm of staking the entirety of the human person. Perhaps there is some similarity to how Hegel demands of *Begierde* her full surrender, for it may be that the desiring consciousness now finds itself standing before the lonely god of philosophy, one who appears solitary and deserted because the new, eventual form of truth has deprived him of any fixed and given conceptuality, any traditional universals in the manner of Platonic or Scholastic ideas.

this collapse. Arguably, thus, Hegel does not deliver a story of immanence engendering its own self-transcendence, but rather a story of the indiscriminately intertwined immanence and transcendence dissolving one in the face of the other and unfolding a logical space between the two where a different form of truth can come to life. What the master–slave dialectic actually intends and aspires to might therefore not be some positive form of social recognition or human self-awareness, but a new theory of truth. To support this case, two elements could be discerned that seem rather underexposed in the interpretations proposed so far.

### *3. The Struggle at the Boundary between the Outside and the Inside*

First, it is seldom noticed that in the master’s-to-be uncanny risk of death it is not only that an individual puts his life at stake, but behind this there is a certain balance of two spheres crumbling and being reduced to nothingness. What the traditional readings seem to forget is that the entire drama plays out precisely at the interstice of the inner and the outer world.

Initially, *Begierde* turns the realm of objectivity into a formless mass to be swallowed and consumed. Such gluttony might strike us as a metaphorically somewhat more pointed image of the Fichtean I overpowering the world. In Hegel, however, the movement of *Begierde* disintegrating the order of things only sets the stage for the breakdown of her inner world. And therein, at least as seen against the backdrop of a certain historical development, lies the most crucial invention of Hegel. German idealism responded to the empiricist dissolution of the metaphysics of substances with Kant’s and then Fichte’s shift toward the subjective constitution of being. The world was placed upon the ground of spontaneity and practical action, which infused the subject with some sort of rush of original, impulsive energy. Yet, in return, this subjective

idealist rearrangement inevitably, and for want of a transcendent backing, only brought to light a certain boundless lack within the subject herself, the lack epitomized in the vertiginous void of Kant's infinite tasks and of Fichte's perpetual drive to act and labor. With German idealism, the subject found in herself a hole never to be filled. And in this context, Hegel could be seen as giving a face to the suppressed, obscure *discontent* at the heart of Kant's spontaneity and Fichte's I. What is often overlooked in interpretations of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is that it not only tells an optimistic story of the world becoming subjective in the style of Kant's growth of knowledge and Fichte's frantic world-usurpation, but also has a darker reverse side, one that points to the implosion of the subject and her search for a new fulcrum. To put it starkly, where Fichte's I was artificially, delusionary happy, Hegel's *Begierde* shows that this I just does not know how miserable she really is. Thus, to get to the bottom of the master-slave dialectic, the equilibrium of two processes should be taken into account: on the one hand, the world undergoes a Humean de-substantialization, which is kept in balance by the introduction of the idealist subjectivity; on the other hand, the thereby enthroned I is forced to face her inner hypothec, as it were, and in consequence enact her own symbolic suicide.

To repeat, the empiricist deflation of the given world was compensated by the German idealist inflation of the subject, and leverage shifted from the one to the other. But now Hegel recognizes the lopsidedness of this move and tries to even it out. He proposes something much more radical than Kant or Fichte. If the substantial structure of the outside world is crumbling, he seems to be saying, then the inside world loses any justification, any firm support, any transcendental claim as well. Thus, the Humean disintegration of being is not only reciprocated by the introduction of the self-positing subject but also, in a way, compensated by her self-sacrifice; and the megalomania of the Fichtean I now passes over into the master staging his potential

death. Put differently, it is not enough to realize that the world does not stand up to *Begierde's* appetite; she herself must concede that she possesses no metaphysical right to do so, no preordained role in this universe, no infinite supply of inner vitality, and no perennial logical forms to impress them upon things.

Precisely this is what the master-to-be accomplishes. He could be imagined as someone who allows a glimpse into his inside and admits there is literally nothing there. In gambling with his life, he comes across as some sort of Cartesian subject coming to terms with the fact that he possesses no inner Archimedean point; as the Kantian transcendental subject realizing that he does not carry in himself an already established table of categories; or as the Fichtean I acknowledging that his practical impetus is mortgaged and simulated. The illusion of a timeless set of concepts and the original spontaneity subsisting in our minds can only be maintained as long as the world out there manifests some order; but once things are up for grabs so thoroughly and offer so little resistance, the one grabbing them suddenly stands at the precipice of the presumed creatural necessity, staring down into the abyss of his own contingency. The mirage of the outside and the inside world at least faintly mirroring each other or striving to do so within the ideal limit requires a metaphysical entity to warrant for it, as Kant already knew in his dialectical ideal of God. But when this frame dissolves, it demands a new form of truth. In risking death, Hegel's master reveals that the world could do well without him, that no cosmic plan predestines his presence, and no universal fate depends on him; he makes his own inner untruth known, so to speak. Consequently, truth turns out to be neither something out there, for the objective world melts away in the face of the subject, nor something in here, for the subject herself could well not have existed. In this logical space of neither-nor, truth will therefore be forced to become a projective apparition that will only yet emerge as the result of the double annulment, where the outside catches fire upon the inside, while both end up repealing and offsetting one another.

#### 4. *Against Sufficient Reason and Non-contradiction*

The second somewhat neglected layer of this dialectic is that it tacitly performs a break with two of the most fundamental rules of classical metaphysics, the law of non-contradiction and the principle of sufficient reason.<sup>8</sup> The entire section on “Self-Consciousness” is fraught with what would traditionally be perceived as *illogical*. *Begierde* wants its object to be and not to be; life, Hegel’s *Leben*, is a unity of oppositions, a fluidification of all differences, etc. But it is precisely in the figure of the master that both transgressions of logic coincide explicitly. A succinct definition of Hegel’s master could perhaps be that it is *a creature embodying both contradiction and un-reason<sup>9</sup> at the same time*. In staking his life, the master achieves a fleeting moment of both being and not being, and he does that by way of exempting himself from the causality of sufficient reasons, to which the slave still adheres.<sup>10</sup>

In order to illustrate this line of reasoning, one could well parallel Hegel’s constitution of self-consciousness in the *Phenomenology* with the beginning of *The Science of Logic*. The dichotomy of being and nothing in the *Logic* is evocative of the antagonism of the master and the slave, and so much so that the former may be envisioned as a repetition of the latter under the criteria of pure thought. “Being” and “nothing” are famously *mere*

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<sup>8</sup> It is Leibniz who called them by their name in elevating them into the structuring precepts of his logical and ontological edifice: “Our reasonings are based upon two great principles: the first the *principle of contradiction*, [...] and the second the *principle of sufficient reason*” (Leibniz 1989 [1714], p. 646).

<sup>9</sup> The term “un-reason” is used for the present purposes only and means solely the violation of the principle of sufficient reason; it is not identical with, but can nonetheless be related to the term *Un-Grund* used by Schelling, who inherited it from Böhme.

<sup>10</sup> In Hegel’s own words, the master must show that he “is not attached to life” (Hegel 1977, p. 113), while for the slave the things of the world still represent the “chain from which he could not break free in the struggle” (*ibid.*).

*exclamations*, which makes them non-propositional in form and lacking any predicate. This implies that the first element does not entail, motivate, or produce the second, while the second is not derived from the first. The one does not negate, mediate, or sublimate the other; rather, they simply stand next to each other as *irreducibly two*. The structural analogy between the two text passages therefore consists in the original duality of two elements, either of the slave and the master, or of being and nothing.

But why must twoness in Hegel logically precede oneness? Only as *essentially two* can they represent entities without any mediation between them, without the one passing into, reflecting, intervening into, corresponding to the other; in short, only as two can they negate each other directly and without any reason whatsoever. What both the master–slave dialectic and the interjections of “being” and “nothing” mark is thus the very entrance into the realm stretching beyond the domain of non-contradiction and sufficient reason.

What role, then, does this suspension of the two principles play? The master seems to represent the instance which will reveal to the slave that there is nothing there behind the veil of subjectivity, and that the logical core of the subject is empty. Perhaps comparably, the function of “nothing” is to declare to “being” that there exists no such thing as an already elaborate logic, a collection of innate ideas, or a table of transcendental forms subsisting latently behind it all. The “nothing” as the second category conveys that every other category, from “becoming” to “existence,” from “essence” to “concept,” will only have been produced in the following process of pure thinking. Therefore, if Hegel’s *Science of Logic* notoriously renders God’s thoughts before the creation of the world, this merely means that it exposes God at the moment of ignorance and impotence, when he himself does not know what follows, but instead needs to take the wearisome path of reasoning out the rubrics of logic step by step. Hegel implies here that even the divine mind possesses no logical structure



before creating it itself. By the same token, the master could be imagined as a sort of *Nullpunkt* in the search for truth, one that represents to the slave the unsettling realization that nothing, no certainty, no guarantee, no telos, no safety net to fall back on, no place to rest upholds the manifest surface of their voracious lives from behind. To put it pointedly, the master-to-be stands for the difficult fact that truth does not yet exist.<sup>11</sup>

It is therefore important to define carefully at which point exactly the invalidation of both logical principles takes place. When Hegel, in making the master stake his own life, enacts the collapse of both non-contradiction and sufficient reason, does he do it in order to disclose a completely lawless, erratic, anarchic, inconsistent universe? Does he want to let us know that everything in this world is also its own negation, and anything can happen at any time? Hardly anything misses the spirit and the tone of his philosophy more than such conjurations of some cosmic chaos. Hegel was never a romantic who mystified either nature or the human soul, and he is the last to endow things with ambiguities and absurdities. Whenever he cast a glance at the physical or even the biological environment, he was never prone to recognizing in it anything subversive, unpredictable, or inconstant. Rather, he always seems to have been bored by the prospect of the merely given world. In his conversation with Heine, he called the stars the “luminous leprosy of the sky,” and in his hike to the Bernese Alps he only described the tedium of the grey stones and the

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<sup>11</sup> This might remind us of Jonathan Lear’s congenial description of Freud’s death drive: “[W]hat lies ‘beyond the pleasure principle’ isn’t another principle, but a lack of principle” (Lear 2000, p. 85). Thanatos is not another, substantial cosmic force next to Eros, but only indicates that the life-drives themselves are already insubstantial, thus falling into their own inertia of endless repetition. The death drive is the “nothing” behind the life drives, and the master is *another* subject beside the slave only insofar as it represents the *subject-in-lack*, that is, the stand-in for the fact that even the slave possesses no Kantian or Fichtean fullness of subjectivity.

unsightliness of the glaciers.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, in Hegel's eyes, man's personality in itself was never something profound, impenetrable, or unfathomable, never an irresolvable Diderotian, romantic, or Nietzschean tangle of irrationalities and multiple roles, but rather something shallow and uninteresting. What must therefore be stressed in this respect is that the principles of logic do not fail as rules that structure either the facts of the outside world or the ideas and representations within our inner world. Instead, *they only break down at the interface* between the complete obliteration of the outside and the utter sacrifice of the inside. Consequently, their abrogation holds neither simply for the world *an sich* nor directly for our subjective world *für uns*, but only for the lamellar domain where the one sphere touches upon the other, presumes to determine or mirror it, but then fails at any attempt to parallelize the two.

The identification of the place where the universe comes undone, so to speak, is crucial. Even though Hegel could at times be seduced into staging the world as a venue for “real contradictions,” as they are called—in his philosophy of nature one could certainly find many instances of such philosophical romanticism—, his inauguration of contradiction and un-reason as well-nigh cosmic laws actually applies less to the givenness of either nature or the human soul, and more to the laborious process of constructing concepts and truths. The “illogical” tenor of Hegel's logic, which raises negation into the prime meta-category, is not a flat-out truth about how things are, but rather the truth about how truth will have to become because things, as they are, are untrue.

What, then, does the suspension of the two fundamental principles of logic amount to, if it occurs at the boundary between the

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12 There, he memorably stated: “Neither the eye nor the imagination will in these formless masses find a spot to rest upon, to find occupation or reason to play with. [...] The sight of these eternally dead masses gave nothing to me but a monotonous and horribly dull notion: *it is so*” (Hegel 1986, p. 618; translation mine).

outside and the inside world? As I see it, Hegel's move serves to break apart the form of truth that intertwines the order of ideas and the order of things. It is the most natural, spontaneous form of truth as correspondence, one that represents the most instinctive definition of our everyday sense of what is true, and one on which classical metaphysics was based.

Therefore, it would again be worthwhile to place the master-slave dialectic against the historical background of philosophy, against Spinoza, Leibniz, Hume, Kant, and Fichte. The most full-blown ontological expressions of the law of non-contradiction and the principle of sufficient reason are, of course, the two greatest systems of rationalism, Spinoza's monist parallelism of *ordo rerum* coinciding with *ordo idearum*, and Leibniz's preestablished harmony of every simple substance embodying its own complete individual concept. Having lost the prerogative to deal with the substance itself, German idealism aspired to re-justify the logical consistence of the world within the reach of the spontaneous, free subjectivity. Both non-contradiction and sufficient reason were thus saved, but the cost was considerable: the very subject who vouched for them is now not only exempt from the jurisdiction of reasons, but she also exhibits a strange vulnerability to contradiction.

While in Kant "the principle of sufficient reason is the ground of possible experience, namely the objective cognition of appearances with regard to their relation in the successive series of time" (Kant 1998, p. 311; *KrV* A 201/B 264), the primary qualification of the subject, who establishes this field of reasonable objectivity, is, of course, "spontaneity," which means that the activity of *Verstand* (and, *eo ipso*, *Vernunft*) cannot be derived from any previous reason. Furthermore, the subject who holds the world together falls prey to the "paralogisms of the soul": her substance, identity, unity, and simplicity are mere dialectical assumptions, and they could also be the opposite. The moment we apply the category of the substance to the "I think" in order to pinpoint the

soul itself, this subject of “rational psychology” starts to elude our grasp and oscillate between being and non-being.<sup>13</sup> The Kantian world is thereby causally and logically consistent, but the price to be paid for this is that the founding subject now stands beyond any reason, while her ultimate core cannot preclude contradiction.

Along these lines, Fichte then expressly conceived the I as *not* abiding by the logic of reasons,<sup>14</sup> and as simultaneously *embodying* contradiction inasmuch as it comprises herself and her negation, the not-I. In Fichte’s transition from  $I = I$  to  $I = \text{not-}I$ , the explicit *causa sui* of the I immediately prompts an inner negation directed against the not-I. On the face of it, un-reason converges with contradiction in the very foundational act of ontology.

It could be argued that it was precisely this Kantian and Fichtean groundless and self-contradictory spontaneity of the subject that paved the way for Hegel’s self-sacrifice of the master. However, Hegel goes a crucial step further. In Kant and Fichte, the autogenetic, from the outside perspective unforeseen and almost miraculous advent of the subject is ontologically necessary, given that the entire order of things depends on it. In Hegel, on the other hand, the very I who is the creator of the world now stakes her own life, as if enacting the fact that she herself is utterly contingent and possesses no inner forms to still vouch for the correspondence between the logic of reason and the ontology of things. Therefore, while Kant and Fichte bracketed the two principles only at the highest pinnacle of world-making, but let

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<sup>13</sup> See for instance: “But I do not thereby know at all whether this consciousness of myself would even be possible without things outside me through which representations are given to me, and thus whether I could exist merely as a thinking being (without being a human being)” (Kant 1998, p. 446; *KrVB* 409).

<sup>14</sup> “A judgment concerning that to which nothing can be equated or opposed is simply not subject to the grounding principle [*Satz des Grundes*, which is the German term for the principle of sufficient reason; my note], for it is not subject to the condition of its validity; [...]; it has no ground, but itself provides the ground for everything that does have a ground. The object of such judgments is the absolute self ...” (Fichte 1982, p. 111).

the created world itself still comply with them, Hegel invalidates them at any intersection where either the given world lays claim to determine the content of our ideas, or our ideas purport to synthesize a world of their own. It is in these double waivers that a new form of truth transpires, the truth of the events in which reason and the world clash, so that the concept turns out to no longer correlate with reality, but rather to emerge from the ashes of their failure to match one another.

This might sound abstruse and sketchy, but Hegel's philosophy offers an abundance of quite easy to follow examples of the delicacies of this new truth-form. One should only recall the more comprehensible part of his system, the *Philosophy of Right* with its dialectical string of legal and social conceptuality. The transition from "property" to "contract" provides an especially illustrative case; even more so the progression from "family" to "civil society." How, then, does the succession of these categories, the substitution of one with the other, get effectuated in Hegel? As is well known, the one concept develops its inner contradiction and passes over into the other. But, more accurately, the key is that the given reality of the first *notion* founders, thereby evolving into another, higher *notion*, and it is through this conversion that it simultaneously, and retroactively, emerges as a *concept*.<sup>15</sup>

Say, "property," as the external thing that I own, represents the minimal condition of the free will of my person. However, I do not remain free if I stay attached to this particular piece of property, but only if I am capable of alienating it, that is, placing it at the disposal of other free wills. I must exchange its ownership with another person, and I do that by concluding a "contract." The way Hegel puts it is a veritable stylistic exercise in "staging a contradiction":

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<sup>15</sup> The distinction applied here between notion and concept is not Hegelian *per se*. "Notion" is used more in the sense of the German *Vorstellung* (which is otherwise translated as "representation"), and "concept" denotes the *Begriff*.

This is the process in which the following contradiction is presented and mediated: I *am* and *remain* an owner of property, having being for myself and excluding the will of another, only in so far as, in identifying my will with that of another, I cease to be an owner of property. (Hegel 1991, p. 104, [§72])

Here, both logical principles seem to be outwitted quite vividly. At the moment of signing the contract, I *am* and *am not* the owner at the same time, and I do not enter the exchange of property out of some (sufficient) reason, such as a need or an interest, but only in order to enact the freedom of my will; I am a socially recognized “proprietor” insofar as I am free to sell my belongings away. It is thus the potential alienation of the *reality* of my property by the *reality* of the contract that *post factum* accomplishes and completes the *ideality* of the concept of “property.” The logic behind this process is not to make the ideal concept tally with its real correlate. Quite the contrary, it lets the ideal concept arise when its ludicrous failure to correspond to any reality becomes entirely manifest.

In order to carry out this inversion and transition from the concept trying to equal reality to reality giving birth to a concept, precisely the two logical principles that still warranted the correspondence form must be bypassed. Thus, “property” becomes an ideal concept only from the perspective of the contract, because a contract makes the property transcend both the validity of non-contradiction, seeing that it exemplifies the moment when to possess and not to possess coincide, and of sufficient reasons, given that it symbolizes alienation as its original potentiality.

Quite similarly, in *Sittlichkeit*, the third part of the *Elements*, the “family” breaks apart on account of the individual leaving her nest and becoming part of the “civil society.” It is another case of a staged contradiction and un-reason, since the purpose of the family is to give birth to the very offspring who causes its demise. Its properly Hegelian function is not to equip the progeny with a set of positive social skills to be applied in the public sphere, but

to disclose to her the essential “voidability” of any primary social form, any inherited tradition or inborn boundedness. Thus, it is in the figure of the free civil subject that the family most *is* and *is not*, and it is there that it experiences its break from the chain of reasons. This situation, however, does not represent a flat-out “real contradiction” in the romantic sense of mysterious self-sown creatures living in conflict with themselves, and it also does not depict some kind of “real un-reason” in the Humean manner of chaotic occurrences. Instead, the contradiction and the un-reason unfold solely at the intersection of the concept and reality. While, for instance, the conventional family considered itself to be an entity that fully embodied its symbolic, even mythical notion, the Hegelian disintegrating household breaks up this organic unity and shows how the *real* kin must perish in order for it to rise as an *ideal* concept, one no longer assuming a place in some natural cosmic order. Similar to Hegel’s “contract” disassociating the concept of “property” from any feudal notions of inherited lands, the family, which is dissolved by its own product, makes the concept of “family” emerge only retroactively on account of its old, hereditary unity of idea and thing being sacrificed.

These examples give at least a rough sketch of a certain “new form of truth” that can be derived neither from the outside world nor from subjective reason, for it simply does not exist either out there or in here as something given. In this universe of homeless truth, what one is left with is to *stage an event*<sup>16</sup>—such as a contract

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<sup>16</sup> To avoid any misunderstanding: “staging an event” should not be confused with mere theatrics. It implies a performative action, introducing a new (social) reality into the world. Hegel’s concept of the monarch, as discussed in the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, has been traditionally associated with performative utterances. However, as Gregor Moder astutely points out, the monarch is merely a figurehead: “Hegel’s constitutional monarch is a ceremonial figurehead, a mascot, a professional actor. He is the embodiment of that which can never become what Hegel so pompously described as the ‘world historical individual’” (Moder 2020, p. 162). The idea of “staging an event,” by contrast, is the idea of a performative action which produces a historical shift.

being signed, or an individual abandoning his family—, where the traditional concept lives to see its intended object dwindle, performs the double sacrifice of both its real embodiment and its pre-conceptual meaning, and then defines itself anew in the process of leaving its initial reality behind.

### 5. *The Evental Form of Truth*

In the final analysis, it could be surmised that the ultimate reach of the master–slave dialectic is the invention of the logical space of truth that is neither deductive nor inductive or transcendental, but *historically evental*. In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel seems to be on the track of a fourth dimension of truth after the rationalist deduction from the first principles of the divine mind, the empiricist induction from the order of nature, and the Kantian inference of the transcendental conditions of experience, all of which ultimately relied on a given, fixed, already worked out frame. By contrast, the Hegelian production of truth differs from the previous doctrines in at least three respects:

1. Truth is never “incarnated” at some place, but rather *membranate*. Philosophy before Hegel seems to have had a tendency to infer everything from, and then approach the state of “embodied truth,” be it in the form of the direct intuition of transcendent ideas, the comprehensive knowledge of nature, or the elaboration of the conditions of possibility. Within this framework, the state of full truth was then typically displaced from the present moment of knowing and acting. In classical idealism, the *ground* of truth dwelled in the Platonic realm of ideas, in the palaces of rationalist gods, and ultimately in the innate concepts of the human mind. The inductive truth of empirical evidence relied on the irreducible, impenetrable givenness of nature. In German idealism, Kant’s primary



synthesis or Fichte's *Tathandlung* were admittedly brought down to earth, but these acts were nonetheless conceived as ontologically initiatory, foundational, and "cosmoplastic," and were therefore tinged with connotations of pre-temporality, transcendentalism, perhaps even a sort of *Ersatz*-divinity. Hegel's form of truth, by contrast, knows neither first principles nor givenness of facts or inaugural acts, but happens in the here and now and *takes place upon a membrane*. Since it cannot rely on any metaphysical guarantee, any privileged object, any original subjectivity, it transpires solely at the ontologically thinnest, fleeting place where an old idea is thwarted and the intended reality proves inadequate. In this sense, truth occurs essentially on the diaphragm between the two spheres, the outside and the inside, the real and the ideal, and lets them miss the mark and break down in the face of each other.

2. Truth is neither derivative nor approximative, but secularly current, urgent, in a word, *reactive*. In Hegel, there exists no horizon where the ideal concepts could hope to coincide with reality.<sup>17</sup> Thus, truth can neither be consequent and resultant nor regulative and teleological, for it neither proceeds from, nor does it approximate to anything. What one is left with is to assume the labor of disengaging the ideal order from the real, let the conventional interpenetration of transcendence and immanence collapse, and then, on the one hand, release reality from the constraint of directly manifesting the forms of reason, and, on the other hand, set in motion a dialectical redefinition of concepts. Since one can never take recourse

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<sup>17</sup> Or else, this horizon is deferred to the very last chord, as in Hegel's perhaps maladroit concept of "the end of history," where reality could finally be said to embody the Idea. However, truth at the height of its operability takes quite different paths.

to any pre-guaranteed frame of meaning, this ultimately means that one is forced to assume a place within the world, which is already symbolically structured and socially and historically mediated, to detect its inconsistencies, tensions, and antagonisms, and only amidst these massive reactions find a way out of its labyrinth. In a nutshell, one has to *create an event* and elaborate its consequences.<sup>18</sup>

3. Truth is *ontologically minimalist* instead of maximalist. The deductive, the inductive, and the transcendental forms of truth put in motion vast programs of converging the ideal with the real, be it in the form of a recollection of ideas, an intuitive union with the transcendent mind, the infinite growth of knowledge, or the program of making the world one's own. Truth tended to assume the narrative of setting itself a maximalist goal. Indeed, Hegel was not free of the German idealist claim to know the world in its entirety in the vein of Kant, or to appropriate it in the vein of Fichte, but the very technique of his truth-making functions differently. In Fichte one still has to subdue the earth, while in Hegel it is enough to create this or that truth. For truth does not strive toward the grand ultimate fusion of the subject with the object, but consists in the spatially and temporally *minimal* events of truth, where the concept detaches itself from reality and vice versa, and with this mutual abdication

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<sup>18</sup> This resonates with Bara Kolenc's fourth matrix of repetition, the matrix of formation or creation, where she argues that a certain reality (i.e., an event) comes into being within a doubling, within a split into two events. The relation between the two establishes a specific causality, which can be perceived through the perspective of retroactivity or *Nachträglichkeit*: "Because of this, *Nachträglichkeit* is not only directed backwards: within the very return to the past, a certain 'intentionality' towards the future is established. The paradoxical moving forward through the eventual moving backward is possible because of a slip of causality at work in the constitution of the signifying chain that produces (the subject's and the world's) history" (Kolenc 2020, p. 115).

creates a surplus that can no longer be undone. The habitat of truth is the minimalism of irreversibility rather than the maximalism of totalization. The master may have staked his life, making his ontological substitutability explicit, but he thereby elevated himself into an irrevocable benchmark of the slave's future journey.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> This conception of a membranate, reactive, minimalist form of truth might finally throw some light on the issue whether the dialectic of the master and the slave is about providing a rudimentary social theory or whether it exceeds the immediately ethical and political scope. As I have hypothesized, it is not an exercise in philosophical sociology, but delivers a new theory of truth. The question remains, why the manifest *sociality* of Hegel's self-consciousness? What is the purpose of the inter-subjective structure of two consciousnesses? What does the proto-social vocabulary of mutual recognition serve?

In my view, the distinctively *social* metaphors only draw the contours of the place most *in medias res* that this world can offer. Hegel never, not even in *The Science of Logic*, begins in the ivory tower of pure thought or in the state of innocence of a worldless, exempt perspective. The great lesson of the *Phenomenology* is precisely that we are plunged into an already constituted, impure, heterogeneous world, traversed with communal mores, prejudice, illusions, frictions, and aversions. From "sense-certainty" on, we are never epistemologically naïve, and the entire momentum of the *Phenomenology* emanates from the mess of symbolic forms and conventions blending with the givenness of the world, colliding with it, and working these collisions off. From this perspective, it seems that only the highly reactive junction of the always already socially mediated desires, as knotted together in the master-slave dialectic, can accomplish the needed concretion to unfold the original scene of making truth. The unmistakably inter-subjective setting of the struggle for life outlines the only position we are entitled to occupy, for every other site would already be too abstract. Therefore, "sociality" seems to refer to the greatest possible range of what must be untangled so that the purity of truth, one purged of any ideal warranty or external support, can come forth. Hegel's social metaphoric is thus a mere means, albeit the most convoluted one, to extract the *metaphysically least assuming form of truth* from the world that itself harbors no pre-given truth.

This finally indicates that the Hegelian drama is not about what logic can teach us about society, but more about what social obstacles must be overcome in order to get hold of something like logic itself. To the question whether the master-slave dialectic offers anything valuable in terms of social theory, the answer could be: it does, but indirectly. Hegel's struggle for recognition delivers

## 6. Hegel's Modernity

The clash between the slave and the master has been interpreted as a philosophical *proto-event*, the first full, graphic enactment of a membranate, reactive, minimalist truth, one that severs ties with metaphysical, empiricist, or Kantian conceptions. The question remains, however, what does such *truth upon a membrane* bring into play? Can it be deemed implicitly or even explicitly modern? Does it tell us something today?

A case for Hegel's modernity can perhaps be made if we compare him with some of the philosophers of the twenty-first century who deal with traditional logical and metaphysical laws in ways remotely similar to Hegel's, but probably with less care. In the past twenty years or so it has become fashionable to advocate a certain *ad hoc* antihumanism and declare that the world is a place of utter disarray. In *After Finitude*, Quentin Meillassoux proposed an ontology which abides by the law of non-contradiction, but altogether discards the principle of sufficient reason. He forged "the principle of unreason," *irraison*, claiming that the only necessity is the one of contingency of everything, including laws. In this world of *hyper-chaos* anything can happen at any possible

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neither a normative account of what societies should be like in the style of Plato's *Politeia* nor an empirical report on existing societies or a sociology of *faites sociales* determining the structure of logical forms. What it instead puts forth is the lesson that the "really existing" societies should take upon themselves the labor of logic in order to become societies at all. In Hegel, it is the historical world that, in the process of overcoming its paradoxes, inevitably produces logical forms, which in turn shape the social body. Perhaps the only thing behind the struggle for life that comes close to a "social theory" is the realization that all of the traditional anchors of social meaning, be they metaphysical ideals, empirical data, or the transcendental *faites sociales*, must be sacrificed in the manner of the master staking his life. In this regard, Hegel does not propound a flat-out "logic of society"; if anything, he proposes a theory of society becoming social by way of producing its own logic, that is, a logic that draws on nothing, but unfolds upon a membrane.

moment.<sup>20</sup> Meillassoux then nevertheless defended the relative stability of things, which he justified with an argument that has been repeatedly accused of being merely rhetorical and sophistic.<sup>21</sup>

In comparison, Hegel's moves appear somewhat more refined. Of course, he was not aware of the entire reach of his intuitions, so it is up to us to think them through to the end. What Hegel's philosophy seems to be suggesting is that the world is neither outright chaotic nor downright reasonable; but it is nonetheless all right as it is, and it will remain so indefinitely. Consequently, his unsaid goal might be to indicate that our traditional understanding of the nature and validity of laws is fallacious; it is our concept of "law" that must change. When he, within his systemic dialectic of concepts, orchestrates the events which overrule both non-contradiction and sufficient reason, he only invalidates them within the range of these dramatic climaxes, and not outside of it. He does it in order to demonstrate how the logical consistency of the one realm, the realm of ideas, is not directly coextensive with the other realm, the realm of things. There are thus two warnings that must be heeded on how *not* to grasp the scope of this invalidation.

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<sup>20</sup> "We must grasp how the ultimate absence of reason, which we will refer to as 'unreason,' is an absolute ontological property, and not the mark of the finitude of our knowledge. [...] Everything could actually collapse: from trees to stars, from stars to laws, from physical laws to logical laws; and this not by virtue of some superior law whereby everything is destined to perish, but by virtue of the absence of any superior law capable of preserving anything, no matter what, from perishing" (Meillassoux 2007, p. 53).

<sup>21</sup> The argument distinguishes "contingency" as a global logical law and "chance" as an intra-worldly occurrence. And since "contingency" is so absolute and transcendental, it cannot differentiate between its more or less probable worldly applications, so it is also *not incompatible* with the apparent stability of the world. What "contingency" entails is a bare assurance that a stable world is *just as probable* as an unstable one. But this logical "non-incompatibility" does not necessarily involve any ontological claim about how the world really is. As Brassier cautions, Meillassoux "leaves the ontological status of stability entirely unclear. Is uniformity a real feature of things-in-themselves or merely a phenomenal illusion generated by our relation to things?" (Brassier 2007, p. 82).

On the one hand, just because the laws of non-contradiction and sufficient reason are suspended, this does not mean that the world suddenly becomes absurd and erratic. In this context, Hegel's break with logic is not about disclosing some intrinsically chaotic world in the fashion of Hume (and today Meillassoux), and he does not plunge us into a world of some sort of embodied natural paradoxes, as romantic philosophy in the style of Schelling perhaps does. Hegel's specific, highly constricted circumvention of logical laws serves to unveil that even when the world seems orderly or, from Hegel's perspective, dull and drab, it does not abide by any metaphysically decreed Law in the sense of the classical metaphysics of Leibniz or Spinoza. Hegel should not be mistaken for Meillassoux, according to whom the world, for want of any transcendent Ordinance, can at any time fall into chaos. His point is rather that the universe can be regular, inert, unsurprising, or even dreary *without relying on any positive fundamental principle*; this seems to be the tacit hint behind Hegel's dialectical circumvolutions.

On the other hand, Hegel's alleged "illogic" does also not mean that while the two principles are admittedly disabled at the intersection between the outside and the inside, they somehow *keep governing* the things out there in the world and the ideas in here in my soul. The argument is probably subtler and implies that both logical laws have actually never been simple algorithms according to which things in themselves instinctively occurred, or according to which representations of the mind obediently concatenated. Hegel might be on the track of the realization that the two principles could succeed as laws only within the presupposed metaphysical frame of *ordo idearum*, the mind, and *ordo rerum*, the world, running in parallel. Outside this frame, there exists no "lack of contradiction" and no "chain of sufficient reasons" pulsating through the universe. From this perspective, sufficient reason and non-contradiction no longer pose as some kind of "instant laws" that are evident enough to make things naturally

comply with them. Instead, they are massively metaphysically overdetermined in order to be logical at all. They are, to put it briefly, conceptual values and not some anonymous guardians of cosmic facticity. And it is this ideal, valuative underpinning of logic that Hegel's new form of truth perhaps sets out to shatter.

What, then, does Hegel's stringently localized and controlled bracketing of the two principles ultimately amount to if it neither plunges the world into chaos, nor hinges it on some definite cosmic Law? In my view, it serves to provide a vision of an utterly *de-metaphysicized reality*. But what is to be gained by such a removal of any transcendent, ideal meaning from the given things? What would a world without any warranted value look like?

Behind the "staged events" strewn over Hegel's system, there might lurk a faint inkling that the traditional, pre-Kantian conflation of sufficient reasons with causality and of non-contradiction with relations among things is only possible where the real order is fully pre-established within the ideal order, and the ideas constantly intermit and punctuate reality. The world in which no master ever stakes his life in order to display his inner nullity is an aseptic, rigid land, one in which Malebranche's occasionalist deity continuously intervenes, or the circumstances of which are thoroughly thought ahead by Leibniz's clockmaker-God. This locked-in universe, however, presents us with a problem: it is not a world of *real* causal relations among things, but, quite the contrary, either a redundant Malebranchian or a sterile and immobile Leibnizian cosmos of total divine control on account of infinitesimally incarnated ideas. It is quite telling that the most elaborate system of sufficient reason and non-contradiction, Leibniz's monadology, is also the one without any effective relations, any hustle and bustle, any touching and rubbing between things. Each individual substance, or monad, directly incarnates its own "complete individual concept," so any kind of causal interaction between two substances is already predetermined, and thus side-stepped in the space of ideal reasons. The identity of every entity

is so sequestered that it derives all its virtual relations to other entities from its own set of *ideal* determinants, and never from any direct, *real* contact with them. Leibniz's monadology thus represents the most pointed, preposterous, though sublime image of an *entirely ideally inhibited reality*. And it is against these very compulsions, these argumentative deadlocks of metaphysics, that Hegel's membranate truth-form, one founded upon the risk of death, seems to do its best work.

Thus, in an attempt to carry his work forward, we might do well to recognize in the form of "truth upon the membrane" the implementation of two momentous operations. First, such a truth-form may be presumed to detach the metaphysical form of sufficient reasons from the physical chains of causes and effects, thereby freeing causality from the rationalist constraint of determinative reasons; that is, from the duress of either the intermitting, occasionalist divine acts or the forethought divine ideas of pre-established harmony. Second, a truth-form like this releases things from the ideal mold of a self-identical substance after the fashion of Spinoza's conatus or Leibniz's monad, thereby stretching out a new ontological landscape where relations precede any stable, essential identity. In short, such pro-Hegelian conceptuality could help disclose the modern world, not of romantic contradictions or of Meillassoux's un-reason, but of real causality and real relationality.

This is where the Hegelian anthropogenic logic of staking one's life nevertheless trickles down to something that might be called *Realontology*. His "epistemology of membranate events," in which the (implicitly human) subject surrenders her inner array of seemingly fixed ideal forms to eventual redefinition, perhaps promises a new ontology whose prospects may well be more far-reaching than what contemporary realists propose. The great ambition of the latter has been to paint portraits of the universe without man. Ray Brassier even deduced the necessity



of “transcendental extinction.”<sup>22</sup> By contrast, I have argued in this paper that the Hegelian truth occurs neither in the outside world nor within the subject, but upon the diaphragm between the two, where the one side somehow takes the wind out of the sails of the other, and vice versa. Does this mean, then, that the Hegelian form of truth is still *humanist*, still caught in the correlation of human thought and being? I would say that it is precisely not so. What Hegel makes clear with his membranate truth is neither that reality depends on the gaze of man, nor that reality outside this gaze is unattainable in principle. Rather, the new form of truth—although Hegel has only left us with a few clues about this—could be said to imply that cosmic *reality* can do well without man, but it is *truth* that requires a place where an ideal surplus can emerge, one which no longer strives to be embodied in reality, but rather persists in its ideality of the event that reveals the world beyond any ideal form. And the only site of the production of such not-to-be-incarnated idealities that we can cling to is the membrane at the boundary between the inner and the outer world, where both sides can sacrifice the illusion of possessing any truth on their own. In view of this, the Hegelian doctrine may represent a more anti-humanist vision of the world than speculative realists could ever dream of. While they tend to finally resort to some sort of eliminativism of man’s share in the quality of things, which, however, only turns the world into a negative image of man, Hegel makes the human being lend her body to the world’s own revelation that it simply possesses no truth and knows no truth about itself before it enacts an event where such truth can come forth.

If the most radical purview of Hegel’s still inchoate intuitions is to discover *a world that must give birth to its truth in the first place*, then the coincidental biological and intersubjective structure

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<sup>22</sup> See the last chapter of *Nihil Unbound*, “The Truth of Extinction” (Brassier 2007, pp. 205–239).

of the human being, her drives, her sociability, her sense organs, ultimately her skin, merely provide the initial membrane from where she as, alas, human can set off. The inevitably corporeal boundary between the mind and the world, to which we are stuck due to our contingent nature, is thus nothing more than a starting point where, in and for our eyes, the mutual collapse of the ideal and the real can come about; for only such an offset can outline a place where the world can divulge its secrets. This does arguably not amount to closeted anthropomorphism, where man still projects his fortuitous forms upon the universe, for the event of giving up one's inner nature (which, in Hegel, is aggravated into the act of staking one's life) is itself accidental and cannot be derived from some higher cosmic necessity. But the question now poses itself, what kind of ontology ensues from this staging of human self-abnegation?

The answer is a story for another time, but let me conclude with a hint. What can only be called an "event" seems to take place within a topology that entirely rearranges the functions of the real and the ideal. The Hegelian truth-form does not make the ideas of the mind mirror the world, nor does it expect the world to incarnate the ideas of God's mind. Quite the contrary, the membranate truth has no ground under its feet, but it nonetheless has two legs, or maybe two tentacles, with which it keeps its balance: on the one side, it touches the Real, and on the other, it creates an Idea. And in this, the sudden possibility of truth converging with reality as it is in itself flickers on the horizon. For such a truth might reveal that even the inhuman reality itself only occurs and unfolds by way of constantly contracting so as to release idealities of its own.

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# Dialectic's Laughing Matter

*Simon Hajdini*

*Cartoon by Izar Lunaček*

Before I begin, I want to begin with an epigraph. Conferences are as much about listening as they are about speaking—ideally speaking, at least. And listening has its obvious advantages. For one, to reference Deleuze and Guattari, one can make other, perhaps more sensible uses of one's mouth once it is no longer de-territorialized by language. And if to speak is to hunger (Deleuze and Guattari 1975, p. 35), if the forced choice is that between “bits of food” and “bits of Shakespeare” (Deleuze 1990, p. 23), when listening we can have both. We can have our cake and eat it too. The epigraph I am about to quote is taken from Philip Roth, his novel *I Married a Communist*, and the quote has to do with listening, but, more importantly, it has to do with storytelling, with conveying one's experience to others. Broadly and perhaps inaccurately speaking, the topic is Benjaminian, and it is primarily bits of Benjamin that my talk is concerned with. The quote has to do with listening—so listen up:

When I ask myself how I arrived at where I am, the answer surprises me: “Listening.” Can that have been the unseen drama? Was all the rest a masquerade disguising the real no good that I was obstinately up to? Listening to them. Listening to them talk. The utterly wild phenomenon that is. Everyone perceiving experience as something not to have but to have so as to talk about it. Why is that? Why do they want me to hear them and their arias? Where was it decided that this was my use? Or was I from the beginning, by inclination as much as by choice, merely an ear in search of a word? (Roth 1998, p. 226)

Hopefully, that epigraph will make better sense once we get started.

Benjamin's position within the Frankfurt School is by no means unambiguous. Though deemed its fellow traveler, the relationship is a difficult one, permeated with tensions. And to begin somewhat arbitrarily, said difficulties and tensions are sufficiently exemplified by the circumstances surrounding the publication of his infamous essay on "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (Benjamin 2008a, pp. 19-55). The French original, published in 1936 in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, the official journal of the Frankfurt School, is missing the entire first section. Benjamin's letters from the time immediately prior to this first publication testify to an uneasiness and anger over the editorial process. The publication was overseen by Hans Klaus Brill, the secretary of the Parisian section of the Institute for Social Research. Brill refused to listen, turning a deaf ear to the author's pleas, which prompted Benjamin — on 29 February 1936 — to write a letter to Horkheimer, the Institute's director at the time, a letter full of harsh words regarding Brill, who supposedly cut sections of the text "*behind my back*" (Benjamin 2015a, p. 63). Surprisingly, in his response, Horkheimer took Brill's side:

As regards your complaint about mister Brill, I of course understand where you're coming from; on the other hand, however, as you yourself indicate, you are also familiar with our own situation. We must do everything in our power to protect the journal as the scientific body [*Organ*] from being dragged into political discussions in the press. This would seriously jeopardize our work in this and in other directions. (Benjamin 2015b, pp. 70-71)

The serious threat and the object of self-censorship, which ought to spare the scientific body from a likely lynching by the media, was Marx, mentioned at the very beginning of Benjamin's essay. The 1930s were a time of violent opposition to communism, one symptomatically embodied by an otherwise internally

divided, yet externally unified, coalition of fascists, conservatives, liberals, and social democrats. 1936 is also the year of the Anti-Comintern Pact between Nazi Germany and the Empire of Japan, joined a year later by Mussolini's Italy. Historical circumstances just mentioned effectively favor caution. However, from our remote historical perspective, the erasure of the first section of the essay can be persuasively defended despite and beyond these historical circumstances. The section's contribution to the whole is modest. Instead of substantially serving the essay itself, it serves the self-identification of its author, his inscription into the tradition of historical materialism. The contribution's modesty is further matched by the ultimately problematic references to Marx, convincingly critiqued by later Marxologists. These references include a historicist reading of Marx's *Capital* in the tradition of Kautski, Luxemburg, and Lenin. These readings suggest that Marx paints a picture of capitalism in its infancy, a picture that must be updated and reformulated in accordance with capitalism's subsequent developments.<sup>1</sup> The same goes for Benjamin's uncritical adoption of the base–superstructure divide promoted by Marxism-Leninism (see Benjamin 2008a, pp. 19-20).

Since the inner, conceptual gain of the introductory reference to Marx is negligible at best and untenable at worst, both the editorial intervention and the allusion to historical circumstances appear spot on. However, when it comes to the remaining two editorial changes, things are less self-evident and much more complicated. Though themselves minimal, they maximally alter the essay's political scope. Moreover, they alter it in ways that, in turn, elucidate in an unflattering way the political ideology of the Frankfurt School. Brill erases the words "fascism" and "communism," which, considering historical circumstances,

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<sup>1</sup> Here are the opening lines of Benjamin's essay: "When Marx undertook his analysis of the capitalist mode of production, that mode was in its infancy." (Benjamin 2008a, p. 19)

does not strike us as particularly odd. What *is* odd, however, are the two substitutes: “fascism” becomes the “totalitarian state” (*L'état totalitaire*), while instead of the word “communism” we get “the constructive forces of humanity” (*les forces constructives de l'humanité*). The initial terms, carrying certain political and conceptual weight, are substituted for the abstract discourse of conventional social sciences. Except this time the political price that critical theory must pay for this reactive sublimation is much higher: we are prompted to question the critical character of critical theory itself, while catching a glimpse of its reactionary-liberal ideological core. The liberal vocabulary replaces communism with forces of humanity whose constructive character appears—in retrospect—as a double apology of fascism and capitalism.

The differences between Benjamin and the Frankfurt School are best exemplified by the disparities between Benjamin and Adorno as the key figure of the school, and they surely exceed my concrete examples, in turn concerning broader views on technology and mass culture. Thus, it is no wonder that the gap between the two is most palpable when it comes to their respective treatments of cinema, this paradigmatic bundling together of both, of art and technology. More precisely: ultimately, the dispute concerns the valuation of comedy, mainly Chaplin—a valuation whose entire drama revolves around the problem of laughter. Is laughter a reactionary or a revolutionary affect? Or does it embody both, and thus the very split of social totality? Moreover, what is the connection between laughter and Marx's critique of capitalism?

As a worthy heir to the philosophical tradition going back to Plato, Adorno was notoriously suspicious of laughter, especially of laughter generated by the products of the culture industry. In laughter, servitude finds a space of false freedom that is nothing but a mask of conformism:

There is laughter because there is nothing to laugh about. ... Fun is a medicinal bath which the entertainment industry never ceases



to prescribe. It makes laughter the instrument for cheating happiness. ... In wrong society laughter is a sickness infecting happiness and drawing it into society's worthless totality. Laughter about something is always laughter at it, and the vital force which, according to Bergson, bursts through rigidity in laughter is, in truth, the irruption of barbarity ... The collective of those who laugh parodies humanity. (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p. 112)

In sharp contrast to Adorno's conception of laughter as the vehicle of mass dumbification, laughter as false happiness, and laughter as indistinguishable from sadistic ridicule, for Benjamin "there is no better trigger for thinking than laughter" (which, of course, does not mean that every laugh is the beginning of thought): "In particular, convulsion of the diaphragm usually provides better opportunities for thought than convulsion of the soul" (Benjamin 2008b, p. 91).

We cannot overlook the curious fact that, according to the famous anecdote, philosophy effectively begins with laughter. In this anecdote, as retold by Diogenes Laertius, we encounter Thales, the first philosopher, out on a night-time walk, looking at the stars and overlooking the ditch in front of him, falling right into it. The scene is observed by an old Thracian woman, who responds to it with an explosive laugh. Should her laughter be read in Adornian fashion, that is, as a ridiculing of philosophy? Or should we read Thales's fall in a Benjaminian way, that is, not as the fall *of* philosophy, but rather as a falling *into* philosophy, born of a "convulsion of the diaphragm"?<sup>2</sup>

If we briefly consider the topic of "Marxism and laughter," then Benjamin's defense of laughter is an exception rather than the rule. But if we nevertheless look for an influential figure, situated at the juncture of both, that is, of Marxism and laughter, then Brecht comes to mind. And the line from Benjamin I just

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<sup>2</sup> See Laertius 2018, p. 18. The anecdote is the subject of Blumenberg's famous study *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman* (Blumenberg 2015).

quoted refers to Brecht's Epic Theater, "lavish only in occasions for laughter" (Benjamin, 2008b, p. 91). It comes as no surprise then that Adorno's criticism of Benjamin often concerns the insufficient "liquidation of Brechtian motifs" (Benjamin 2015c, p. 78), further split into the two interrelated topics of Marxism and laughter. It is well known that Brecht was precisely the Marxist who, with the seriousness of a humorist, spelled out the link between thinking and "convulsions of the diaphragm" by insightfully recognizing the comedy of dialectical thought, calling Hegel the ultimate humorist.

In this article, I propose to focus on laughter and dialectic. However, what concerns me here is not the dialectic of laughter, but rather the laughter of dialectic. Laughter as the laughter of dialectic is essentially speculative, pertaining to Reason, *Vernunft*, and hence is situated beyond the reflexive logic of the Understanding, *Verstand*. To quote Kant's *Critique of Judgement*: "Something absurd (something in which, therefore, the understanding can of itself find no delight) must be present in whatever is to raise a hearty convulsive laugh" (Kant 2007, p. 161). Not the dialectic of laughter, but rather the laughter of dialectic, its laughing matter. I am not concerned here with how to think laughter dialectically, but rather am interested in ways in which laughter already thinks dialectically, always already structuring dialectics at its most fundamental.

Brecht's Ziffel, the character from his *Refugee Conversations*, notoriously says with regard to Hegel's *Science of Logic* that he's "never met a humourless person who understood Hegel's dialectic" (Brecht 2020 [e-book]). What is dialectic, then? Here is one of its all-time best definitions: dialectic is merely *der Witz einer Sache*, "the punchline of a thing." Brecht is not merely suggesting that grasping dialectics requires a sense of humor, rather he is telling us that one can only think dialectically if one has—not a sense *of* humor, but—a sense *for* the humor of things, which is not the same thing. If in its minimal philosophical designation, a

thing is defined as that which persists (for some time) in its self-identity, then dialectic is its inherent self-splitting, getting right at the butt of a thing. Furthermore: many readings of this passage from Brecht overlook the telling connection between the topic of laughter and Hegelian dialectic, on the one hand, and Marx's critique of political economy, on the other. A page earlier, Ziffel draws attention to the "third-rate Marxism without Hegel," namely precisely without the humorist Hegel of *The Science of Logic*: "A half-decent understanding of Marxism will set you back between 20,000 and 25,000 gold marks these days, according to a colleague of mine, and that's without the trimmings. You don't get any of the proper stuff—you get a third-rate Marxism without any Hegel" (ibid.).

But before we continue along these lines, I must mention another of Benjamin's references, one that appears as far removed as possible from the one just mentioned: according to Benjamin, Baudelaire's *Essence of Laughter* "contains nothing other than the theory of satanic laughter. In this essay, Baudelaire goes so far as to view even smiling from the standpoint of such laughter. Contemporaries often testified to something frightful in his own manner of laughing" (Benjamin 2004, p. 182). With this reference, laughter acquires an unsuspected tonality. Its affective value enters the domain of a new hedonic paradigm. Instead of laughter as cheerful humor, we witness here demonic and destructive laughter as central to Benjamin. What is satanic laughter? What is its nature? What does its demonic essence consist in? Before we are led astray by free associations, Benjamin provides us with the key. In "The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism," he writes: "*Satan is dialectical*" (Benjamin 1991, p. 838). Laughter owes its satanic character to the feature mentioned by Brecht, namely to the very nature of dialectical thinking, marking self-identity with irreducible alterity.

Let us take a step back. According to Brecht, Hegel

contested the idea that one equals one, not only because everything that exists changes inexorably and relentlessly into something else—namely its opposite—but because *nothing is identical with itself*. (Brecht 2002 [e-book]; my emphasis)

Brecht's point is a very precise one. Dialectical thinking refers not merely to the passage of every entity into its external opposite, but rather to the inner alterity of each entity, that is, to the entity's negativity in relation to itself as an entity. Hegel writes in *The Science of Logic*: "Such *identical* talk therefore *contradicts itself*. Identity, instead of being in its own self truth and absolute truth, is consequently the very opposite; instead of being the unmoved simple, it is the passage beyond itself into the dissolution of itself [*ist sie das Hinausgehen über sich in die Auflösung ihrer selbst*]" (Hegel 1969, p. 415).

Here is how Benjamin continues his remarks on satanic laughter:

The dialectic of commodity production: the product's novelty (as a stimulant to demand) takes on a significance hitherto unknown; in mass production the ever-selfsame [*das Immerwiedergleiche*] manifests itself overtly for the first time. (Benjamin 2004, p. 182)

From laughter, through dialectics, to commodity production. The dialectical nature of laughter holds the key to the commodity form. I have dealt with this elsewhere (see Hajdini 2016 and 2021), so let me be very brief here. Brecht's insight into the comic nature of dialectical thinking ultimately relates to a very precise property of the relation of identity, namely to its reflexivity, without which identity would have dissolved into nothing ("nothing is identical with itself," Brecht writes). Reflexive oppositiveness (as opposed to reflexive identity) lies at the conceptual core of Marx's analysis of the commodity form. On the one hand, a commodity is a relational entity, whose (exchange) value is entirely dependent on its relation to other commodities. However, this universal

translatability presupposes a point of impossibility, without which it would not have been possible. In other words: commodity exchange is made possible by an impossibility. This point concerns the impossibility of a particular commodity to express its own value. This means that the commodity-relation of equivalence is not reflexive and that the values of commodities can only be equated on the condition that commodities *are not equatable with themselves*. It is precisely this reflexive oppositiveness that fuels the dialectic of commodity production.

The satanic laughter provides a key to the dialectics of commodities but can be further linked to the demonic image of the commodity, proposed by Marx: the commodity is a sensuous-supersensuous thing, entertaining “grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will” (Marx 1990, p. 163). The commodity-relation (of equivalence) rests on a (reflexive) non-relation, and perhaps the image of a dancing commodity is but an approximation of the image of a laughing commodity, subjected to the vibrations of the diaphragm. Laughter is the affect of non-relation; the self-splitting of the commodity, its inability to express its own value, could be put forth as follows: *commodities can't tickle themselves*—they can only be tickled by other commodities.

Let us briefly return to dance, as mentioned by Marx. Laughter and dance are situated at the intersection of body and spirit, populating their split: dance is the laughter of the body, laughter is the dancing of the spirit. It was Nietzsche who first noticed their intimate relationship. In *Zarathustra*, he writes: “And we should consider any day lost, on which we have not danced once! And we should call any truth false, that has not been accompanied by one burst of laughter!” (Nietzsche 2005, p. 183) In his reading of Nietzsche, Deleuze mistakenly interprets dance and laughter as elements of anti-dialectics. By his lights (and this is taken from his book *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, a chapter tentatively titled “Against Hegelianism”), dialectic

proceeds by opposition, development of the opposition or contradiction and solution of the contradiction. It is unaware of the real element from which forces, their qualities and their relations derive; it only knows the inverted image of this element which is reflected in abstractly considered symptoms. ... Dialectic thrives on oppositions because it is unaware of far more subtle and subterranean differential mechanisms ..." (Deleuze 2006, p. 157)

That is why, according to Deleuze, dialectic is foreign to laughter and hence "the natural ideology of *ressentiment* and bad conscience." (Ibid., p. 159) Deleuze paints a thwarted image of dialectic as premised on external opposition, thus overlooking "the real element" of reflexive oppositivity at the very heart of dialectical movement—the element not of bad conscience, the "spirit of gravity," but of satanic, Dionysian laughter.

In discussing the economy and laughter, we cannot fail to mention Bakhtin, Benjamin's famous contemporary. Bakhtin understood carnival culture as an offspring of the general culture of laughter. Laughter is conceived of as an instrument of the ruled in their struggle against the ruling class. Laughter dethrones by symbolically perverting the existing relations of power and authority. By redressing, in a gesture of travesty, beggars as rulers and slaves as masters, laughter profanes power and ridicules the false transcendency of the ruling order. Laughter is a means of leveling that reduces the tricky spirituality of the ruling class to its profane material principle. We immediately see that such leveling is not dialectical in the aforementioned sense. Though relying on the mechanism of reversal into opposites, though being the vehicle of destabilizing social differences, the carnival is ultimately the great leveler, relying entirely on the principle of an external "identity of opposites." Consequently, Bakhtin's theory of laughter lacks a truly dialectical character. Instead of recognizing external oppositions as mirroring reflexive oppositivity, Bakhtin drowns self-difference in the regime of universal equivalences. Ultimately, the carnivalesque redressing is the

commodity market in miniature, such that *the carnivalization of culture finds its model in market profanation*. That which appears as a revolutionary attack on class society effectively amounts to its reconfiguration in accordance with the commodity market and its principle of equivalent exchange.

This aspect of Bakhtin's conception of carnival culture is often overlooked, even though, for Bakhtin, the market of early-modern European cities is the carnival's primordial breeding ground. The beginnings of carnival culture coincide historically with the onset of capitalist development in Europe, first emerging in the High Middle Ages but beginning to flourish in the 16th and 17th centuries. Structured like the early-stage capitalist free market of equivalent exchange, premised on the identity of opposites, the carnival owed its transgressive character to the conditions of precapitalist domination in which it existed. Its provisional overturning of social hierarchies and privileges could only have thrived in conditions of precapitalist exploitation, which rested upon a relationship of personal domination and dependency. Thus, the carnival enacted within culture the same process that the expansion of commodity markets enacted in the economy. With the triumph of capitalism, the carnival lost its subversive potential because *the economy of the carnival coincided with the carnival of the economy*. In developed capitalist societies — which is to say, under the new conditions of capitalist exploitation — the carnival retained its ritual cultural-transgressive function, while losing its critical edge.

From here, let me return to the discussion between Adorno and Benjamin. In this discussion, laughter plays the role of a differentiator of the difference between what is politically revolutionary and what is politically reactionary, and its fate is ultimately decided with reference to Chaplin's films. It is worth mentioning, against the backdrop of discussing carnival culture, that Adorno sees in film as the primary consumable of mass culture the paradigm of "cheating happiness," by means of which the exploited class is

deprived of an insight into the exploitative nature of industrial capitalism. This thesis aligns well with a central circumstance from film history. Setting aside the obvious reason, we should ask whether it is coincidental that the first film ever made (though that is not entirely accurate) was the Lumière brothers' 1895 *Workers Leaving the Factory*. In the eponymous documentary, Harun Farocki, the recently deceased German experimental film essayist, gathers an astonishing number of scenes from film history that rely on the same motif. Historically, the art of film showed little interest in what was going on inside the factory as the modern scene of exploitation, rather focusing on spaces outside of it. This circumstance supports Adorno's point. However, contrary to the entire history of film, there is at least one movie that I can think of, namely Chaplin's *Modern Times*, that begins precisely with *workers entering the factory*. Though using scenes from Chaplin's film, Farocki surprisingly takes no note of this. Chaplin's film is the ultimate comedy of capitalist exploitation, which sets it apart from other comedies from the era of the great depression, which portrayed the high society of "individual entrepreneurship" (outside of factories) while purposefully disavowing the misery as the truth of its "humanity" (see Hajdini 2015). Incidentally, 1936 is the release year of both Chaplin's *Modern Times* and Benjamin's artwork essay.

This singular status of *Modern Times* speaks in favor of Benjamin's interpretation of Chaplin as someone who, in his films, "appeals both to the most international and the most revolutionary emotion of the masses: their laughter" (Benjamin 2008c, p. 337). I must provisionally note that, in the German original, Benjamin does not say "their" laughter, but merely laughter. I will show why that is important in a bit. But to continue: Adorno rejects such a view as mere romanticizing, basically reducing Chaplin's films to reactionary mass products (Benjamin 2015c, p. 77). However, Benjamin's defense of laughter is found also in other, less-expected places. The crown example of this is the closing lines of his 1933



essay “Experience and Poverty,” which together with other texts, for instance the artwork essay and the storyteller essay, relies on the diagnosis of the incommunicability, impoverishment, and the collapse of experience at the height of modernity, reducing the subject (to quote Roth again) to “an ear in search of the word.” The dissolution of experience pushes civilization, caught up in wars and economic crises, over the edge, while calling for its re-configuration along the lines of a messianic *Barbarentum*. And *Barbarentum* is no *Barbarei*, no barbarity or barbarism, otherwise addressed in Benjamin’s famous thesis on the philosophy of history. The latter states that “[t]here is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism [*Barbarei*]” (Benjamin 2015d, p. 248). *Barbarentum*, “barbarianhood,” interrupts the reciprocal conditionality of barbarism and culture. In her book *Barbarism and Its Discontents*, Maria Boletsi writes that “*Barbarentum* is not civilization’s loyal opposite but a rupture in the edifice sustained by *Kultur* and *Barbarei*” (Boletsi 2013, p. 130). As such, barbarianhood aims at a new collectivity, a community of creatures who have shed all similarities with man: “In its buildings, pictures, and stories, mankind is preparing to outlive culture, if need be. And the main thing is that it does so with a laugh. This laughter may occasionally sound barbaric. Well and good” (Benjamin 1999, p. 735). The quote echoes the Marxian topic of the revolutionary overturning of existing power-relations, an overturning accompanied by laughter as a revolutionary affect, while the barbarically sounding laughter further echoes Baudelaire’s notion of satanic laughter. But the key point I want to highlight once more is the simultaneous linguistic kinship and tension between Benjamin’s project and Adorno’s already quoted reply that rejects the “irruption of barbarity,” while declaring the laughing collective a parody of humanity.

The difference between Adorno and Benjamin as it relates to two disparate conceptions of laughter as either a reactionary or a revolutionary affect of the masses is perhaps best illustrated by

their irreconcilable interpretations of cartoons. Whereas Adorno sees in the violence of Disney films the cryptogram of bourgeois violence, Benjamin sees in these same films a critique of these bourgeois relations and the possibility of a breakthrough.

To quote Adorno:

[C]artoons ... hammer into every brain the old lesson that continuous attrition, the breaking of all individual resistance, is the condition of life in this society. Donald Duck in the cartoons and the unfortunate victim in real life receive their beatings so that the spectators can accustom themselves to theirs. (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p. 238)

And here is a quote from Benjamin:

In these films, mankind makes preparations to survive civilization. / Mickey Mouse proves that a creature can still survive even when it has thrown off all resemblance to a human being. He disrupts the entire hierarchy of creatures that is supposed to culminate in mankind. (Benjamin 2008d, p. 338)<sup>3</sup>

Is it not highly indicative that, out of all the possible Disney characters Adorno chooses Donald Duck, known for his Adornian pompousness, bitterness, and quick-temperedness, while Benjamin's beloved cartoon character is the happy, mischievous, and heroic Mickey Mouse? The formula would hence read *Adorno : Benjamin :: Donald Duck : Mickey Mouse*.

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<sup>3</sup> In her Benjaminian reading of Adorno, Lidija Šumah gives this creaturely dimension a sinister spin by relating Fascist dehumanization to a cartoonization of the Other, which, however, does not amount to its reduction to bare life, but rather to bare afterlife: "Fascist de-humanization of the Other coincided with its *cartoonization*. But what is its function? Is the Other thereby reduced not to *bare life* (which can be legally extinguished), but rather to *bare afterlife*, i.e., to a non-human, creaturely substance situated beyond life and structurally akin to a cartoon character perpetually surviving its own death?" (Šumah 2022, p. 80)



Cartoon by Izar Lunaček

The best example embodying these two competing theories of laughter, an example of the drama entailed in the encounter of the masses with the art of animated films, is provided by Preston Sturges's 1941 comedy *Sullivan's Travels*. In it, we encounter another Disney character, namely Pluto. Unlike Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse, Pluto is not entirely anthropomorphized and thus is perhaps even better suited to embody the Benjaminian creature. Within the Disney universe, Pluto is Mickey's pet, so it shouldn't surprise us if he were to prove philosophically closer to Benjamin than to Adorno. A scene from *Sullivan's Travels* takes place in a southern church, where we witness a group of prisoners, including Sullivan, joining a congregation of impoverished blacks to watch Disney's animated short *Playful Pluto* (1934). (*Playful Pluto* was not Sturges's first choice; initially, he wanted to use clips from Chaplin's films, but couldn't get the rights for it.) On the one hand, the scene brilliantly illustrates Adorno's point. If the prisoners (and the segregated black paupers) are laughing at the "continuous attrition" on the screen, their laughter serves the forgetting of and reconciliation with the beatings they suffer in real life, with the *punchline* merely standing in for the *punch*. The carceral and racial cage is momentarily substituted for the cage of laughter. But is the punch effectively all that is on the line in the punchline? And does the punchline necessarily bring the subject in line with the demands of social authority?

Such an Adornian reading does not exhaust the full complexity of the scene. The laughter of social rejects has an unmistakably ominous, demonic, satanic character, such that the scene does not strike *us*—the viewers—as the least bit comical. Here is Alenka Zupančič's insightful comment on this scene:

The prisoners laugh from their hearts, as we say, but at the same time there is something sinister (menacing, ominous) in this laughter and in the way it is filmed: something excessive, something disturbing the homely comfort of the (supposedly natural) social differences that frame the film at the level of its narrative. We get

something like a time outside of time, a hint at the emergence of masses as collective subject, or at least at the possibility of such an emergence. The poor and underprivileged are certainly not shot here “as we like to see our poor”: as weak, grateful, and lovable; no, they are presented as a subject emerging out of, and with this excessive laughter... (Zupančič 2020, p. 278)

The scene situates laughter beyond the comedic. The laughter of the social outcasts, though appearing in a comedy film, fails to befit the genre of comedy. Though this last thesis is highly counterintuitive, I nevertheless claim that the scene brings to light laughter not as an element of comedy, but rather the paradoxical part-of-no-part of comedy. Here, we should be reminded of Hegel's notion of dialectic as the “universal irony of the world” (Hegel 1892, p. 40). In Hegel's singular sense of the term, irony does not pertain to language and discourse, but rather to the world itself. In terms of our discussion, we could say: dialectic relates not to the *word* of comedy, its punchline, but rather to the punchline of the *world*. It pertains not to the oppositional, contradictory, antagonistic, etc. character of comedic *discourse*, but rather to the reflexive splitting of reality itself, that is, to its irreducible and unsymbolizable *laughing matter*.

However, can the scene nevertheless be salvaged? Can the outcasts' laughter enact their vindication? In the scene from Sturges's film, the faces of the outclassed and/or of criminals “throw off all resemblance to a human being,” assuming a figuration of inhuman creatures, or of the barbarianhood of a new collectivity. Their satanic laughter is dialectical in the precise sense of emerging at the point of dissolution of self-identity: at first, Sullivan is perplexed and somewhat amazed at the demonic roaring laughter of those around him but is very quickly overtaken by the same affect of the masses. His initial outburst of laughter is automatic and mechanical, as if he were seized by some inhuman force. Sullivan's laughter is something that essentially happens to him, something escaping his free will. However, immediately after this momentary

outburst, Sullivan calms down, re-collects himself, turns to the fellow prisoner seated next to him, visibly perplexed, and asks: “Hey, am *I* laughing?” Am *I* the one, who is laughing here? Therein resides the essence of dialectical laughter undermining the subject’s reflexive identity, that is, the subject’s identity with itself. In laughter, Sullivan ceases to be who he is; his is precisely a laughter of an inhuman creature “preparing to outlive culture.”

Another very quick aside: Benjamin’s double thesis on laughter as the best occasion for thought, and laughter as a creaturely affect accompanying the dissolution of humanity, is reflected in Foucault’s book *The Order of Things*, first published in 1966. In the Preface, Foucault famously writes that “[t]his book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought—*our* thought” (Foucault 2003, p. xvi). Near the end of the book, after having “shattered the familiar landmarks of thought,” laughter is mentioned again, this time the “philosophical laughter,” as a kind of an immediate response to the Benjaminian topic of outliving humanity. Here is this powerful passage:

To all those who still wish to talk about man, about his reign or his liberation, to all those who still ask themselves questions about what man is in his essence, to all those who wish to take him as their starting-point in their attempts to reach the truth, to all those who, on the other hand, refer all knowledge back to the truths of man himself, to all those who refuse to formalize without anthropologizing, who refuse to mythologize without demystifying, who refuse to think without immediately thinking that it is man who is thinking, to all these warped and twisted forms of reflection we can answer only with a philosophical laugh—which means, to a certain extent, a silent one. (Foucault 2003, p. 373)

Benjamin sees cartoon characters as creatures of satanic laughter that have “thrown off all resemblance to a human being,” while Adorno reduces these same characters to symptoms of traumatized bourgeois subjectivity; their resilience and literal

“destructive plasticity” (Malabou 2012), their immeasurable capacity for enduring violence places them beyond the concept of trauma. The new subjectivity emerging from the burning ground of experience therefore disrupts “the entire hierarchy of creatures that is supposed to culminate in mankind,” that is, in man as a reservoir of tradition and “inner life.” This new subject is emphatically *a subject without a biography*: its life cannot be written because it is situated beyond life. Slavoj Žižek takes note of the connection between post-traumatic subjectivity and the death drive (which, according to Freud, is silent, just like Foucault’s philosophical laughter):

The properly philosophical dimension of the study of post-traumatic subject resides in this recognition that what appears as the brutal destruction of the subject’s very (narrative) substantial identity is the moment of its birth. The post-traumatic autistic subject is the “living proof” that subject cannot be identified (does not fully overlap) with “stories it is telling itself about itself,” with the narrative symbolic texture of its life: when we take all this away, something (or, rather, *nothing*, but a *form* of nothing) remains, and this something is the pure subject of death drive. (Žižek 2009, p. 143)

In his “Storyteller” essay, Benjamin provides a succinct description of what post-traumatic reality might look like:

Beginning with the First World War, a process became apparent which continues to this day. Wasn’t it noticeable at the end of the war that men who returned from the battlefield had grown silent—not richer but poorer in communicable experience? What poured out in the flood of war books ten years later was anything but experience that can be shared orally. And there was nothing remarkable about that. For never has experience been more thoroughly belied than strategic experience was belied by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on horse-drawn streetcars now stood under the open sky in a landscape where nothing remained unchanged but the clouds and, beneath those clouds, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body. (Benjamin 2002, pp. 143-144)

Are the new creatures of satanic laughter, emerging against the background of culture outlived, not precisely subjective forms of the self-destruction of the Self? Their laughter does not spring from a Bakhtinian “culture of laughter”; rather, it emerges at the point where culture outlives itself. As such, the laughter signals the dialectical nature of these new subjective forms emerging from the dissolution of experience—it is dialectical insofar as it remains irreducible to an “identity of the opposites” (which exhausts itself in the logic of market equivalences), in turn standing for the reflexive oppositivity as the dialectical core of subjectivity (and as the point of subjectivization of dialectic).

Before concluding, a key question must be asked: so, what of all this? I will highlight, very briefly and provisionally, some of the possible uses of these conceptions for understanding contemporary power structures, especially as they relate to technology. My conclusion is open-ended and serves to indicate my plans and directions for future research.

The new subject as embodied in autistic laughter is a subject without a biographical identity. It is not the post-traumatic subject emerging from the “field of destructive torrents and explosions,” but rather the subject of trauma, namely the trauma of dialectical self-splitting. Does our contemporary historical moment not incite us to undertake a double revision of this Benjaminian subject-matter? The first of these two revisions concerns the status of information as a means of communication. The old, orally transmitted story that Benjamin talks about is characterized by an openness distinguishing it from information. Information is verifiable; it demands referentiality, which attests to its semantic conclusiveness. “[N]owadays,” Benjamin writes in “The Storyteller,” “no event comes to us without already being shot through with explanations. In other words, by now almost nothing that happens benefits storytelling; almost everything benefits information” (Benjamin 2002, pp. 147-148). The story, on the other hand, gives an account of an event without cementing its meaning, such



that its meaning can resonate and is carried on by continuous storytelling: “The most extraordinary things, marvelous things, are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connections among the events are not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks” (ibid., p. 148). In our age when new media have taken over the function of informing the public, Benjamin’s (but also Adorno’s and Agamben’s) criticism of information is brought to its limit. Today, we appear to be witnessing a return to the story and of the story as the means of misinforming the public. It is left up to us “to interpret things the way we understand them.” Information thus loses what is integral to it, namely verifiability, that is, a reference to truth. My second revision concerns the return of biography—a return that places the story and storytelling at the very center of the modern *digital dystopia*.<sup>4</sup> The managing of the informational flow is left up to algorithms which generate, via our participation in digital systems and through tracking mechanisms, our “unauthorized biographies.” These are no longer stories “we tell ourselves about ourselves,” but essentially stories that are told about us by the big Other in the form of predictive algorithms, risk modeling, biometric systems, etc. Hence, today the dead biography is experiencing a massive dystopian comeback.

But wherein exactly lies the difference between Benjamin’s concept of biography and the new reality of unauthorized digital

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<sup>4</sup> I am borrowing the term digital dystopia from Jean Tirole, who deploys it within the following analytical framework: “Autocratic regimes, democratic majorities, private platforms, and religious or professional organizations can achieve social control by managing the flow of information about individuals’ behavior. Bundling the agents’ political, organizational, or religious attitudes with information about their prosocial conduct makes them care about behaviors that they otherwise would not. The incorporation of the individuals’ social graph in their social score further promotes soft control but destroys the social fabric. Both bundling and guilt by association are most effective in a society that has weak ties and is politically docile.” (Tirole 2021, p. 2007)

historiography? What sets apart the dystopian scenario of digital alienation from traditional biography, which consists, as Benjamin notes, of “unfolding the views of himself in which he [the subject] has encountered himself without being aware of it” (Benjamin 2002, p. 151)? In this traditional sense, biography confronts the subject with the intimate core of its identity, standing opposite of it as an alien exteriority, in which the subject is unable to recognize itself. And this point of misrecognition is the extimate core of subjectivity. The biography enacts a dissolution of the self-identical biographic subject, laying bare its effective splitting. Digital biography, on the other hand, confronts the subject with the flat, and to use Hegel’s term, “the unmoved simple” of identity (Hegel 1969, p. 415), unable to reach beyond itself and to self-dissipate. The identity of the subject as constituted through the erasure of its own identity is hence confronted with unerasable evidence, with an “In-Itself” of the permanent record of a-subjective individuality, stored in digital “clouds,” where (or rather no-where) our unauthorized biographies dwell and underneath which there dwells “the tiny, fragile human body.”

The big Other of biography is a compliment of sorts to post-traumatic subjectivity, as understood by Malabou. Is it coincidental that the concept of autistic subjectivity as alien to memory and remembrance should emerge at the precise time when unauthorized biographies are being tamed and regulated by “the right to be forgotten”? The autistic, post-traumatic subjectivity is radically foreign to biography as such. The autistic subject is understood as the effect of an external trauma that remains uninterpretable and irreducible to personal history. As such, it presents the point of impossibility, or of suspension, of hermeneutics. The unauthorized biography as the product of digital domination presents us with the flip side of this impossibility. In it, the subject faces not a traumatic *impossibility* of hermeneutics, but rather its equally traumatic *inescapability*.

One final word on the politics of digitization. From a liberal perspective, the issues involved in digitization primarily have to

do with privacy protection. However, in my mind, the main issues lie elsewhere. Many AI scholars have pointed out how the use of AI is intended to root out the biases of human decision-making, while entailing its own algorithmic biases. If Benjamin called for a politicization of art that would counter the fascist aestheticization of politics, should we today opt for a politicization of digital systems countering the digitization of politics? Or are these systems already politicized in a very fundamental sense? Looking at the State's digitization of social protections, some have pointed out how these systems penalize the poor. Virginia Eubanks, for instance, speaks of the creation of a digital poorhouse. It is clear to me that algorithmic biases perpetuate, if not create, class divisions. We could use a provisional pun-cept and say that digitization is inherently *classified*, reproducing and further accentuating class divides. I will conclude with an open question: how do we get out of this? Or, in Benjamin's terms, how do we bring about collective laughter in the LOL world?

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# Undoing the Master/s: Generic Ambiguity in Karoline von Günderrode's Ballad "Don Juan"

*Frauke Berndt*

Masters, slaves, and Hegel form the trinity of nineteenth-century ethics, though Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel did not invent the concept of the master. Its roots lie rather in antiquity and it was particularly fundamental to early modern political theory. Understanding the concept of the master requires *Anschauung*; it requires the concrete perception of an example. But every example that provides *Anschauung* of the concept of the master also shifts its meaning. That is definitely the case with the character Don Juan, whom the German Romantic author Karoline von Günderrode (1780–1806) refers to in her ballad of the same name from the beginning of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> In dubbing her character Don Juan, she takes advantage of an ambiguity in the name, which could historically refer to two different people. On the one hand, her Don Juan could reference John of Austria, a historical master who aspired to be a sovereign. However, as an illegitimate son of Emperor Charles V and Barbara Blomberg, a commoner from Regensburg, John was excluded from political sovereignty. Instead, he served his half-brother, King Philip II of Spain, a legitimate heir of Charles V, as a military leader. On the other hand, her Don Juan clearly refers to the fictive character that

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<sup>1</sup> Günderrode 1990; Engl. trans. Ezekiel (1990).

everyone associates with a profane narrative promulgated by art and literature since the early seventeenth century. Always ready for sex and crime, this Don Juan is the prototype of masculinity and virility. As such, he is considered the southern European counterpart to the northern European Faust. By invoking this ambiguity in the name Don Juan, Günderrode's ballad playfully violates the ontological border between history and fiction and thereby maps political power onto sexual potency. In other words, the ambiguous collision of the two figures sheds new light on the concept of the master. The ballad is thus an excellent example of how the epistemic media of art and literature produce philosophical insights.

Günderrode left behind a considerable oeuvre: poems, prose, and letters. She published the ballad "Don Juan" in 1804 under the pseudonym Tian in the collection *Gedichte und Phantasien*,<sup>2</sup> 11 years before the publication of E. T. A. Hoffmann's short story about Don Juan (1813) and 15 before Lord Byron's classic poem (1819). Although Günderrode doubtlessly belongs to the masters of the canon of German Romanticism, in the broader context of European modernity, her ballad has been all but forgotten.<sup>3</sup> And almost nobody has acknowledged that Hegel's female contemporary provided us with a concrete perception of the concept of the master. Her gender and early suicide prevented her voice from being heard. Yet her "Don Juan" challenges the concept of the master and the idea of its necessity in modern thought. Recent discussions on the master have pointed out his ridiculous, hysterical, excessive, undead, colonial, and racist aspects; some have even considered how the master may be considered, by definition, as castrated.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, I want to probe how the ballad advances such a

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<sup>2</sup> See Ives 2000.

<sup>3</sup> The best among the few readings of the ballad is by Marjanne E. Goozé, who focuses on female authorship and considers Günderrode's sociopolitical context. See Goozé 1991.

<sup>4</sup> Here, I refer to the conference "The Master/s: On the Contemporary Structure of Power," Ljubljana, 22–24 September 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/@goetheljubljana/videos>, accessed 1 April 2023.



perspective. Günderrode's ballad stages the master before Hegel's master had even been born. This staging reveals the ambiguity of the concept, and this ambiguity is not only conceptual (semantic) but also formal, and the latter depends on the former. In fact, we could say that Günderrode's ballad does not so much dispute the concept as undo it aesthetically. The poem derives its subversive force from connecting political power with male potency.

In the following psychoanalytical close reading, I would like to demonstrate how the master is made ambiguous in three steps. I begin with the history of the Don Juan motif and consider the theoretical readings of this figure (1). Then I analyze the generic forms in Günderrode's ballad (2) and demonstrate that their interplay produces the ambiguity of the master. With this ambiguity, the ballad "Don Juan" undertakes a frontal assault on the modern myth of the master before the concept had begun its illustrious career under Hegel (3).

## 1

There has been a lot of scholarship on the history of the Don Juan material, which is among the most popular motifs in modern literature. From the very beginning, the character of Don Juan has been portrayed as shady: not only is he an unscrupulous seducer, but he is also a clumsy show-off. There may be some prototypes for Don Juan in the comic tradition, but he only really appeared at the beginning of the seventeenth century in Tirso de Molina's comedy *The Trickster of Seville and the Stone Guest* (*El burlador de Sevilla y convidado de piedra*), first printed in 1630. Then Molière's comedy *Don Juan or The Feast of the Stone Statue* (*Dom Juan ou le festin de pierre*) brought the material to court theaters in 1665. In Günderrode's time, Don Juan was famous from Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's 1787 opera *The Rake Punished, or Don Giovanni* (*Il dissoluto punito, ossia il Don Giovanni*), for which Lorenzo Da Ponte wrote the libretto.

As in the earlier comedies, Mozart's story is based on four elements: (a) Don Giovanni desires women (always more than one); (b) Don Giovanni has rivals; (c) Don Giovanni has a servant; and (d) Don Giovanni is punished. In the first act of the opera, Don Giovanni seduces two ladies and one peasant woman, cuckolds two husbands, and murders a father (*il Commendatore*), who is commemorated with a statue. The plot strings together not only affairs but also intrigues and misadventures, in which Don Giovanni's servant, Leporello, faithfully assists his potent master and keeps a record of the seductions: "Look at this thick book. It's filled with the names of all his sweethearts."<sup>5</sup> But then comes a morally, even theologically motivated turn in the second act: Don Giovanni, who refuses to repent, invites the statue of the murdered father to a candlelight dinner. When he arrives, the stone guest pronounces Don Giovanni's punishment, and the flames of hell engulf the playboy. Mozart's opera thus makes a tragic figure out of the ridiculous Don Juan. Don Giovanni's act of patricide does not allow him to escape the troubles he has sown. In the end, he succumbs to the real master—and there is an end to masculinity, virility, and potency.

Mozart's opera has been at the center of the Don Juan boom in modern literature and theory. The theoretical literature ranges from Søren Kierkegaard, who views Don Juan as the prototype of the aesthete,<sup>6</sup> to the existentialist philosopher Albert Camus, who claims that Don Juan's free love led to the citizenry's liberation in the French Revolution.<sup>7</sup> In psychoanalytical theory, Jacques Lacan evaluates him as a hysteric,<sup>8</sup> while Julia Kristeva diagnoses Don Juan with objectless love, which means that he embodies desire in and of itself—the absolute object,<sup>9</sup> whereas Alenka Zupančič

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<sup>5</sup> Mozart 2011, p. 531.

<sup>6</sup> See Kierkegaard 1956.

<sup>7</sup> See Camus 1991.

<sup>8</sup> See Lacan 2014.

<sup>9</sup> See Kristeva 1987.

points out that Don Juan's sharing of his *agalma* provokes the desire of other.<sup>10</sup> In literary studies, Shoshana Felman argues that Don Juan's seductive power can be ascribed to the power of language, because he does not tell the truth but only makes groundless promises.<sup>11</sup> And Cornelia Pierstorff claims that narrations are the medium of his desire.<sup>12</sup> But I am not prepared to put up with so much abstraction. Instead, I ask myself: Where does the energy that this character is charged with in literature and theory come from? How can it be that a rather ridiculous comedic figure has become a tragic figure in the modern age and has been seen as a mirror figure of the potent master Faust?

The Viennese psychoanalyst Otto Rank provides an answer to these questions. In an essay entitled "The Don Juan Legend" ("*Die Don Juan Figur*"), which appeared in the journal *Imago*, edited by Sigmund Freud, Rank derives the Don Juan myth from the Oedipus myth—the psychoanalytic metanarrative. In this telling, Hamlet, Faust, Don Juan, and other tragic heroes form, in Oedipus's wake, the psychoanalytical paradigm of the master. As is well known, the goal of a boy's development is to overcome the Oedipus complex. Only then has he successfully identified with his father and replaced his mother with another woman. Overcoming the Oedipus complex is thus the precondition for mastery. Only those who are not their fathers' servants can become masters. In his analysis of Mozart's opera, Rank elaborates how in Don Juan's Oedipus complex, "the many seduced women represent the one unattainable mother, and [...] the many men whom he deceives, fights, and kills represent the father."<sup>13</sup> Don Juan remains loyal to his mother by devaluing women, hence the importance of the series of women in all the adaptations of the

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<sup>10</sup> See Zupančič 2000.

<sup>11</sup> See Felman 1983.

<sup>12</sup> See Pierstorff 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Rank 1975, p. 20.

material. The father remains his enemy, represented very impressively by the stone guest. He embodies Don Juan's censoring ego ideal (*Ichideal*).

The echo of this thesis lingers in all the theoretical readings. But at one point Rank notes something that has since ceased to play a role. In a reading that is strongly informed by cultural studies, he shows how two temporal layers overlap in the Don Juan material: the unconscious of the individual and the "immemorial" (*das Unvordenkliche*) of a culture. I take the term *immemorial* (*Unvordenklich*) from Hans-Georg Gadamer,<sup>14</sup> who appropriates it, in turn, from Friedrich Schelling<sup>15</sup> to address the repressed layers of human history. For this inaccessible layer, Freud invents the famous fairy tale of the primordial horde. It tells of how, in the dim and distant past, the sons of the father who led the horde and who owned all the women were guilty of a common crime: they murdered their father. Among the brothers, the master was the one who committed the murder, took his father's place, and claimed all the women for himself. As Rank shows, precisely such an idealization through heroization is at the basis of the Don Juan figure. Don Juan's guilt is not oedipally motivated at the level of the individual; rather his guilt reveals the "original guilt" of the cultural imaginary:

The artistic-synthetic presentation of the Don Juan material culminates in Mozart's immortal masterpiece. Here the sense of guilt breaks through so powerfully that it leads on the one hand to its clearest manifestation in the father complex (the Commander), and on the other hand to the complete inhibition of the libido (which was originally unrestrained) for the forbidden maternal object. The result of this second effect is that the whole series of women remains unattainable for the hero. (Rank 1975, pp. 107–108.)

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<sup>14</sup> See Gadamer 2004.

<sup>15</sup> See Schelling 1979.

This collision of the immemorial and the psychological charges the Don Juan figure with an energetic potential that has fascinated modern literature and theory since the mid-nineteenth century. It is the source for the ambiguity of the master in the first place.

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With *Don Giovanni*, Mozart produced a great monument to the master. In her ballad, Günderrode knocks it off its pedestal. In cases of such a hostile relationship to a predecessor, Harold Bloom speaks of "misreading," which he assesses as a strategy of outdoing another author.<sup>16</sup> However, Günderrode misreads not only Mozart but also all the other Don Juan variations before and even after her ballad.

This narrative poem has 22 cross-rhymed stanzas in iambic tetrameter, each stanza ending with a triple rhyme to form the pattern ABABCCC. The stanzas are divided into one group of 8 stanzas and two groups of 7 stanzas. Günderrode immediately violates all four elements of the storyline: (a) Don Juan desires only one woman; (b) Don Juan does not have any rivals; (c) Don Juan does not have a servant; and (d) Don Juan is not punished by a father—at least not by a "real" father. So the story narrated in the ballad is very different from those of Mozart and company. The ballad instead tells a "romantic" version of Don Juan.<sup>17</sup> European literature began to promote a bourgeois concept of romantic love starting in the middle of the eighteenth century. Such love is exclusive and combines heteronormative sex with the idea of friendship and the institution of marriage. The fact that such a concept is not designed to last is the problem that modern novels revolve around, beginning with the prototype of a failing lover:

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<sup>16</sup> See Bloom 1975.

<sup>17</sup> See Gooz e 1991, p. 117 passim.

Johann Wolfgang Goethe's famous diary fiction *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (*Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*; 1774).

Günderode interrupts the serial pattern of the Don Juan tradition by staging his romantic love. The love story represents a moment that each element in the series of lovers might have and reveals that moment's psychic economy. It is the specular and spectacular moment of union that the ballad narratively unfolds by underlaying this moment with a story. The first part of the ballad tells of Juan's adoration of a queen, the second fantasizes a passionate love story, and the third ends with the king's revenge. My analysis of the ballad's form is based on narratological categories.<sup>18</sup> In a narrative metalepsis, the narration jumps in the very first verse from an extradiegetic position outside the narrated world into the middle of the narrated world: "Now the festival has come" (*Es ist der Festtag nun erschienen*). Intradiegetically, the narrative is tied to a nonpersonalized position among the people. From out of the crowd and literally live on stage, the appearance of the beautiful queen alongside her new husband is enthusiastically cheered. The live effect is supported by the verb tenses in the present and perfect—the rhetorical technique of *energeia* (vividness). The pair's wedding dance is watched in particular by "one man, one in the crowd" (*Einer, Einer im Gedränge*): "Juan," whose observing in turn is observed. Until the fifth stanza, Juan remains nameless, and "Don" only appears in the title of the ballad. The second stanza introduces the two central concepts of the ballad, the "gaze" (*Blick*) and the "heart" (*Herz*). Indeed, the heart appears no less than six times as the organ of *Empfindsamkeit*, that is, of the eighteenth-century European movement of sentimentalism. Juan's heart aches for the queen, but above all, in good Petrarchan tradition, it burns for her—and it has done so for months, as the fourth stanza, which narrates the backstory to the wedding, makes clear.

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<sup>18</sup> See Genette 1980 and 1988.

In the entire first part of the ballad, the narrative follows Juan's gaze. It thus forfeits the autonomy that normally characterizes extra- and heterodiegetic narration. In other words, the ballad does not narrate about Juan but rather *with* Juan. Not even the title ensures that the narration is anchored outside the character's consciousness. The internal focalization is continuous even in the passages that are not narrated in free indirect discourse (*erlebte Rede*) or as a stream of consciousness. Pointedly, one could say that the nameless character interprets himself as "Juan." The readers are thus plunged deeply—and without escape—into Juan's world: "[t]hus he falls prey to his watching" (*So wird er seines Schauens Beute*), and the reader falls with him. This internal focalization is precisely the formal ingenuity of the poem. It is not about Juan, which would alone make the deviation from the literary tradition clear, but rather inhabits a Juanian consciousness that is tied to a specific character. In this "Juanian world," a young man has devoted himself to the adoration of a beautiful married woman, from whom he is separated by social status above all: he is a nobody from the people, she the queen.

In his adoration, Juan almost religiously transfigures his lady in the tradition of minnesang. In an analepsis, the fifth stanza narrates how Juan disturbs the devotions of the courtly congregation on the Christian holiday of All Souls. In one scene, the queen poses like the Mother of God, first with her head lowered, then with her eyes turned heavenward, as in the iconographic tradition of Maria Immaculata, such as in a painting by Sassoferrato (see Fig. 1). It is this transfiguration that stimulates his desire: "Then Juan's ardent gaze implored / That she would just *once* make him happy!" (*Da flehen Juans heiße Blicke: / Daß sie ihn einmal nur beglücke!*). He imagines himself stepping in front of the altar: "Aloud he'll tell her of his passion" (*laut will er seinen Schmerz ihr nennen*). To his mind, it is not the souls of the deceased that are to be liberated but his own desire:



Fig. 1: Sassoferrato (Giovanni Battista Salvi): Maria Immacolata (1640/1660). Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main. Photo © Städel Museum



*Stanza 7*

Laut spricht er: Priester!	Aloud he speaks: Priest!
lasset schweigen	let fall silent
Für Todte die Gebete all.	All prayers for the dead.
Für mich laßt heisse Bitten steigen;	Raise for me your ardent pleas;
Denn größer ist der Liebe Quaal,	For greater is my love's torment,
Von der ich wehn'ger kann genesen,	From which I can less recover,
Als jene unglücksel'gen Wesen	Than those unhappy creatures
Zur Quaal des Feuers auserlesen.	Chosen for the fiery torment.

Here, an ambiguity of scope connects the torment of purgatory with the suffering caused by the flames of love, which form the imagery of the second and third parts of the ballad. But a consideration of form makes clear that Don Juan has only imagined his "love" (Liebesmuth). He has not revealed it to the courtly community but only to the crowd, in which he is only one among a multitude. The attempt to realize the wish in reality does not result in a sovereign entrance but rather in a crank talking crazy. The crowd is quite astonished at Juan's expression of his feelings, as one reads in an ironic break in the scene in one of the few verses narrated without a Juanian focalization: "Where among the festive splendour?" / Some quietly think, 'is she intended / By his words and with such fervour?" ("Wo ist, im festlichen Gepränge," / Denkt Manche still, "die solche Gluth / Und solches Wort hat jetzt gemeinet?").

Don Juan: a stalker, a poor lunatic, who covets his queen as a virgin and displays behavioral problems—that alone would be incredible. But Günderrode goes even further with her misreading. Graphically separated from the first eight stanzas of the ballad's first part by a line, the next seven stanzas of the second part introduce a change in the modality so as to narrate the fulfillment of an exclusive romantic love. The trigger for this change, which is additionally motivated in stanzas 9 and 10 by a shift from a narrative to a dramatic mode of narration, are the queen's "secret

tears” (heimliche Thränen). Juan imagines how his beloved saw his tears at the court and correctly read their meaning. In free indirect discourse, he asks himself, “Was it pity, was it love, / That wrung those tears from her?” (War’s Mitleid, ist es Lieb’ gewesen, / Was diese Thränen ihr erpreßt?). He desires just one day with her, even just a single nocturnal hour “[w]here sweet love blooms for him” (Wo süße Liebe für ihn blüht) to be ready for the eternity of “death’s night” (Todesnacht).

Modality is an ontological category used in fiction theory.<sup>19</sup> The theory of possible worlds distinguishes the actual world from other possible worlds. While the first part of the ballad and the beginning of its second part are epistemologically unreliable since they are narrated with internal focalization, the events are nonetheless situated in the realm of what is possible in the actual world. The following seven stanzas shift into the realm of the impossible (in the actual world) and so from what I will call a narrated possible world into a narrated impossible world. The love story between Juan and his beloved plays out in this other world, which is not located on the same ontological level as the events presented so far. From stanzas 11 to 15, the narration is not internally focalized, that is, it does not inhabit a Juanian consciousness. Instead, the love story is narrated without focalization as if it were real. In this impossible world, Juan builds a theater for the queen. It is this absurdity—a poor wretch from the people building a theater at lightning speed—that justifies my ontological interpretation, for there is no other way to explain how the theater is built so quickly. In fact, this scene retrospectively casts doubt on the ontological status of the first scene as a possible world since it, too, possesses clear theatrical attributes. Further pursuing this insight would, however, go too far, unless one is not afraid of considering a formal collapse in which there is no orientation between distinct ontological levels.

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<sup>19</sup> See Ryan 1991.

Stanzas 11–12

Es liebt die Königin die Bühne, Erschien oft selbst im bunten Spiel.	The Queen loves the stage, Often appeared in colourful play.
Daß er dem kleinsten Wunsche diene Ist jetzt nur seines Lebensziel. Er läßt ihr ein Theater bauen, Dort will, die reizendste der Frauen, Er noch in neuer Anmuth schauen.	To serve her smallest wishes Is now his life's only goal. He has a theatre built for her, There he will see the loveliest Of women in new grace.
Der Hof sich einst zum Spiel vereinet, Die Königin in Schäfertracht, Mit holder Anmuth nur erscheint Den Blumenkranz in Lokkennacht.	The court unites one day for a play, The Queen, dressed as a shepherdess, Appears with lovely grace A floral wreath in her hair's night.
Und Juans Seele sieht verwegen, Mit ungestümen wildem Regen, Dem kommenden Moment entgegen.	And Juan's soul recklessly, With impetuous wild stirrings, Looks forward to the coming moment.

Stanza 11 mixes the simple past, which refers to the possible world, with the present tense, in which the impossible world is narrated, whereas in stanza 12, past and present overlap. The modality of the impossible world, in which Juan's love is fulfilled, has a specific generic form: the ballad becomes an anacreontic ode (and I will spare you the detailed formal analysis that explains this categorization). What seems picturesque to us today—the queen donning the costume of a shepherdess, as in Jean-Honoré Fragonard's painting (Fig. 2)—was a familiar code for sex in the era of *Empfindsamkeit* and is echoed in the peasant girl Zerlina, the third woman in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. One could say an anacreontic porno is playing in rapid time-lapse in Juan's "inner cinema." Because the events are not *possible* but rather *impossible*, it is not surprising that the theater, which has just been



Fig. 2 Jean-Honoré Fragonard: *The Shepherdess* (ca. 1750/1752). Bequest of Leon and Marion Kaumheimer. Milwaukee Art Museum. Photo © John Nienhuis, Dedra Walls

instantaneously built, all of a sudden burns down again at Juan's signal. The fire naturalizes the flame metaphors borrowed from the Petrarchan discourse of love. The burning theater and the flames of love alternate, whereas the love story culminates in the desired "lovely hour":

*Stanza 13–14*

Er winkt, und Flamm und Dampf erfüllen,	He signals: flame and fumes pervade
Entsetzlich jetzt das Schauspielhaus;	Now horribly the theatre;
Der Liebe Glück will er verhüllen	He will conceal love's happiness
In Dampf und Nacht und Schreck	In fumes and night, and fear
und Graus;	and horror;
Er jauchzet, daß es ihm gelungen,	He rejoices; he has succeeded,

Des Schicksals Macht hat er bezwungen Der Liebe süßen Lohn errungen.	He has forced destiny's power And gained love's sweet wages.
Gekommen ist die schöne Stunde; Er trägt sie durch, des Feuers Wuth Raubt manchen Kuß dem schönen Munde, Weckt ihres Busens tiefste Gluth. Möcht sterben jetzt in ihren Armen, Möcht alles geben! ihr, verarmen, Zu anderm Leben nie erwarmen.	The lovely hour has come; He bears her through the fire's rage, Steals kisses from her lovely mouth, Awakens her bosom's deepest blaze. In her arms he would pass away, Would give all! To impoverish her, Never warm to another life.

Marjanne E. Goozé decodes this episode allegorically: "The moment of sexual fulfillment is compared with death; the metaphor is an old one. After his orgasmic death, his warmth will be spent. His purgatory is to become hers."<sup>20</sup> The haunting literally comes to an end when the costumed queen breaks free from the impossible world, which in this interpretation is then unmasked and rationalized as Juan's dream. Not the ghost of a father, as in *Hamlet* (or *Don Giovanni*), but the ghost of his mother appears at the end of the scene: "He sees her float through the halls. / The minute's life is breathed out" (Er sieht sie durch die Hallen schweben. / Verhaucht ist der Minute Leben).

Another line graphically separates the final seven stanzas of the third and last part of the ballad from the seven stanzas of the second part. Back in the possible world, things are looking bad for the romantic "master to be": Juan suffers from "crazed senses" (irrer Sinn). The anacreontic porno, which played in the impossible world, is thus psychologized by the narrative instance as a delusion. Around 1800, the discourse on melancholy provided

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<sup>20</sup> Goozé 1991, p. 126.

set pieces for representing madness. These set pieces were, in turn, stored in cultural memory by influential texts like Goethe's *Werther*: Werther's "sickness unto death" is an integral part of the bourgeois concept of romantic love. Such melancholic attributes are compactly gathered together in stanzas 16 and 17 to characterize Juan's madness. This characterization is rounded out by an *image* of the queen highlighted by the stanzaic form. In this last part of the ballad, the stanzaic form changes significantly. Through to the end, the cross-rhyming couplets are followed by a rhyming couplet and an unrhyming single verse. The very first such single verse emphasizes madness by addressing its medium: "Her beloved, lovely image" (ihr geliebtes, holdes Bild). The waking-dream state of madness, in which sleep and a "dream-like death"<sup>21</sup> are blended in a manner so typical of late-Enlightenment psychological discourse, leads to a dissociated state where Juan hears the voice of his grief and compares awakening from the episode to a resurrection from a "crypt" (Gruft). Today, Juan's condition would probably fulfill all the symptomatic requirements of a psychotic episode:

*Stanza 18*

Und da er wacht aus seinem Schlummer	And when he wakens from his slumber
Ist's ihm, als stieg' er aus der Gruft,	It seems he's climbing from a crypt,
So fremd und tod; und aller Kummer	So strange and dead; and all the anguish
Der mit ihm schlief erwacht und ruft:	That slept with him awakes and cries:
O weine! sie ist dir verlohren	Oh weep! she's lost to you forever
Die deine Liebe hat erkohren	She who your love chose
Ein Abgrund trennet sie und dich!	An abyss divides you from her!

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<sup>21</sup> Goozé 1991, p. 127.

In stanzas 19 to 22, it again seems as if *something* is happening, but in fact, *nothing* happens in the real, possible world. For there is again a change in modality from the possible world to the impossible world, so the following actions are also located on a different ontological level and narrated there without focalization: Juan sets off for the gardens of the castle, where he meets a girl who gives him a letter from his beloved. In the letter, she tells him to save himself from the king, who, contrary to the Juanian tradition, has no intention of being cuckolded or murdered. Juan reads this passionate declaration, presses the beloved page as a fetish to his heart—"Loves it, holds it to his heart" (Und liebt's, und drückt es an sein Herz)—broods a little over his fate, and then, somewhat suddenly, falls victim to murder. While the impossible world of love has the generic form of an anacreontic ode, the impossible world of murder has the generic form of a condensed tragedy narrated at a high tempo. The elements of a secret love, the letter, and the murder are paradigmatic; they are not narrated so much as quickly recalled from cultural memory. That this tragedy does not occur in the real, possible world is made clear in the concluding verses, where Juan lapses back into his dissociated state, repeating in the very moment of his death the union with his beloved.

### 3

In the last section, I concluded that in Günderrode's misreading of the Don Juan material, both love and punishment—the two central motifs of the tradition—are narrated but do not really occur. For the author combines the techniques of internal focalization, which had become increasingly common since the end of the eighteenth century, with a sophisticated change of modality. The only "real" thing narrated in internal focalization is Juan's romantic love. But with the economy of this love, which is mirrored in the anacreon-

tic porno and the tragedy, Günderrode comes up with a surprising diagnosis: her Juan is not, as one would expect from the Don Juan material, an adult womanizer. Instead, the ballad identifies him as a whiny little boy and so reveals the master's potency as a regressive fantasy. In an "infantile tendency to regress,"<sup>22</sup> Juan idealizes the queen in the image of a mother according to the Mariological model, sexualizes that image according to the anacreontic model, and is then punished according to the tragic model—all of this as an expression of dissociation. Yet it is precisely the anacreontic costuming of the Mother of God that points to the phenomenon that Rank describes using the example of Mozart—a phenomenon that is quite typical of literature around 1800: the superimposition of temporal layers. When Juan worships and desires the queen, he worships and desires her individually as a mother and culturally as an archaic "great mother" (*magna mater*). This mother imago is mediated by the staging, common in anacreontic poetry, of the shepherdess in the tradition of a Flora–Aphrodite constellation, such as in François Boucher's painting (Fig. 3). In multiple mythological sources, Aphrodite is not only the goddess of love but also refers to the chthonic, maternal goddesses of an archaic, matriarchal cultural stage.

In his 1861 cultural-anthropological study *Mother Right: An Investigation of the Religious and Juridical Character of Matriarchy in the Ancient World* (*Das Mutterrecht: Eine Untersuchung über die Gynaikokratie der alten Welt nach ihrer religiösen und rechtlichen Natur*), Johann Jakob Bachofen distinguishes between an early hetaeric mother, a later matriarchal, oral mother, and a final patriarchal, oedipal mother. Juan's supremely powerful mother imago is characterized by the fact that she combines all three mother imagines. She has sexual, nurturing, and punitive aspects. This mother imago thus also has an oedipal function. In the ballad, Juan is accordingly not murdered by the king; indeed,

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<sup>22</sup> Rank 1975, p. 96.





Fig. 3 François Boucher: *Dreaming Shepherdess* (1763). Residenzgalerie Salzburg. Photo © Ulrich Ghezzi, Oberalm

the king fails even to take notice of him. Rather, the murder is narrated in an entirely indeterminate manner, and can therefore also be assigned to the preoedipal, phallic mother: “A killing dagger finds his breast” (*Da trifft ein Mörderdolch die Brust*). In

this verse, the German adverb *da*, which is elided in the English translation, is wonderfully vague since it can indicate a spatial, temporal, or causal relation. At some place, at some time, and somehow, Juan meets his fate. In the penultimate stanza, the two rhetorical questions framing an exclamation refer to the three functions of the mother imago; this is supported by the impure rhyme *meiden–bereiten*:

*Stanzas 21–22*

Er liest das Blatt mit leisem Beben Und liebt's, und drückt es an sein Herz. Gewaltsam theilet sich sein Leben, In große Wonne — tiefen Schmerz. Sollt er die Theuerste nun meiden? Kann sie dies Trauern ihm bereiten! Soll er sie nimmer wieder sehn?	He reads the page, gently trembling Loves it, holds it to his heart. His life is violently divided In great bliss – deep pain. Should he now avoid his dearest? How can she cause him this sorrow? Should he never see her again?
Er geht nun, wie sie ihm geboten; Da trifft ein Mörderdolch die Brust. Doch steigt er freudig, zu den Todten Denn der Erinn' rung süße Lust, Ruft ihm herauf die schönste Stunde, Er hängt noch an ihrem Munde; Entschlummert sanft in ihrem Arm.	He goes now, as she bade him; A killing dagger finds his breast. But to the dead he rises gladly, For memory's sweet passion, Calls up to him the loveliest hour, He still hangs on her mouth; And gently slumbers in her arms.

In the last stanza, the actual vanishing point is not sexual union with the shepherdess, which Juan recalls in dying with the repeated rhyming words *Stunde–Munde*, but the imagination

of death as sleep. The ballad establishes the pictorial connection between madness, "slumber," and death already in the seventeenth stanza in the image of the "crypt." The figura etymologica of *Schlummer–entschlummern* repeats this connection in the last stanza and assigns it to the mother imago. Rank, by the way, also notices the chthonic, maternal symbolism of the crypt in Mozart. This imago is omnipresent in the cultural memory around 1800. For example, the classicist painter Asmus Jacob Carstens links individual psychological regression with pagan and Christian mythology in a famous drawing of the chthonic, maternal goddess of the night. Nyx is the mother of Hypnos, the god of sleep, and Thanatos, the god of gentle death (Fig. 4). This scene also reflects the type of the Virgin of Mercy from Christian iconography (Fig. 5). By superimposing the unconscious of the individual



Fig. 4 Asmus Jacob Carstens: *Night and Her Children, Sleep and Death* (1794). Kunstsammlung Weimar. Photo © Kunstsammlung



Fig. 5 Piero della Francesco: *Virgin of Mercy* (1460/1462). Museo Civico, Sansepolcro. Photo © Museo Civico

and the immemorial of culture, Günderrode stages a regressive Juan, who imagines a preoedipal world in which there is not yet a father. Rank also notices this potential of the Don Juan figure and elaborates upon it:

As the fantasy also clearly reveals, this unattainability does not refer to sexual possession, to which there is certainly no barrier in primitive times and character. Rather, it involves the deeply-rooted biological wish for the exclusive and complete possession of the mother, as once experienced in the pleasure of the prenatal situation and forever afterward sought as the highest libidinal satisfaction. (Rank 1975, p. 95)

The ballad thus does not lead into a heroic world but into a preoedipal one. The real point here is that Günderrode explicitly marks—not least because of its serious deviations from the tradition—an intertextual relationship to the greatest tragedy of German classicism. For in her ballad, Günderrode overlays “Don Juan” with Friedrich Schiller’s dramatic poem *Don Carlos* (*Dom Karlos, Infant von Spanien*), which was published in 1787, the same year that Mozart’s opera premiered. A syllepsis leads from “Philip,” who is mentioned in verse 29 of the ballad, to King Philip II of Spain, who in Schiller is the antagonist to his son Don Carlos, the crown prince (Fig. 6). But if this Philip is the husband of the adored and coveted queen, then Juan’s position is quite precarious. Günderrode’s Juan would either take the position of Carlos of Asturias (1545–1568; Fig. 7), who was King Philip’s son and the prince of Spain. Then Philip’s wife, Queen Elisabeth of Valois, who had been Carlos’s former fiancée and whom he still desired after she had married his father, would take the symbolic position of Juan’s mother. In this case, the ballad of Juan’s love would narrate a story as old as time—the oedipal story of rivalry and incest. Or Juan can take the position of John of Austria (1547–1578; Fig. 7), who was the half-brother of King Philip. With an equally original and lucid move, Günderrode also brings this alternative into



Fig. 6 Titian: Philip II (1549/1550). Museo del Prado, Madrid.  
Photo © Prado

play, because the “Philip” in verse 29 can also be an allusion to William Shakespeare’s comedy *Much Ado about Nothing*, written in 1588/1589 and first published in 1623: Juan “features as a villain (Don John, the Bastard Prince), and, after Günderröde’s time, he



Fig. 7 Alonso Sánchez Coello: Prince Don Carlos (1555/1559). Museo del Prado, Madrid. Photo © Prado

appears in mid- and late-nineteenth century works featuring a love rivalry between Don John (sometimes written as ‘Don Juan’ or ‘Don Giovanni’) and King Philip.”<sup>23</sup>

These intertextual allusions through the “Philip” syllepsis are a game changer, because Günderrode endows the protagonist with

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<sup>23</sup> See Anna C. Ezekiel’s introduction to her translation of Günderrode’s poem in Günderrode 1990.

“constitutive ambiguity”<sup>24</sup> by mapping his political power onto his sexual potency or, should I better say, his potential political power onto his potential sexual potency. This strategy is convincing since John of Austria and Carlos of Asturias were of exactly the same age, and, what really matters, both lacked sovereignty. With regard to power and with regard to potency, Philip is the one and only master in the ballad. The illegitimate brother of the king can never obtain political sovereignty because dynastic laws forbid it. His actions are motivated by his envy of his brother’s political sovereignty, which is the basis for his social authority. Admittedly, the son of the king has it even worse. While he is the potential sovereign and was also almost the legitimate husband of the woman who is now his mother, he is both politically and sexually emasculated. And Günderröde squints at Schiller with an evil eye. Don Carlos’s desire for the married queen in the symbolic position of his mother is his tragic flaw (hamartia), and it establishes the oedipal conflict with Philip. Although he is willing to replace his love for Elisabeth with a sublimated love for his fatherland, the son is handed over to the Inquisition at the end of the tragedy by his jealous, vengeful father.

Historical portraits of premodern rulers provide noteworthy clues about this symbolic knowledge of political and sexual disempowerment. Their iconography inscribes the difference between political power and male potency into the representation of the sovereign—with more or less ambiguity. The portraits thus relate political power and male potency as if they were already the two sides of the master. In Titian’s painting *Philip II* (1549/1550), the insignia of political power, the scepter and sword, frame the sovereign’s clearly visible genitalia (Fig. 6). In typical fashion for the time, his genitalia are in their own casing, a codpiece that covers them and at the same time displays them in the covering. The painting thus depicts the male body twice: as the body of a man

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<sup>24</sup> See Berndt and Sachs-Hombach 2015.



and as the body of the sovereign. This doubling of the body is structural for premodern political theory, as Ernst Kantorowicz points out in his classic 1957 study *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology*.<sup>25</sup>

By focusing on the male genitalia, the portraits of rulers bring into view what complicates the doubling. For not only the body politic but also his male body are symbolic. The doubling thus does not concern a given body as the body of the sovereign but rather encompasses two different symbolic systems, the system of politics and the system of masculinity. While the body politic is constituted by the traditional symbols of sovereignty, the male body is constituted by the phallus, which is never real. Significant semantic tensions arise in the interaction of the symbols of sovereignty and the phallus, in both Juan Pantoja de la Cruz's painting *John of Austria* (1547/48) and Alonso Sánchez Coello's *Prince Don Carlos* (1555/1559). Particularly noteworthy is how the cut of the codpiece in Coello's painting makes Don Carlos's phallus appear enlarged (Fig. 8), while, as in Titian, only the pommel of the sword, the symbol of political power, is depicted. In addition, the cut of the pants imitates the scrotum. By fixing the phallus in a highly erect position, the symbol of male potency lends its power to the symbols of political power.

In his painting, Pantoja also celebrates a symbolic overkill: the lion at the lower edge of the picture invokes the Habsburg heraldic animal. The military leader John of Austria—who, as I just mentioned, could not become the sovereign—does not, however, lean on a scepter, like Titian's Philip, but rather on an ordinary wooden stick. Here the symbols of sovereignty and the power of the body politic affect the representation of the male body. Again, it is the codpiece and pants that stylize the scrotum. In addition, the cut

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<sup>25</sup> For an investigation on the aspect of clothing in the process of symbolization, see Kraß 2006. For an analysis of the "carnal" dimension of this structure in the ethics of modernity, see Santner 2011.



Fig. 8 Anonymous (sometimes attributed to Juan Pantoja de la Cruz): John of Austria [Don Juan de Austria] (1575). Museo del Prado, Madrid. Photo © Prado

of the breastplate points like an arrow — meaning deictically — to the phallus, which symbolically interacts with the other parts of the armor on the right edge of the picture. However, apart from the sword pommel, which symbolizes the body politic, there is another weapon in this painting: the dagger that pierces the right pant leg. In a metalepsis that bridges the ontological boundary between the body of the sovereign and the body of the man, the dagger connects the two systems of politics and masculinity. While Coello valorizes the phallus by presenting it in an erect position, Pantoja devalues the phallus by wounding the genitalia. The dagger penetrates the body in such a way that the wounding of the male body means at the same time the wounding of the body politic. Or put differently: the dagger castrates the sovereign. Whether valorization or devaluation: through the interaction of the two symbolic systems, it seems that the body politic cannot be thought without the male body. And I am not just concerned here with a banal gendering of power but rather with the fundamental question of whether sovereignty presupposes the exact blind spot that Günderrode illuminates in her ballad, thereby demonstrating the necessity of revising this key concept.

It is such a murderous dagger that costs Juan his life. His murder also represents a castration that is carried out symbolically, as in Pantoja's early modern painting. For while there is also a semantic connection to Philip II, the sovereign, in both Pantoja's painting and Günderrode's ballad, there is not a real connection. In the ballad, the dagger strikes the rival's chest both masterlessly and unerringly. In any case, Günderrode has shrunk her Juan to such an extent that both eros and thanatos refer back to the oedipal triangle. When Juan finally dies, it is not because he has waged a heroic struggle against his ego ideal and has thus identified with the father, who is both powerful and potent. Rather, the ballad deheroizes Juan and completely banishes the father from the scene. In its three parts, the ballad is dominated by an overpowering mother imago of a preoedipal world. Not only

is he not the dick that picks up all the chicks, to put it vulgarly, he actually lacks any dick at all. Due to the constitutive ambiguity, which comes with the generic forms of the anacreontic ode and tragedy, Günderröde's Juan can neither be a powerful nor a potent master. Thus, at the end of the ballad, she literally puts an end to tributes to the concept of the master like those by her contemporary Hegel and German classicists like Schiller. No matter which regressive hero is idealized as a "master" following Hegel or in literature, they all do not attest to political power or male potency, but rather to the powerlessness and impotence of a male consciousness that remains regressively attached to the mother until the very end.

*Translated by Anthony Mahler (University of Basel)*

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# Master, Don't You See That I Am Learning?

*Henrik Jøker Bjerre*

In his *Science of Logic*, Hegel describes how quantity changes into quality. Changes in nature have mistakenly been conceptualized merely as gradual increases or disappearances, he says, but this understanding fails to acknowledge the real breaks that actually occur. Nature works not only in continuous flows of more or less, but also in more radical shifts, where quantitative changes suddenly result in qualitative shifts. This break or rupture or instantaneous change is “ein Anderswerden, das ein Abbrechen des Allmählichen und ein Qualitativ-Anderes gegen das vorhergehende Daseyn ist [a becoming other which is a break with the gradual process and a qualitatively different being against the previous]” (Hegel HW3, p. 368).

Hegel himself offers the example of the change of water into ice: the quantitative change of temperature at some point results in the qualitative change of the state of matter. Water changes into ice at its freezing point “auf einmal,” as Hegel says, and similarly, of course, it changes into steam at the other end, at its boiling point.

“Qualitative changes” like the ones encountered in physics, chemistry, or biology, can also be observed in human societies. In anthropology, for example, it has been shown how, historically, the size of a population can affect the “quality” of its social structures: a village that has increased its population beyond a certain threshold might start functioning poorly and require either a separation into two villages or the invention of new institutions or forms of regula-

tion (Carneiro 2000, p. 12928). Political revolutions could also be seen as results of “quantitative changes” culminating in qualitative shifts. Like Bukharin wrote, they do not “fall from the sky”; “[t]hey are prepared by the entire preceding course of development, as the boiling of water is prepared by the preceding process of heating or as the explosion of a steam-boiler is prepared by the increasing pressure of the steam against its walls” (Bukharin 1969, p. 82).

I think something similar could also be said about science and education. Isn't Thomas Kuhn's description of “normal science” a description of accumulation of data, knowledge, and understanding within the framework of a paradigm, until the limits of the paradigm itself have been reached and a new conceptualization is needed? Scientific revolutions do not fall from the sky, either, although one might sometimes be forgiven for thinking so, with images of genius scientists at the receiving end of apples falling from trees, etc. Their groundwork has always been laid beforehand, and even if scientific breakthroughs in important ways happen “auf einmal,” they would not appear without meticulous, long-lasting, and patient work within the constructs of certain established sets of assumptions and ways of thinking. In effect, there are thus two kinds of scientific progress; what could be termed “knowing more” and “knowing differently,” respectively, neither of which is sufficient without the other<sup>1</sup>. “Knowing more” means

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<sup>1</sup> After delivering this talk at the conference in Ljubljana on 23 September 2022, I realized that the elaboration of the distinction between “knowing more” and “knowing differently” is to some extent in debt to John Caputo's *Radical Hermeneutics*, in which Caputo advocates for (maintaining) the ability of “writing differently” and “thinking differently” as opposed to standard political, social, and educational technologies. Caputo does not connect these two modes as closely as I am trying to do here, but they do resemble the pair that I am sketching (Caputo 1997, p. 233-234). I have been teaching Caputo's text for a few years and must have internalized some of its points without really noticing. When I read his text again for the autumn 2022 semester, I was surprised how similar some of his formulations were to my own – a very direct case of *Wirkungsgeschichte*, I suppose.



adding on data, information, knowledge, etc., while “knowing differently” means acquiring a new framework for understanding the meaning of the information already obtained – or indeed what counts as information in the first place.

If there is a crisis in contemporary university discourse, and I think there is, its most prevalent trait is probably the exhaustion of the ability to know differently. It follows from the preceding argument that such an ability in an important sense cannot be separated from the ability to know more (we do need to know more in order for *any* significant progress to be possible), but “knowing more” does not have much scientific value without some integrated sense of a direction towards knowing differently. So, the two are related, but they do not condition each other in the same way. Maybe an analogy can serve to illustrate the asymmetrical relation between them: Immanuel Kant said that we know of freedom, even if freedom cannot be “theoretically proven,” because we are able to imagine the moral law and the law is thereby the “ratio cognoscendi” of freedom; the moral law in turn would not really be moral at all if it were not for freedom. Freedom is thus the “ratio essendi” of morality. Similarly, “knowing more” is the way in which, or the path along which, we become able to contemplate something differently, while the potential of “knowing differently” is the essential component of knowing more, if it is to be counted as scientific knowledge. Freedom, to Kant, is a way of “breaking off” from natural determination, and similarly, science appears, in the first place, as a way of breaking off from mythological or ideological explanations, and it has continued to revolutionize its own foundation. As a scientist, you collect data, analyze, reflect, write, discuss, and so on because you want to establish some truth that you may only vaguely discern; an answer to a question that you are still not able to formulate. Or maybe more precisely: as a scientist you do ask concrete questions and expect concrete answers, you do clarify concepts and compare, measure, estimate, etc., (this is what Thomas Kuhn calls “mop-up

work”), but without the always potentially relevant question that has not yet been asked, this work would not be genuinely scientific: “What does this mean?” or “How can it be so?” In a slogan, the genuinely scientific thought is not “I understand,” but on the contrary “I do not understand” – which is of course also why, in Lacanian terms, it is the hysteric’s discourse that produces knowledge, whereas the university discourse rather circulates knowledge. When Lacan speaks of S2, the “battery of signifiers,” that is the agent in university discourse, he is talking “about those signifiers that are already there” (Lacan 1991, p. 13). Knowledge is something “given” in university discourse – it is already there, at least in its basic definitions and frames – whereas in the hysteric’s discourse nothing is really ever taken for granted. Although the hysteric is thus the agent that pushes for new knowledge, it is not necessarily the hysteric that causes or identifies actual breakthroughs. Going back to Hegel’s dictum, maybe the hysteric’s discourse is that which pushes the quantitative increase of knowledge to its limit, whereas something else is needed to execute the qualitative change. For this to happen, something like an intervention is required, which maybe enables a certain reformulation à la “Is this what you are saying?” (for example: What if it is not just an anomaly or imprecision in our measurements that electrons seem to be able to appear as particles *and* waves at the same time? What if it is an ontological question about the “nature” of matter?). The analyst’s discourse produces master signifiers, not because it produces new knowledge, but because it enables a certain recognition of what has been produced, almost a reconciliation: “Maybe this is it?”

The university discourse in its pure form, without hysteria, without masters and without interventions, could be said to be the one in which the change from quantity to quality does not occur or does so only rarely. Instead, scientific production tends to remain within more or less established frames, where conceptual shifts are no longer necessarily the aim. This is what

I am afraid, we are beginning to see in academia. We get loads of knowledge, but nothing really happens. We could almost call this a shift from quality to quantity or to quantification without the essential ingredient of the absolute. To be precise: quantification itself is not the problem, certainly not in the natural and mathematical sciences, but not in a broader sense either. We quantify whenever we repeat certain figures, define, infer, and conclude. A literary analysis might for example consist of quantifications to a significant degree: why is this string of signifiers repeated several times in the poem; why do the sentences become shorter in this chapter; how many inclinations of this verb are possible, etc.? The problem is rather a kind of meta-quantification, if you will: a quantification of results as products that can be counted, controlled, and compared, which effectively encourages, if not even forces, scientists to remain at the level of the gradual changes that characterize the moderate state of affairs between extremities, like lukewarm water that never becomes too hot or too cold. In other words, the problem is that academics are rarely given time and incentive to pursue a track unto its ultimate conclusions. Instead, they try to stay on ground that is more likely to ensure objective outputs (a testament to this effect was given by British physicist Peter Higgs, the Nobel Prize-winning discoverer of the “Higgs boson,” who in a 2013 interview with *The Guardian* said that he would probably not qualify for a job like his own today, because he wouldn’t be considered productive enough (Aitkenhead 2013).).

One of the most important engines driving this process is the funding mechanism that has infiltrated more or less the entire academic world in recent decades. In order to obtain funding for your research, you need to apply for research donations from public or private foundations, and in such applications, you must outline the benchmarks, timelines, work packages, partial results, and plans for publications three or more years ahead of the actual research. This is not *necessarily* invalidating for the research that

will eventually be conducted, but it is nonetheless striking how elaborately a project must be rolled out along the lines of the language of the contemporary situation. In a way, this language is even doubly restricted, for the objectives of your project must also be formulated in ways that are understandable to peers that are not necessarily up to date on exactly those theories that you want to employ in your problem solving (paradoxically, researchers are therefore required to present themselves as both *more* insightful than they really are, like agents of a certain *tout-savoir* (Lacan 1991, p. 31) – being able to overview detailed elements of a comprehensive, future research process, and simultaneously making themselves more *stupid* than they really are, because they must refrain from telling everything they know, which, I think, resembles what Aleš Bunta has called artificial stupidity of the first order (Bunta 2017)). Admittedly, some of these processes in the funding procedure are to a certain extent meaningful, just like the peer review processes in most journals and the presentations and exchanges at conferences. Sharpening your point, clarifying your aims, and structuring your work are not bad ways of spending time. In a specific sense I would actually say that many of these mechanisms probably do improve the projects and papers that are produced, seen in isolation, but they also – by definition – involve a change of focus from, let us say, truth to output. A specific aspect of this problem is the endless amounts of hours spent for drafts and applications that end up not being funded – with success rates usually lingering around 5–10%. An early study from the *Economics of Education Review* showed that US academics spend more than 4 hours per week on average on grant writing (Link et al. 2008, p. 365). A study from Australia from 2013 showed that an estimated 550 years of work was put into a call from the National Health and Medicine Research Council (Herbert DL, Coveney J, Clarke P, et al. (2013, p. 2)). This particular call had a “high” success rate of 21%, but the amount of fruitless efforts is nonetheless overwhelming. In a rather concrete sense, most of

such work is unpaid labor: research foundations need unsuccessful applications to justify awarding their preferred choices with significant capital.

The “meta-quantification” is a pseudo-commodification. Academic achievements have become commodities, or more precisely (what, on an earlier occasion (Bjerre 2017), I have called) pseudo-commodities: they are counted, compared, and rewarded as if they were commodities, although we know very well that they are not. A paper in a highly rated journal is not something a scientist produces with the literal aim of selling it, and even if some journals are in fact retrieving their contents for free and selling the access rights to the eventual publications back to the institutions at high prices, this is not exactly the same like a system of production in which capitalists are extracting surplus value from poor workers that are not paid for the full value of that which they produce (the authors are not employed by the journals at all, but (generally) by universities). To a large degree, however, internally at the academic institutions, we behave *as if our products were commodities*. They are defined and assessed in quantitative terms that assign value to them – not exactly monetary value, but sometimes something that comes very close: papers are quantified in relation to national indexes, conferences are entire little enterprises of their own with an elaborate economy of funding, renting facilities, accommodation; researchers get awards or bonuses for outstanding achievements, etc. Everything has a prize, even though it is never sold. The pseudo-commodification of the university system thus has the subtle implication that we are encouraged to think of our products *like* commodities, but are also constantly reminded that they are of course not commodities, and so we should simultaneously maintain a sense of loyalty towards colleagues and attend their lectures, peer review papers for free, and be ready to help students with special needs, etc. At the end of the day, the pseudo-commodified university entails that academics are spending an increasing amount of their

time and focus for collecting points of various kinds, which will increase their chances of promotion or at least decrease the risk of being made redundant. Their being-scientist in its everyday practices (partly, but not at all only because of the funding processes described above) has become increasingly bureaucratized, and bureaucracy doesn't think; it merely administers the law of the prevailing order.

There is a one more point in bringing up Hegel's analysis of the shift from quantity to quality, namely that what he describes are events in nature. Nature itself is a system of transitions from state to state, where the gradual increase or decrease in quantity inevitably leads to changes in quality. If we apply this understanding directly to science, in a naïve, "naturalist" reading, it becomes evident that a significant effort is in fact needed if one wants to *prevent* science from transgressing its own boundaries. It is against its nature, so to say, to be polite, pragmatic, and sensible, and therefore "artificial" measures must be invented and installed to *stop scientists* from aiming at objectives beyond what is realistic and understandable. Such a naturalist reading could of course be refined quite a bit by more precise definitions of science as not simply natural occurrences like running water or ant colonies, but rather a deviation from nature, or nature's own deviation from itself (to echo Alenka Zupančič' description in *What is Sex?* (Zupančič 2017)), but the point would basically be the same: scientists must become "artificially stupid" in order to restrict themselves from approaching their work with the drive that characterizes science. (I use the phrase "artificial stupidity" here in a Kierkegaardian sense. Kierkegaard has a number of wonderful passages on stupidity. In one of them he, like Bunta, uses the formulation "artificial stupidity," by which he means the kind of stupidity that can only be acquired after elaborate studies and a stern belief in the perfectibility of the prevailing understanding. In another, he parodies the often heard, common praise of especially talented or outstanding people – "who would have known that

this little child possessed such excellence?” – to say instead, and this is a quote from Kierkegaard, “No one knew, who could have thought of it, that in this child, who was very much like others, there was such a resource of stupidity, which we now in the course of the years witness unfolding in ever richer ways” (Kierkegaard 2008, p. 332, my translation).) Overall, stupidity is the product of what we might call “pascalian measures” of everyday, academic bureaucracy in which academics gradually unlearn their incentives to be creative and persistent. How do you learn to believe in the organizational philosophy of postmodern university systems? You kneel in front of your computer, open your spreadsheet, and dutifully fill in the register of your time spent on various tasks. Universities have become enterprises with their own administrative logic of operation, which increasingly works on the level of meta-quantification, and thereby they import tendencies of what Alvesson and Spicer have called “functional stupidity” from other kinds of organizations: functional stupidity, they write, “entails a refusal to use intellectual resources outside a narrow and ‘safe’ terrain. It can provide a sense of certainty that allows organizations to function smoothly. This can save the organization and its members from the frictions provoked by doubt and reflection” (Alvesson and Spicer 2012, p. 1196).

In education, we see similar trends to those in research, although they play out somewhat differently. If research establishes new master signifiers, education generally rather engages with already established discourses and concepts. The “normal-neurotic” student is the hysteric, who bombards their professors with questions and thereby contributes to the production of knowledge, but usually not as the one who defines the “analytic intervention” itself (even when students have original ideas, they are often consciously or unconsciously stolen by their professors). However, there is also a certain passage in academic education, ideally at least, in which you pass from the position of the hysteric to something that resembles that of the analyst, i.e. from questioning, but also acquiring

the received, prevailing knowledge, to being able to identify when something new is appearing. In order to pass through this passage, you need to change your relation to the master signifier.

One way of describing this passage, although not in Lacanian terms, has been elaborated by Ray Land (who is a professor of higher education at the University of Durham in England). Land and some of his colleagues have identified a number of what they call “threshold concepts” that they find to be essential to various academic disciplines. Such concepts

can be considered akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It [the threshold concept] represents a transformed way of understanding, without which the learner cannot progress, and invariably involves a shift in the learner’s subjectivity, or sense of self. As a consequence of comprehending a threshold concept, there is a transformed internal view of subject matter, subject landscape, or even world view. (Land 2015, p. 17)

The metaphor of the threshold has something in common with the view of a passage that I mentioned: You pass to “the other side” and, upon passing, you see the world differently. Like what I described as “knowing differently” in relation to research, this transformation, according to Land, “may be sudden or protracted, with the transition to understanding often involving ‘troublesome knowledge’” (Land 2015, p. 18). Simplifying a little bit, maybe we could call “knowing differently” in relation to research its phylogenetic dimension (we all, as humanity, know differently, when some scientific breakthrough has occurred), while the student’s way of knowing differently could be called the ontogenetic dimension.

As a student, you pass a threshold as the conclusion of a lengthy engagement with difficult material. Each discipline has its own threshold concept or concepts. Land offers examples like “Evolution” in Biology, “Gravity,” or “Uncertainty in Measure-



ment” in Physics, “Precedent” in Law, and “Deconstruction” in Literature. The point being that when and only when you have really grasped these concepts are you able to understand the fundamental questions of the discipline<sup>2</sup>. Clearly, these concepts are historically and contextually variable, such that not only do they change the “learner’s subjectivity,” but they are themselves the result of a subjective effort. Nonetheless, they represent something of essential importance to academic education, I would claim: the prolonged effort to grasp something that initially transcends the horizon of one’s understanding. Threshold concepts change “the learner’s subjectivity,” because they require what one might even call a traversing of an entire field of knowledge. Grasping a threshold concept therefore also has implications for how you understand a host of other concepts and questions. After you have grasped the concept of evolution, for example, there are certain beliefs, even systems of beliefs, that you can no longer uphold.

This is all well and good. The problem with threshold concepts, however, is, as already indicated, that they demand consistent effort and time to be grasped. Students may get the gist to some extent without really “getting it,” and there is an unavoidable period of what Land describes as “liminality” connected to these efforts. You start seeing that there is something new or other that you might want to learn, and maybe you lose a little bit of confidence in your former ways of seeing things. The danger is that without the proper guidance, effort, and time spent, the student risks never exiting this state again: “Difficulty in understanding threshold concepts may leave the learner in a state of ‘liminality’, a suspended state or ‘stuck place’ in which understanding approximates to a kind of ‘mimicry’ or lack of authenticity” (Land 2015, p. 18).

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<sup>2</sup> In psychoanalysis, the threshold concept would of course be “The Unconscious,” and in philosophy, we would probably find a host of different such concepts depending on the school of thought.

As a teacher, in a state of liminality is generally where you would not like to leave your students, but it is nevertheless where more and more students risk ending up, the more their education is gutted of its extended and in-depth studies of difficult texts and problems. Except for the personal unease this might leave the student in, it also contributes to the dissemination of half-baked theories about topics they might have studied but never completely grasped (maybe this is part of the explanation of the so called “culture wars” between proponents of very strongly held, but not very well-founded positions on gender, culture, science, etc.). In the teaching process itself, and especially on exams, the state of liminality also complicates things. Like Land says, “It can be hard to know whether they have ‘got it’ or not” (Land 2015, p. 25) when assessing students who are still in the phase of liminality. They might be able to say some of the right things, but do they know their implications? Students on the other hand might feel misunderstood or even disrespected when they are not given credit for the work they have actually done and the progress they have actually made. The title of this paper, “Master, Don’t You See That I Am Learning?,” in this context represents a cry from the student that is left alone without the appropriate amount of feedback and is frustrated that they cannot really advance further, even if they are really trying their best. The product of the university discourse is the split subject.

So, who is to blame for this development? The shortest answer to that question is probably that it is *someone else*. In university discourse, as Lacan defined it, the master is hiding under the bar. He is present as absent, in the sense that he can be invoked, when there is a need of legitimization, but the master is rarely issuing direct orders. Rather, and more precisely, the master is a signifier, a referral, an explanation of the need for doing like the neutral agents in university discourse must do. Like the “boss of it all” in Lars von Trier’s film, the master in university discourse is an evasive figure that always seems to be managing things from a distance.

Teachers must adhere to the curricula, the guidelines from the study board, the administrative limitations on the time spent on actual teaching and supervision, public and political demands for the students' future employability, and, indeed, in the broadest sense, systems, such as Bologna, that seek widespread standardization through universal credits, while emphasizing explicit skills and competences. The combined pressures of these various factors are gradually turning many universities into vocational schools, in which the primary aim is to prepare students for occupations of almost any kind. Or, in the words of Geoff Boucher: "the university discourse is a discourse of interpellation, that is, of the formation of subjects to serve a social order" (Boucher 2006, p. 277). The second interpretation of my title would therefore be even worse: "Master, Don't You See That I am Learning?" would mean that the student is actually *acquiring* the skills and competences that the system is designed to teach her. In this scenario, the state of liminality is not a passage: it is the desired outcome of the student's training. She is supposed to be flexible, adaptable, and creative, and able to engage with more or less any field without aiming for any kind of fundamental change, neither of herself, nor of the context she is engaging with, let alone of course society at large<sup>3</sup>. In the worst case, we might end up with candidates that would really have been better off *without* a higher education at all.

There is just one more thing, like detective Columbo would say: the master signifier. I have been handling it more or less as if it was something that someone (the scientists) produced and others (the students) needed to grasp, but this story should be elaborated a little bit in at least a couple of respects. First of all,

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<sup>3</sup> Just one symptomatic example of this tendency – from a reliable source: In literature studies at Copenhagen University a couple of years ago, the lecturers were required to present their readings in a "tapas course," where students could read a little bit of this and a little bit of that, but without being expected to really engage profoundly with any of it. Maybe this is what we can expect from the future: The Tapas University.

we certainly do not understand master signifiers in the same way that we understand knowledge in the broad sense (S2). For example, we do not understand the concept of the unconscious in the same way that we understand that Foucault was born in 1926 or that Aristotle operates with four different concepts of causality. Indeed, master signifiers are, strictly speaking, “nonsensical signifiers with no rhyme or reason” (Fink 1995, p. 131), and it might therefore even seem appropriate to divorce the concept of the master signifier from Land’s threshold concepts altogether. Nonetheless, although the two concepts are certainly different, I think it does make sense to emphasize some of the traits of the master signifier a bit more than Land does, when talking about threshold concepts, even in his own examples. One reason is the effect of retroactivity that I have already touched upon: the master signifier is not so much a new insight or understanding as it is the acknowledgement of an insight which is already there. It adds the dot upon the i, so to say. And so, the master signifier is (merely) a name for the entire process of understanding that someone has undergone, when it can finally be concluded<sup>4</sup>. Another reason, however, is that the inscrutability of the master signifier is maybe not that far away from Land’s concept as it might at first appear. Do we really understand Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle, for example? I admit that physicists of course understand much more precise and specific things than I do in their engagement with this principle. But even they reach certain limits. Let us say that the big bang is a threshold concept in astronomy. Let us say that you are the leading scientist in the field: is it even possible that you understand all the theory’s implications? What was in

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<sup>4</sup> Mladen Dolar has explained the concept of “absolute knowledge” in Hegel’s *Phenomenology* in a similar way: the culmination of the experience of consciousness is the mere “Punkt” (in Slovene and German) or “full stop,” where it retroactively becomes clear that the truth was there all along, being produced on the way (Center for Vild Analyse, Radio24syv, originally broadcast on 5 August 2012).

the beginning? What was before the beginning? In other words, don't fundamental concepts like these necessarily contain a dimension of the inconceivable as well? Without becoming entirely Heideggerian, couldn't we say that there is only understanding, when something eludes us as well?

If there is a modest political lesson from all this, maybe it is that science does not work, and thus does not create the progress that society expects from it if it is commodified and turned into ready-made digestibles. Further, the lesson is that education urgently needs to be defended and maybe even redesigned to avoid permanent states of liminality with forced expressions of apparent understanding. Instead, it would be much more productive to educate students with a firm grasp of that which they do not understand.

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# On Ridiculous Master

*Peter Klepec*

We live in an age dominated by ridiculous masters. Or so it seems.

Such masters are found primarily in politics and are characterized by their saying and doing things that are shockingly outrageous, bizarre, and obscene from the standpoint of modern democratic and cultural standards. In other words, as elected political leaders, they say and do things in public that are appalling and divisive. It seems that the existence of similar political leaders is nothing new; history is full of tyrants, authoritarians, despots, dictators, and totalitarians. But after the defeat of Nazism and Fascism in WWII, it seemed that extremists, who will always exist in parliamentary democracies, were consensually consigned to the periphery and margin of the political sphere. The postwar period was committed to the motto: Never again! After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the possibility of this changing was announced by cases such as Berlusconi in Italy and Milošević in Serbia. Many did not take them seriously. It was, “Oh yes, that’s Italy.” Or, “But of course, it’s the Balkans!” However, around the turn of the millennium, when the SPÖ under Jörg Haider became involved in the Austrian government, a moral panic broke out in the EU. Suddenly, what had been declared forbidden, became reality. Many similar cases followed and over the last two decades we have seen the same pattern almost everywhere: to prevent “extremists” from coming to power, “democrats” of all stripes have banded together by participating in elections. Thus came the domination of the “extreme center,” as Tariq Ali called it (see Ali 2018), which

not only failed to prevent non-democrats from coming to power, but also shared responsibility for what happened next: democracies began to implode, demagogues of all kinds boomed, violent words were followed by violent actions and incidents, and the already prevailing general mood of apathy, despair, and depression was joined by the belief that everything was going down the drain. There are many reasons for this, especially the spiral of various crises (economic, social, environmental), the systemic crisis of capitalism and the power of neoliberalism, the general disillusionment with politics and democracy with increasing anti-politics, the sterility of liberalism and political correctness in various forms, etc. It was in such a context that the new breed of masters rose. They came to power first on the periphery of the West, with Victor Orbán in Hungary and the Kaczynski brothers in Poland, but then they seized power throughout the world: Erdoğan in Turkey, Duterte in the Philippines, Modi in India, Xi in China, Putin in Russia, Bolsonaro in Brazil, Vučić in Serbia, Janša in Slovenia, and so on and so forth. Finally, with Brexit and Boris Johnson in the United Kingdom and Donald Trump in the United States, “core democracies” succumbed as well. Despite the fact that now Johnson and Trump are no longer in power, we have a situation in which new, non-democratic masters can potentially emerge anywhere now. And that is something new.

The West, or more precisely, the better part of the West, the guardian of the holy grail of democratic wisdom and tradition, has long been convinced that because of its democratic tradition and institutions, it is immune to such phenomena. But now a certain line has been irreversibly crossed. What are the consequences? I cannot offer a thorough analysis of all that here. I also will not be interested here in dealing with the problem of satire, parody, laughter, or comedy that has accompanied and mocked the figure of the master since ancient times, but with the master as a public and political figure, or, more precisely, with its recent changes in the form of “ridiculous masters.” I do not claim that all politicians and masters as such are ridiculous, still



less that they are all ridiculous masters. In what follows, I will be interested in what characterizes the ridiculous masters, what their most distinctive traits are, and what conclusions emerge, perhaps somewhat unexpectedly, about the figure of the master in general. Although I have no time or space to elaborate it further, my whole intervention here is to be understood in the context of and as a comment on one specific point of Lacan. In his seventh seminar, *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan namely points out that for Hegel history is defined

in terms of a radical decline of the function of the master, a function that obviously governs all of Aristotle's thought and determines its persistence over the centuries. It is in Hegel that we find expressed an extreme devalorization of the position of the master, since Hegel turns him into the great dupe, the magnificent cuckold of historical development, given that the virtue of progress passes by way of the vanquished, which is to say, of the slave, and his work. (Lacan 1992, p. 11)

As we might expect, Lacan had no (Hegelian) illusions here, let alone did he think that the time had come to mock and ridicule masters. Premature celebration of the master's death can quickly backfire, and this is true not only in politics. The main problem is that in a certain way we cannot do without masters, even if we want to get rid of them in the end. That is why the figure of the master is one of the most controversial and contested elements of intersubjective relations, not only in politics, but also in society, science, culture, art, education, philosophy, family, sports, etc.

### *Ridiculous Masters*

What comes to the fore with the new, ridiculous masters? As Alain Badiou recently put it, with them we are witnessing the emergence of

strange persons who are very difficult to understand: they are politicians, but they are in some sense like new gangsters. This was the case with Berlusconi in Italy. Berlusconi was the first to represent the victory within the democratic system of somebody who was openly a gangster and with the same characteristics as Trump: vulgarity, sexism, complete contempt for intellectuals, and so on. And Nicolas Sarkozy was not unlike this gangster figure. (Badiou 2019, p. 43)

What Badiou highlights here is the novelty, indeed the oddity and the weirdness of the new political leaders. As public and political figures, they appear bizarre and alien; the focus is not on their political vision, but on them as personae and as characters. The prevailing logic of the general democratic consensus with its sterility and impotence even demands that such bizarre personalities become more prominent. Or, as Orbán put it in an interview (for the *Weltwoche*, 12 November 2015): “To put it bluntly: what today dominates in European public life is only European liberal blah blah about nice but second-rank issues.” (Quoted in: Lendvai 2017, p. 202) Although their individual stories differ, these new masters all use their strangeness and weirdness as a brand, or better, as a distinctive mark of their radical difference and separation from the prevailing democratic consensus, the ruling classes, and the elites. Thus, their special political status as outsiders and underdogs, which they carefully cultivate and never forget to present to the general public. The latter is just baffled, confused, perplexed, and embarrassed by them – those who are not immediately won over wonder how the success of such figures in politics is possible in the first place. Especially here and now, in democracy, after all these years since the defeat of totalitarianism and authoritarianism. Another problem is that these new masters make no secret of their authoritarianism. On the contrary, they emphasize it, they make no secret of it, just as they make no secret of the fact that they are personally convinced that they are “great historical figures.” So, everything is there quite openly, nothing is hidden: arrogance, presumption, ambition, self-absorbed grandiosity.

What would be simply ridiculous under other circumstances and in other historical moments is now taken seriously by their followers and by themselves. The champion of this is, of course, Trump, but there are others as well. As Orbán put it:

People like me would like to do something meaningful, something extraordinary. History grants me this opportunity... In the leadership position I have always been confronted with historic challenges... In a crisis you don't need governance by institutions. What is needed is somebody who tells the people that risky decisions must be taken... and who says to them follow me... Now strong national leaders are required. (Orbán quoted in: Lendvai 2017, p. 144)

What are these “people like me” all about? What are they a symptom of? For Badiou there is no doubt about Trump, he is not “a very, very dangerous guy but a symptom of a bad situation” (Badiou 2019, p. 68), and he must “be interpreted as an ugly symptom of the global situation, not only of the United States but of the world, the world in which we are living today.” (Ibid., p. 27–28) Of course, these assessments by Badiou must be seen in a certain context and framework – they were originally part of his lectures in the U.S. that took place shortly after Trump came to power, and it seems that Badiou wanted above all to keep a calm head and a rational view of the situation. With a defined political goal of how to fight Trump. But Trump is just one example among many, and the fact that there are several examples of similar policies and politicians puts things in a different light. What to make of them all? Gideon Rachman recently described them as “strongmen,” as

the rise of a new generation and type of nationalist and populist leader, linked by their contempt for liberalism and their embrace of new methods of authoritarian rule. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the strongman phenomenon has taken hold in almost all the world's major power centers: the US, China, Russia, India, the EU and Latin America. (Rachman 2022)

Many other commentators went further and immediately invoked similar phenomena from the past for a comparison. They actually seem to be familiar, known, and something already seen, and yet somehow new. Critics claim they are: the new populism, the new authoritarianism or illiberalism, the new post-fascism, the new Bonapartism, the new despotism, and so on (See Traverso 2019; Keane 2020; Mastnak 2021). Old names are put forward, and yet there is a growing conviction that here we have something that was not seen before.

What is so new and unprecedented? Perhaps we can list a few features here. Throughout history masters have been mocked and parodied. More or less openly. But in our modern times it is different, because the new masters are ridiculous by themselves alone: by their own deeds, by their own actions, by their own statements.<sup>1</sup> In this case, reality does not need to be mocked or ridiculed, it is itself already much stranger than fiction. The new masters are predominantly men, and that – especially in the times of the #MeToo movement<sup>2</sup> – also plays an important part. They

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the situation here resembles what Foucault calls “grotesque sovereignty” in his *Lectures on the Abnormal* from 1974-1975. Foucault emphasizes that “the grotesque, or, if you prefer, the ‘Ubu-esque’ is not just a term of abuse or an insulting epithet [...]. Ubu-esque terror, grotesque sovereignty, or, in starker terms, the maximization of effects of power [...] unworthiness of power, from despicable sovereignty to ridiculous authority [...] is one of the essential processes of arbitrary sovereignty.” (Foucault 2003, p. 12) Foucault at the same time says that he has “neither the strength, nor the courage, nor the time to devote this year’s course to such a theme,” but rather wants to devote his time to more pressing questions such as “What takes place in that discourse of Ubu at the heart of our judicial practice, of our penal practice? The theory, therefore, of the psychiatric-penal Ubu.” The idea of “grotesque sovereignty,” which may be intriguing, despite Foucault’s generalization and transhistorical use of the term (for a critique, see: Dolar 2021, pp. 172-174), only partially overlaps with the phenomena of “ridiculous masters.”

<sup>2</sup> An interesting counterpart to both this movement and the new masters (and conservative men in general) is a new generation of angry white women in the right-wing populist parties of the West, “mamma grizzlies” in Sarah Palin’s

present themselves as “men who made it,” as success stories, as self-made men, “men with a mission,” saviors, and at the same time, paradoxically, as outsiders and underdogs. Their adversaries are immediately described by them as “enemies of the people,” while they present themselves as opponents of the ruling elites and friends of the people, of the poor and the oppressed (if the latter have the right racial or national color, of course). Yet they themselves are not and have never been poor – if they have not just become rich through their sudden rise to power and politics, they were rich before, mostly as businessmen of various kinds. In presenting their success stories, however, they regularly “forget” where they got the money for their ventures. This part of their story is always blurred, as are their current connections to the illegal underworld and corruption. They are men of deal and transaction, everything can be negotiated and bargained away, or, as Keane puts it in this context: “[d]espotisms are systems of patron-client connections” (Keane 2020, p. 38), i.e. the new masters are bosses who in a certain sense “take care” of their loyal subjects, not some tyrants only looking out for their own benefits and power. The new masters also claim that they are “the only option in town,” (Trump publicly declared himself to be a very stable genius). Like any populist, they are the true “men of word and deed,” the true saviors – in this context, it is worth recalling Berlusconi’s claim to be “the Jesus Christ of Italian politics,” which referred to his role as savior of the nation and his martyrdom at the hands of the leftist press and judiciary (Cf. Ruth Ben Ghat 2020, p. 88). In modern societies characterized by irreconcilable differences, stalemates, and impasses of political forces, invoking the “savior Trump card” is crucial – if your name happens to be

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self-designation, who are rising to leadership positions, such as Marie Le Pen in France, Giorgia Meloni in Italy, Alice Weidel in Germany, Pia Kjaersgaard in Denmark, Siv Jensen in Norway, etc. This is also an important part of the story of the new masters in politics, which I will leave aside here, as it is a case in itself.

Trump and you have built your entire career and brand on it, you are the man. Here's where another important characteristic of the new masters comes into play: before they were major political figures, they were all already celebrities (as businessmen, politicians, real estate developers, TV personalities, actors, celebrities, mayors, well-known troublemakers, recalcitrant members of ruling parties, etc.). However, although they present themselves as protectors of "the little man" and protectors of their nations, one can find a recurring refrain in their appearances: "I, me, mine!" as the Beatles would put it.

This feature is most prominent in Donald Trump. As Christian Fuchs nicely describes it:

Hyper-individualism is Trumpology's first element. Trump is a brand. Trump is a strategy. Trump is entertainment. Trump is a spectacle. Trump is politics. Trump is the instrumentalization of everything surrounding him. Trump is the absolute commodification of the self. Donald Trump has made a career by branding and selling himself. His presidential campaign was also focused on Trump as brand, celebrity, billionaire and political leader. As a consequence, Trump likes talking in the first-person singular. "I," "me," "my" and "mine" are among his most frequently used words. Trumpology is about possessive individualism, the individual as owner. (Fuchs 2018, pp. 166–167)

Trump always underscores that "a big ego is a positive thing." His entire communication is indeed very egocentric, since he primarily talks about himself, presents himself as a boss, a leader, and an authority. This is at once Trump's best sales strategy and an important element of any authoritarianism – already Adorno argued that an authoritarian leader frequently and characteristically "indulges in loquacious statements about himself." As Fuchs showed, this is easiest on Twitter as a "me-centered medium that lives through the accumulation of followers, likes and retweets. The custom of liking and retweeting on Twitter appeals to Trump's

narcissism. Twitter enables him to enjoy his status as a celebrity, brand and political leader.” (Ibid., p. 211) The only politician in the entire world that surpasses Trump’s obsession with Twitter is probably the Slovenian politician and three times ex-head of the government Janez Janša. Both Janša and Trump have been anonymously “awarded” the unflattering title of being a “Twittler.”

However, Trump is a special case of his own, also with one other important feature, namely his emergence on the political scene – Australian anthropologist Norman Abjorensen compares it with the rise of punk music in the 1970s. Just as punk appeared against a backdrop of overly polished and sophisticated sympho- and art-rock music, Trump appeared against the backdrop of a somewhat jaded and unimaginative political establishment. There are many good arguments to discuss Trump from this point of view, especially the emphasis that it is not Trump who is the problem, but (US) politics itself, which gets lost in its dead ends, quibbles, and tinkering, always just fixing small flaws in the existing political and economic system without the will to ever radically change it. But at the same time, it is important to point out some limitations of such a perspective. Punk was primarily a youth movement, perceived as a generation without prospects and without its place in society. Trump’s supporters, on the other hand, are mostly middle-aged and older, have their best years behind them, and perceive themselves as something the establishment has forgotten and most likely even wants to get rid of. In Trump, they see someone who will listen to them and who will stand up for them. Being rich (but not in the way he boasts) and famous, he has spent years building his brand – but he would never have become who he is without his father’s support. For decades, he has been recognized in public by his figure and silhouette – the orange hair on his forehead, the pinched face, the wobbly index finger on his hand, the plump figure cleverly concealed by a carefully tailored and ever-present jacket. Add to this the image of an entrepreneur with the numerous self-help books he has written,

his interviews and public appearances, his participation in the reality show “The Apprentice” with its signature slogan “You’re fired!” – and there you have it. But the problem is the game itself, the capitalist system in which such figures not only become success stories, but are obviously needed as new leaders. Trump is neither an outsider nor a misfit in such a system, but one of its cornerstones. From the perspective of the political establishment, on the other hand, Trump is an outsider, a lone wolf playing a game that, to the horror of many, is unpredictable – at least that is how it seems from the standpoint of political rationality. Beyond that, the rationality – if there is one – driving Trump is different: it is entrepreneurial; it is about business and trade, not politics. Everything is a matter of an agreement, deal, or contract between two parties. Everything can be negotiated and bargained for. In such a context, unpredictability and shock work well, even if a handshake is needed at the end. The problem is that there is only room for one here – the one and only Trump.

Be that as it may, for the majority of the new masters we can say that they are cases of what in theory is called “narcissistic leadership.” Of course, most of them hide it and hasten to add that they want to save the people, their nation, the West, and true (Western, Christian) values and religion. But eventually they cannot hold back – they never lack superlatives about themselves. While some might be reserved about it, others loudly proclaim that they are the best, the smartest, the most capable – of all times, of course. However, this is not just a sign of their narcissism, but also a fundamental feature of any propaganda, as was convincingly shown by Victor Klemperer’s *Lingua tertii imperii* on the case of Nazi propaganda (see Klemperer 2013, pp. 221-230). Today’s new masters constantly resort to superlatives, which might turn out to be ridiculous, yet they are very effective: *Never before...* or *For the first time in the history of mankind (our nation, country) ...* Those active in Eastern Europe point out something additional – their outcry is that despite being democratic for a long time, nobody



in their countries is yet really free from the shackles and tentacles of the former socialist regimes (which have been gone for about three decades now). We are not truly free yet, is their motto. Or better, we have never been free, to paraphrase Latour. In short, exaggerations and superlatives are now, after they proved their role in modern brand selling and the marketing of celebrities and fame (or infamy), a legitimate part of political propaganda, frequently bordering on ridiculous.

Another crucial feature of the new masters is that they blatantly lie in public without scruples and without shame. Of course, their lies are not called lies, but “alternative facts” and “alternative truths.” Some have even hastened to claim that we have entered the age of “post-facts” and “post-truth.” The new masters consider themselves to be a real alternative to the mainstream media, which according to them are dominated by the elites and conspiracies. That is why their own lies are, in their view, actually liberating. In doing so, they have adopted (or rather, joined) the slogan of the neo-Nazi extremists of the early 1990s: “*Wahrheit macht frei!*” (“The truth liberates!”). But what kind of truth is that? Here the Russian language can be of help, because it contains two words for truth: *istina* and *pravda*. This distinction was already aptly used by Soviet dialectical materialism and Stalinism: while there are facts at the level of truth in the sense of *istina*, while there is scientific truth, there is also a higher level of truth in the sense of *pravda*, where the truth of the one who is right, just, and honest (i.e. our new masters, of course) is vindicated and confirmed (as right) by a higher authority: justice, history (or the Big Other in the Lacanian sense). No wonder the great Soviet daily was called *Pravda*. In any case, a similar distinction is used by our new masters, since their truth is never just “their” truth or something subjective. Their truth, however, is also not objective or “another or alternative objective truth” either. Their truth is not *istina*, because their truth is not scientific truth; recall in this context that their anti-elitism is joined by a fierce anti-intellectualism as well

as contempt for intellectuals and experts of all kinds. Their truth is rather *pravda*, truth which is “on the/their side” and which is “backed up” by a higher instance (our history, nation, people, God). That is why they are always right – even when they are not. Not only are their statements never “just statements,” they are always disclosures which reveal and expose the true state of things. Of course, all this willingness to reveal the truth (as in Andersen’s story of the emperor’s new clothes) is really deception and fetish – its goal is to cover up what is really at stake: the usurpation of power and the dismantling of the state, the subjugation of all branches of government, and the destruction of the free press, the media, and the public.

In this context, the new masters often speak of (fallen off) masks, of unmasking and of false designations. Everything that confronts them is exposed as false, as something that is only pretended and therefore misnamed. That is why they use the adjective “so-called” – everything is fake, there are “so-called experts,” the “so-called public,” “so-called judges,” etc. And here we can introduce another well-known tool of Stalinism – even if their opponents are not aware of it, they are puppets (of somebody, of a conspiracy which differs from case to case: for Orbán this is George Soros, for Erdoğan it is either Gülen or the PKK, for Vučić “foreign forces” such as Croats, Albanians, or the CIA, etc.). In other words, their opponents are “objectively” just marionettes of forces that remain in the background (i.e. conspiracies). Even if something is true or sincere, it is “objectively in the service of the enemy,” the enemy of the people. Who decides what is true, on both the verbal and factual levels, is obvious – the new masters, of course. They are masters of language, or, to use Trump’s phrase, they have the best words (“I know words. I have the best words.”)

But what is obvious to them might not be evident to everyone. That is why they have to fight for their truth. They are fighters, crusaders, men with a mission. This is only possible if they subjugate all the media, even if they first start and stick with new

social media, which always allow them to spread their messages live and without intermediaries. Being without an intermediary, editor, or censor is the key. Because their mighty weapon is the use of obscene, scandalous, abusive, and violent language. They deliberately utter inappropriate and scandalous statements, statements that no one else would have dared to make publicly, statements that are full of vulgarities, obscenities, and bizarreries. Whether or not this is a preconceived calculation, it has its effect: it attracts attention (bad publicity is better than none at all), but it also gives the impression of someone who fearlessly and uncompromisingly breaks taboos and the rule of the (cultural, political, national, global) elites. In reality, none of their acts are revolutionary, even if their intention is to bring about a certain overthrow – like Erdoğan bringing back the Muslim religion after it was expelled from the Turkish secular state; or those who want to re-Catholicize the Polish, Hungarian, or Slovenian nations; or those that stand up for supremacist (“true,” male, white, Christian (Catholic or Orthodox), European) values; or those that introduce chauvinism under the guise of patriotism, such as Modi in India or Vučić in Serbia. The main purpose is to trigger strong emotions and affects. To divide and “to set the house on fire.” After that, they, the pyromaniacs, can perversely pretend to be the only true firefighters and peacemakers. Or, as Badiou puts it:

For these new political figures, the aim of language is no longer to explain anything or to defend a point of view in an articulate manner. Its aim is to produce affects, which are used to create a fleetingly powerful unity, largely artificial but capable of being exploited in the moment. In Trump, we find once again the deliberate vulgarity, the pathological relation to women, and the calculated exercise of the right to say publicly things that are unacceptable to a large portion of humanity today that we also see in Hungary with Orbán, in India, or in the Philippines, as well as in Poland or in Erdoğan’s Turkey. (Badiou 2019, pp. 13-14)

Politically, the new masters have turned out to be conservatives and supporters of the extreme right despite presenting themselves as being at the (political) center. Democratic consensus and political correctness are actually their perfect partner here – they present themselves as “democrats” and “non-extremists,” and at the same time as an alternative to the already existing ones. This duality, this sitting on two chairs, is not accidental. Even when they are in power, they complain that they have no real power and that the people must join their fight against those who really have power, that is, against the elites, the conspiracy. Even when they are in power, they pretend to be in opposition – their great enemy is actually the State, which they are dismantling and turning into a state of control and war. So, their alternative is actually “fake” – they do not want to present any real alternative, let alone an alternative to capitalism or power relations; they only want to dominate and exploit them. Instead of class warfare, they foment identity and culture wars; the old mantra of “*divide et impera*” applies here very well. They usually acquire their wealth in semi-legal or illegal ways, and once in power, corruption and the mafia can breathe freely, even if they sometimes play the card of fighting the latter to consolidate their own power. They contribute to the implosion of the existing system, even if they always and everywhere try to keep order. Their message is: we need *more (of our kind of) order*. This means following number one, the “commander,” i.e. “me,” “the boss of all.” They want to be leaders (even if many are not called leaders, as Mussolini was called “Il Duce,” Hitler “the Führer,” and Franco “El Caudillo”). However, it is interesting to note that many times their names have meaning, which can be exploited for their own purposes such as Trump (trump) or Johnson (penis in the vernacular). The word “trump” is not only a wild card in some card games, but ironically also means “a helpful or admirable person,” while “to trump” someone means “to surpass something by saying or doing something better.” More generally, the word “trump” can refer

to any resource that gives one a distinct advantage. Therefore, it is not so far-fetched when supporters of Trump claim: “Donald Trump is our secret weapon.” However, there are no “Trumpists” – as Moisés Naím mentions in his recent book *The Revenge of Power* (2022), the name of a leader is frequently used to name his followers:

Beppe Grillo’s followers are Grillini, Chávez’s are Chavistas. Trump’s supporters don’t adopt his name as such, but they identify themselves entirely with his slogan, to the point of transforming ‘MAGA’ from an acronym to a collective noun. Salvini’s fans identify him with a kind of honorific title, ‘Il Capitano’ (The Captain), while Berlusconi’s call him ‘Il Cavaliere’ (The Knight), and Chávez’s supporters called him ‘El Comandante’ (The Commander). (Naím 2022, p. 67)

We should see in these obsessions testimony of the ridiculous fact that new masters desperately want to be perceived and understood as Leaders. This is their “true calling” and there never was any doubt that one day they would be at the top or in power. John Keane’s anecdotal and multi-layered account of Orbán when he was just a chairman of the Fidesz political party and once spent the night at his friend’s house, is in this context quite revealing:

Next morning, to [Orbán’s] surprise, the lawyer’s wife began cleaning his shoes. “What are you doing, Mrs. Irenke?,” he asked, to which she answered, “I’m cleaning your shoes so that I can one day say: I cleaned the shoes of Hungary’s prime minister!” The true man of the people responded by fetching Mrs. Irenke’s shoes and set about cleaning them. “What are you doing?” she asked in surprise. “I’m cleaning your shoes,” Orbán replied, “so that you can say one day: Hungary’s prime minister cleaned my shoes.” (Keane 2020, p. 93)

The surmise that Orbán will be Hungary’s prime minister one day is unshatterable in both participant’s views. However, Orbán

himself does not forget to add that he will not do it out of his lust for power, but because he “only wants to serve you, the people.” That is why in the text Keane refers to him as “the true man of the people.” If this anecdote testifies to anything, it is that the new masters are by no means rigid, stupid, or uncreative. It also proves that the spontaneous ideology that fascist, proto-fascist, or post-fascist leaders (and their followers) can be recognized by their humorlessness or rigid nature is completely wrong. The new ridiculous masters are very “human,” they like humor and they like to laugh – “as Slavoj Žižek and others have tirelessly pointed out, one of the great liberal myths about totalitarianism [is] that it can’t take a joke.” (Mazzarella in: Mazzarella, Santner, Schuster 2020, p. 122) It is true, though, that the jokes and humor of the new masters are mainly at the expense of their adversaries. In his book, Fuchs cites many examples of how Trump insults, demeans, and ridicules his opponents, e.g. he calls them “Little Michael Bloomberg,” the “clown Chuck Schumer,” “Pocahontas aka Elizabeth Warren,” “disgusting (check out sex tape and past) Alicia M,” “#failing@ nytimes,” “failing @CNN,” “Crooked Hillary.”, etc. (Cf. Fuchs 2018, p. 230 and in more detail pp. 216-236) Ridiculous masters do not consider themselves to be ridiculous, they hate being ridiculed themselves, but they love to ridicule, humiliate, hurt, and insult others. They just cannot help it and have to “sting” and “stab” their opponents – never in person, but always “from a distance,” preferably via Twitter (Janša, for example, was condemned in court for his remark about the journalists of the Slovenian public television RTV Slovenia as “press-titutes”). Whenever they can, they will. And why? Because they enjoy it, of course. But also because they really enjoy being the constant focus of public and national attention. And it is really ridiculous, if anything, that obsession makes them ridiculous masters.

*Masters, Ridiculous: A Terminological Detour*

These, then, are some basic characteristics of the new, ridiculous masters. What are their consequences for our contemporary societies and for the figure of the master himself? Can a detour through the terminology of the words “master” and “ridiculous” help us understand and show what is at stake here?

In trying to clarify the word “master” terminologically, we will take a short walk in four steps – the number itself is contingent and much could/should be added. The first step is to attempt to circumscribe our term through different languages. The English word master has a double origin: it comes from the Latin *dominus*: master, owner, and lord; and from *herus*: master of the house and lord. In the Middle Ages, *dominus* became a feudal title: lord, which is equivalent to *seigneur* in French and *Herr* in German. However, the equivalence, as we will see, is only conditional. While the French *seigneur* somehow equates with a feudal lord (and while *Le Seigneur*, the Lord, God, was above all), *seigneurie* (a large piece of land) was conferred by the governor. *Seigneurs*, however, were also of a different kind, they were namely not only nobles, but also merchants and religious dignitaries who had received a fief from the French crown with all the attendant rights to person and property. So, there were seigneurs and “seigneurs,” those who “deserved it” (why, really?) and those who did not. In short, not all seigneurs were on the same level and this also holds in more general terms for masters. If we take the German word for master, *Herr*, things are even more complicated.<sup>3</sup> The term cannot be unambiguously translated back into English because it means not only “master” but also “lord,” “patron,” and “owner.” Moreover, the word *Herr* affirms the autonomous status of a free subject (to be one’s own master, “*sein eigener Herr sein*”); one is

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<sup>3</sup> I am relying here partly on the article “Herrschaft” written by Marc de Launay in *Dictionary of Untranslatables* (See Cassin 2015, pp. 433–436).

the master of both oneself and of one's emotions (to be the master of one's senses, "*Herr seiner Sinne sein*") and of a situation in which one finds oneself (to be master of the situation, "*Herr der Lage sein*"). It should be noted that in German the word *Meister* is preferred here instead of the word *Herr*, since one of its meanings refers to someone who is competent, who knows what he is saying, and who has something to say (see: Stoellger 2022, pp. 224-225). In Old German, *Herr* is an adjective meaning "gray-haired," "worthy," and was used to denote the dignity of one who, being old, is morally honorable and wise. This referred to the authority that the father of the family, as head of the clan, exercised over his own family and servants, as well as the ruler of his lands. Later, the word *Herr* became generalized in a sense and came to refer to someone we call a gentleman; in conversation it still means to address someone as "sir," "gentleman," "man." Its derivative, the word *Herrschaft*, which in English corresponds to the terms "mastery," "dominion," "power," "command," "authority," "lordship," remains notoriously slippery. For example, English translators of Max Weber's work sometimes render it as "authority" and sometimes as "domination"; another example are Hegel's terms "*Herrschaft*" and "*Knechtschacht*" from the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: some translate them as "master/slave," others as "lord/bondsman."

So, what has this first step shown us? That the function of a master is internally split and refers to different meanings. This becomes even clearer with the second step. Indeed, there are not only different kinds of masters (ruler, lord, sovereign, boss, chief, leader, director, patron, manager, etc.), but also different purposes of the master: the master not only dominates or subdues, but in some cases also empowers, helps one to become one's own master. Let us look at the French word *maître*: it refers to master in the above senses (i.e. someone who rules, governs, controls) and adds some other commanding functions (*maître* can be *capitaine*, *principal*, *directeur*, *patron*, *commandant*). In



this sense, *maître* can be someone who is in charge or in control of something (*maître de*): “*maître d’hôtel*” is someone who is the “master of the house” (who runs a hotel or restaurant, being the lead or head waiter, or who is responsible for putting food on the table, etc.). In addition to that, *maître* can refer to a teacher (who can also have different roles, such as *professeur*, *instituteur*, *maîtresse*, or *éducateur*). It can also refer to a university degree (master) or to a title for a function one performs in the university process (*maître de conférences*, lecturer, or associate professor). The essential point here is that the master, in his role as teacher, can also be someone who empowers us and thus helps us achieve autonomy. Someone who, like Wittgenstein’s proverbial ladder, can be thrown away in the end.

But here there are important further variations, and this we learn with the third step. As Peter Sloterdijk underscores in his work *You Have to Change Your Life*, originally published in 2009, there are many different kinds of masters in terms of personal growth and personal will to change; there are namely different kinds of personal teachers, trainers, and leaders. Sloterdijk lists no less than ten of them (See Sloterdijk 2013, pp. 271–297). The first five of these are associated with spiritual practices and progress along the path of thought – there is the guru, the Buddhist master, the apostle, the abbot, and the philosopher. Each of them works in a different way, in a different cultural, religious, and/or spiritual context and in a different relationship with his disciples or students, and each learning process ends differently, especially as regards the master-teacher relationship. The second five concern the status of knowledge and also a different way of addressing the audience or addressees, which Sloterdijk names here as a coach of athletes, a master craftsman, an academic professor, a secular teacher, and an Enlightenment writer. It would be interesting to follow Sloterdijk’s analysis in detail and perhaps build on it. But that is not our goal here; we just want to show that a master can address his students, followers, or supporters in different ways.

He can empower them in different ways, but he can also make them dependent on him in different ways. It is certainly interesting that Sloterdijk does not list more figures here, such as a doctor, a psychiatrist, or a psychoanalyst, but the reasons for this would take us too far afield. What is important from our point of view is that the functions of the master can really have different purposes, aims, goals, and results.

Our next and last step problematizes things right from here. In other words, with it all the previous steps are measured from the perspective of the logic inherent in a master: the place he occupies as an element that fills that place. The master is nothing but an interplay between the place and the elements that fill it. Here, everything revolves around the conditions of “being someone’s master” and its consequences: “being someone’s master” can only take place if one is – to state this with reference to structuralism – in a certain place. As Marx writes in footnote 22 of the first chapter in his *Capital Volume 1*:

Such expressions of relations in general, called by Hegel reflex categories, form a very curious class. For instance, one man is king only because other men stand in the relation of subjects to him. They, on the contrary, imagine that they are subjects because he is king. (Marx 1995, p. 55)

Although the “occult quality” of “being a master” seems to be “inherent” in someone, it is rather a quality projected onto someone by others. No one can simply declare himself to be an authority or a master, but others make him so. Or, in other words, someone is a master not only because of the place he occupies (in the structure, the organization, the institution, the intersubjective relations), but it takes something else, a certain excess, a surplus – one “has it”; one must have “charisma,” as some put it. The master is made a master by his subjects or subordinates, and this paradoxically provokes a constant hysterization on the part of the master: “Do I still/really have something special about me?” In

other words, there is no necessity in becoming and remaining a master. Of course, coercion, power, and violence play a role here, but not for long and not forever. The precarious thing about the master is the fact that he depends on his subjects, on their love and transference. Any master is a reflexive category – if his subjects lose “faith” in him, the show is over. The problem is that in love and transference, the *objet petit a* – that special, ridiculous object of Lacan’s that cannot be mastered, controlled, or dominated – plays the crucial role. In this sense, the topography of the master is, as Lacan would put it, “between the two walls of the impossible” (Lacan 1998, p. 167). The figure of the master as such involves “tarrying with the impossible,” to paraphrase Hegel.

The above-mentioned interplay between a place and the elements filling it provides a nice starting point for the treatment of the term “ridiculous.” The latter namely highlights precisely the gap between them. In other words, the adjective “ridiculous” suggests that something or someone is “out of place,” “odd,” “excessive,” “in the wrong place.” In this sense, the ridiculous master is someone who is in the wrong place, in a place where he should not be, or rather, someone who functions excessively and incorrectly in the place where he is. This gap provokes laughter, which is otherwise listed by many English dictionaries as the main meaning of the term. According to a typical dictionary, the verb “to ridicule” means: to make fun of, mock, deride someone.

However, the most useful definition for our purposes comes from Alexi Kukuljevic:

As its etymology attests, from the Latin *ridiculosus*, the ridiculous is bound up with the laughable. Manifest in that which is out of place, the peculiar, the odd, the incongruous, the awkward, and all that lacks conformity, in the malformed or the deformed, the non-sensical and the absurd, that which is ridiculous suffers from an often sudden depreciation, a loss of value, or a lack in logical form, as in *reductio ad ridiculum*. Laying bare a void in the structural order of things or a deformation of an object’s appearance, the ridiculous

punctuates the reduction to nothing of something with a burst of laughter, that uneasy discharge that signals that something is awry. (Kukuljevic 2017, p. 52)

The above explanation seems particularly appropriate when one considers the phrase “ridiculous masters.” Indeed, at first glance it seems an oxymoron to speak of “ridiculous masters.” In a way, the expression presupposes not only that the masters are idiots or morons, but also that they are so incredible that they absurdly contradict reason, common sense, and all experience. One simply does not know whether to laugh at them or burst into tears. As Kukuljevic states later in the work cited above, “the ridiculous appears as a discrepancy between the form of an appearance and its manner.” This once again underscores our intention to understand “ridiculous” here as “extremely silly or unreasonable,” “absurd.” Similarly, in Slovenian you can call someone ridiculous or absurdly beautiful, as in the pop song by Voranc Boh “*Absurdno lepa.*”

The ridiculous is something that is so silly and foolish that it can be made fun of. It is worth noting that some common synonyms for ridiculous include funny, comical, laughable, and ludicrous, and suggest extreme absurdity, stupidity, or contemptibility. Perhaps we should add here another dimension of the term “ridiculous.” As a colloquial term, ridiculous in fact means “unbelievable or amazing” and can refer to things that are incredibly good or incredibly bad. Here we come to an important dimension that is not usually emphasized – the ridiculous is essentially ambivalent. It can mean the best or the worst, or even both at the same time: the meeting of opposites, when the highest and the lowest coincide. No wonder the most ridiculous of all modern state leaders seems to be Trump – with him the highest and the lowest coincide. He is someone so full of ... what? Shit and gold, his incredibly ridiculous self-aggrandizement coincides with the lowest of the low. By the way, this is already indicated by his name. Besides the meaning of the name “Trump” already mentioned

above, there are some other meanings that should be mentioned. As David Cay Johnson points out, there is “the bridge player’s definition of trump: a winning play by a card that outranks all others.” However, there are other definitions of “trump,” including “a thing of small value, a trifle” and “to deceive or cheat,” as well as “to blow or sound a trumpet.” As a verb, “trump” means “to devise in an unscrupulous way” and “to forge, fabricate, or invent” as in “trumped up charges.” (Cay Johnson 2016, p. 33) So it’s no coincidence that comedian John Oliver created the satirical name “Donald Drumpf” on the HBO show *Last Week Tonight* by taking a cue from the history of family names: “[...] it turns out the name ‘Trump’ was not always his family’s name. One biographer found that a prescient ancestor had changed it from – and this is true – ‘Drumpf’. [...] And Drumpf is much less magical. It is the sound produced when a morbidly obese pigeon flies into the window in a foreclosed Old Navy. Drumpf!” (Quoted in: Fuchs 2018, p. 255) Therefore, we can paraphrase Hegel’s famous saying, “Spirit is bone” to, “Spirit is Trump.” To make a long story short: It is no accident that with the ridiculous masters we get the oscillation between shit and treasure that is so characteristic of Lacan’s *objet petit a*.

### *Master and Parallax*

This ambivalence is an important feature of “ridiculous masters,” since they appear ridiculous for two opposing reasons: either they seem to be unchallenged, absolute masters reviving ancient forms of despotism, or they seem to fail completely in doing so. The paradox, then, is that today’s new masters are ridiculous for two completely opposite reasons: either because they are in fact tyrants and despots (and strictly speaking no longer masters), or because they are in fact poor substitutes for masters and are not yet real masters but clowns, buffoons, idiots (nincompoops, as Roger Waters recently put it). The figure of the contemporary

master is thus split – into the mafia despot who rules with a hard hand (Xi, Putin, Lukashenko, Erdoğan, Orbán, Modi, Janša, Vučić) and the proto-fascist clown (Berlusconi, Trump, Johnson, Bolsonaro, but also Janša and Vučić). As we can see, some are listed in both groups, they are not all just strongmen, but even if they are, they also seem ridiculous. There's more to this story of overlapping, but we simply do not have the space to discuss it here – our main point is that through the prism of the ridiculous we get a perfect example of what Slavoj Žižek defines as a “parallax gap,” the confrontation of two irreconcilable perspectives between which no neutral common ground is possible. (See: Žižek 2006, p. 4) For Žižek, the minimal parallax constellation is in fact a framework with or without which we can view things. This leads to the conclusion that there is no “neutral” reality within which gaps occur between two processes, within which frames isolate areas of phenomena. Every field of “reality” (every “world”) is always already framed, seen through an invisible frame:

The parallax is not symmetrical, composed of two incompatible perspectives on the same X: there is an irreducible asymmetry between the two perspectives, a minimal reflexive twist. We do not have two perspectives, we have a perspective and what eludes it, and the other perspective fills in this void of what we could not see from the first perspective. (Žižek 2006, p. 29)

Two important consequences follow from this. The first concerns the nature of the ridiculous masters, that is, it explains why they are so divisive and polarizing: either one is for them or against them. The second consequence, however, is more important because it reminds us that what we have tried to describe as something special and particular, namely ridiculous masters, also concerns the genus itself, the species itself, the masters themselves. It will be seen that, on the one hand, ridiculous masters are not so extraordinary as to be masters, and, on the other hand, that ordinary masters themselves are much more extraordinary than

we usually imagine. In other words, they are connected to the ridiculous, in Hegelian terms, the genus encounters itself as a species in the particular case it is reflected in. Ridiculous masters, then, remind us of the ridiculousness of the master himself. Indeed, the reference to parallax implies that ridiculous masters only seem to contradict the “normal” or “usual” function of the master. In other words, the very designation ridiculous master(s) tries to imply that they are different from masters in the usual or normal sense. But what are they, i.e. what is a “true,” “real,” “ordinary” master at all?

Compared to a ridiculous master, a master would be someone who is not ridiculous. Of course. A true or real master is neither an idiot nor a moron; he is to be respected, loved, revered. Sometimes he may be funny, sometimes he may be feared, but behind his back, behind the public scene, he might be mocked and ridiculed, but a true master is never a ridiculous public figure. That is what we assume when we speak of a master. Of a normal or usual one. We expect a master to be a (true, real) master. What does Lacan teach us in this regard? In his Seminar XVII Lacan reduces the master to a sign, but this sign is crucial because it makes things work:

In the master’s discourse, for instance, it is effectively impossible that there be a master who makes the entire world function. Getting people to work is even more tiring, if one really has to do it, than working oneself. The master never does it. He gives a sign, the master signifier, and everybody jumps. That’s where you have to start, which is, in effect, completely impossible. It’s tangible every day. (Lacan 2007, p. 174)

Lacan continues:

A real master, as in general we used to see until the recent era, and this is seen less and less, doesn’t desire to know anything at all – he desires that things work. And why would he want to know? There are more amusing things than that. (Ibid., p. 24)

The master, and this is a constant in Lacan's work, only wants to see that "the work goes on," that "the show goes on," that production in the sense of the material production of goods, services, and commodities never stops:

What is Alexander's proclamation when he arrived in Persepolis or Hitler's when he arrived in Paris? The preamble isn't important: "I have come to liberate you from this or that." The essential point is "Carry on working. Work must go on." (Lacan 1992, p. 315)

Leaving aside the question of why Lacan singles out these two individuals in particular, and any other questions that might arise therefrom, we should perhaps point out something obvious but, to our knowledge, not sufficiently problematized: that he takes two examples from the past, and that this is a common phenomenon when it comes to masters. We have already mentioned above that the phenomenon of new masters is attempted to be explained by "old names." We should see in this something structurally necessary, something that on the one hand is revealed, but on the other hand is concealed by the expression "ridiculous masters." In fact, it is quite common that when looking for a suitable figure of the master in the present, one spontaneously suspects that such figures do not exist today, and one reaches into the past. It is a habit to say that such figures are no longer made. What is this whole process of relating and comparing about? Here it is helpful to refer to a well-known first assertion about authority by Hannah Arendt from her text "What is Authority?":

In order to avoid misunderstanding, it might have been wiser to ask in the title: What *was* and not what is authority? For it is my contention that we are tempted and entitled to raise this question because authority has vanished from the modern world. (Arendt 1961, p. 91)

Arendt somehow points us in the right direction: it seems that the ultimate zero point of any authority (and thus of a master)



is in fact built from the beginning on a loss, an impossibility – masters *were*. And nostalgia: once upon a time, sometime in the past ... there was authority, there were (true, real) masters. The criterion of what a (normal, usual) master is and what he should be is necessarily immersed in the mythical mist of the past. In other words: new masters, precisely because they are new, are measured by the standards of the past (and of past masters). New masters are used, invoked, in the name of present corruption and disorder – their starting point is “the supposition that there once was an order, which we missed, so now we live in a time that is already corrupt. There once was a proiper past, but the present is diminished, degraded, reduced, decayed in relation to it; it has always begun with degradation.” (Dolar 2020, p. 33) New masters either promise to finally restore the glory of the past (masters) and renew the figure of the master, or they fail to do so and are nothing more than a caricature, a farce, a burlesque, a travesty, a ridiculousness, a parody, etc. Hence this reference to something that does not exist now or no longer exists, but which existed in the past.

We will come back to this, and perhaps three remarks are in order to avoid possible misunderstandings. First, we should not conflate this with procedures that are based on a myth or myth of origin. Let us recall here Freud’s thesis (from *Totem and Taboo*, 1913) that civilization as such is based on the murder of the primordial father, the *Urvater*. Freud departs from a loss that never was and he is not alone in that; recall modern theories of the social, from Hobbes and Rousseau to Kant and Hegel, who have attempted to describe the conditions for the emergence of society and social order by invoking a myth of origin (Hobbes’s or Rousseau’s state of nature, Hegel’s struggle between master and slave, etc.): “Once upon a time, there was an X.”

Of course, all this has certain consequences, but they are different from what actually happened in history – and to which, of course, we ourselves do not want to return. Or rather, we fear

that it might return. That “there were masters” in the past immediately reminds us that they were not “normal” masters who fit into democracy, but brutal, cruel masters of the past who ruled with coercion and violence. We do not want them to return, we do not want the return of a Freudian version of the primordial father/master, the return of an authoritarian, totalitarian master. We prefer “a normal master.” But is there one?

We can never safely play the game of normality with the master as such. As Paul Valéry once said, every ruler or master knows how fragile the authority of rulers is – except for his own. (Quoted in: Sennett 1980, p. 141) Every master believes he is an exception. Each offers himself as a remedy for the precariousness and fundamental impossibility of masters as such. Each has the illusion that he will be the exception, the only one – the One. In other words, there is no middle ground, no balance, no Aristotelian “golden mean” in dealing with a master – the master as such is accompanied by a certain exaggeration, excess. The master is inseparable from it, more than that, it is the exaggeration that is exemplified, embodied, incarnated. The master exaggerates, which means that normality and excess are not to be considered as two opposites, but as two sides of the same coin. Any master is about fame, glory, mana, charisma. Everything depends on how a master implements it, how he relates to it, how he deals with it – in short, how he manages it, to use Santner’s term of mana-gerism (See Santner: Mazzarella, Santner, Schuster 2020, especially pp. 34, 41–43, 57, 70).

The problem, again, is that this excess and this surplus that we encounter in every master are dual in nature, or rather, divided between two poles, a minus (-1) and a plus (+1). The space between these two poles is occupied by the *objet petit a*, the ridiculous object that plays the main role here. And this perhaps has an important consequence: every master is indistinguishable from ridiculousness. This is our most important point in this context: the master is ridiculous or is not a master. And this point

also has many sides and consequences. Not only that the master as such is always ridiculous in one way or another, but that it is ridiculous that there are (still) masters at all. And that it is always ridiculous that someone is a master. But the consequences of the above point actually go in two directions at once: that there will always be masters, and at the same time that (maybe) there are no more (true, real) masters. At least not here and now.

We should connect all this – and this is our third remark – with the above-mentioned minus (-1), with the complaint about the loss of masters, which actually consists of reference to masters of the past, to past masters. This reference is a kind of constant when speaking about masters. And it implies that there is no reference to masters without reference to other masters. However, when we emphasize that any talk of masters is actually a reference, we should not forget that this reference is also a reference to someone who really believed in it, i. e. who truly believed in masters. It is a reference to a naive believer (in masters), a reference that is outsourced, so to speak (to the past, to another place). Benjamin Noys developed the thesis that authority is always outsourced (See: Noys 2014). But this outsourcing of authority, and the need for it, needs to be defined more precisely. I propose to use here the concept of “illusions without owners” elaborated by Robert Pfaller (See: Pfaller 2014): belief or illusion cannot be directly referred to itself; we always need a hypothesis about a naive believer who sincerely and naively believes that we ourselves could also believe as well (via this inexistent intermediary). This assumption of a naive believer is the basis of every authority and every master, which is also why Arendt outsources it – into the past. Herein lies another answer why masters are considered ridiculous today: we no longer believe in naive believers. We cannot believe that anyone, even a hypothetical naive believer, can believe or even has believed in a master. To believe that someone can blindly and naively believe in a master is simply considered ridiculous. Hence, ridiculous masters.

Today no one wants to be deceived, duped. But the paradox is that people err today more than ever. As Lacan warned long ago: “*Les non-dupes errent.*” (“The unduped wander/are mistaken.”) If you do not want to be cheated/duped, you are really screwed, because you are going to be cheated/duped big time. Take the wild proliferation of conspiracy theories lately – many interpreters have stressed that people fall for them because everything is much easier when you do that, “suddenly everything becomes clear.” But this is “clear” precisely because it is a fantasy – according to Lacan, “we only understand our fantasies,” so that is why here “everything is clear.” Furthermore, if you believe in conspiracies, you also belong to a group of believers – suddenly you have a bunch of naive believers in front of you. The proof being in the form of believers who believe in hidden masters (conspiracy) and believers who believe in a master who fights these masters. Maybe I can be wrong, but they are not, they sincerely and truly believe in it – why should not I? Something incredible, almost impossible, which otherwise would be considered ridiculous, is being incarnated (virtually or physically). Maybe this reference is a revelation in another sense: not only that the master as such is always a reference, but that this works also in relation to those who are behind a plot or conspiracy. Often, perhaps even in most cases, the failure or success of (previous, past, other) masters is the starting point for a new master – the new master promises to restore order where there were chaos, disorder, confusion, stagnation, blockage, and impotence. Where there was chaos, a master shall become (paraphrasing Freud’s famous dictum: *Wo Chaos war, soll Herr werden*). As we see, the master as such is constantly moving in a strange time and place: he is never really here and yet he is always there.

A consequence of this is that the impossibility associated with the master has its flip side – we never get rid of the master. The paradox of the master is that as a function it is at the same time very fragile, precarious, and yet indestructible. We do away with

one master after another, and yet the figure of the master itself seems to be indestructible – that is why Mladen Dolar earlier at the conference called the master “undead.” The master is a bone in the throat of *Aufhebung* (if this pun on the account of the organizers of the conference is permitted<sup>4</sup>). The master always sneaks up as the odd man out (to use the title of a book by Alenka Zupančič) – and he is, by definition, ridiculous. So why are the new ridiculous masters of today only frowned upon, while those who eagerly support them are either ridiculed or pitied? One thing is namely certain: if there is anything ridiculous here, it is definitely the premature celebration of the end of the figure of the master. Ridiculous masters are simply a new form of the master figure, and ways must be found to confront and combat them, to overcome them, to get rid of them.

In general, it is not easy to get rid of masters. Freud famously declared mastery to be one of the three impossible professions, along with education and psychoanalysis. However, upon closer examination of his statement (from the seventh chapter of his *Analysis Terminable and Interminable*, 1937), one finds that things are rather tricky for Freud. He wants to emphasize the indeterminate status of the three professions, and this is reflected in his words for them (“*Analysieren, Erziehen, Regieren*”), which are actually verbs used as nouns to emphasize their indeterminate status and activity. Moreover, his own term for mastery, *Regieren*, refers to reigning, governing, or ruling over something. Thus, it

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<sup>4</sup> This paper is a thoroughly revised talk delivered at the conference “The Master/s: On the Contemporary Structures of Power” organized by the *Aufhebung* Association in Cankarjev dom, Ljubljana, 22-24 September 2022. Dolar’s talk was entitled “The Master is Undead.” I would like to take this opportunity to thank the organizers again for inviting me and preparing a great event. I would also like to thank Eric Santner, Aaron Schuster, Arthur Bradley, Gregor Moder, Andrew Cole, Henrik Jøkker Bjerre, Yuval Kremitzer, Frances Restuccia, and Alenka Zupančič for their questions following my talk, which helped me to further develop my arguments, and Dean de Vos for polishing up my English.

does not apply to every form of domination and mastery. The German term, while in principle covering all forms of governing, refers more to governing by consensus, reason, and insight, and is more on the side of democratic governing or enlightened absolutist governing, as opposed to *Herrschen*, where the emphasis is more on power and force. Furthermore, the word “impossible” is actually in quotation marks in Freud’s text, perhaps because it is constantly shifting and reappearing in new forms. For this reason, the results of the three professions are without a proper *Abschluss* (or final closure, conclusion, graduation, or certificate). The work is never done in these professions, which are not actually professions in the usual or ordinary sense of the word. They are jobs where you are well paid for what you do, but they are not ordinary work; they also require certain personal skills and abilities that are not only tricks of the trade, but strictly speaking cannot be learned – either you have them or you do not. Thus, these professions are somewhere between business and art, and they also require a certain vocation and calling – after all, they are a profession, *Beruf* (a calling and call: *Ruf, rufen*). Although lumped together by Freud, they all work and function in very different ways. But the problem is that they still work. Somehow. And last but not least, as Aaron Schuster recently noted, for Freud all three of these impossible professions are somehow, paradoxically,

fundamentally engaged in promoting autonomy. They involve a use of authority that is meant to undermine the grip of external authorities and lead beyond them, to support the subject’s exercise of his own reason. However, and this is the crucial point, if the process is short-circuited and an egalitarian relation directly asserted, the result is often an even more severe hierarchy and despotism. Authority is necessary, but it must also be analyzed, worked through. The impossible professions can neither dispense with authority nor totally align themselves with it; they are neither pro- nor anti-authoritarian. They rather require a specific use of authority, one that is capable of deconstructing itself without pretending that authority can disappear. (Schuster 2017, p. 94)

So, what does all this talk about masters and especially ridiculous masters teach us? At least a few things. That there is nothing self-evident, permanent, or certain about the function of the master. Therefore, one must always expect surprises, strange coincidences, and unexpected creations that can never be fully predicted, planned, controlled, or calculated. Yes, it is possible to get rid of the master, but it is also difficult and time-consuming. And it is never something permanent or irreversible. In other words, there is no guarantee that we will not “fall for the master’s trick” again. Or for the trick of another master. Just as there is no guarantee that we will not fall for the same trick over and over again. Although some may never fall for such a trick.

In short, what seems obvious and natural to one master may seem absurd or ridiculous to another. Of course, just because something seems ridiculous or absurd does not mean that we have nothing to do with it and consider our supposed distance as a sign of liberation from it – there is always the unconscious, which manifests itself often through the absurd and ridiculous. In other words, a master can be ridiculous, but that does not mean that he is no longer a master. Freud teaches us that with the master there is always comedy and confusion, which is why the master and the category of the ridiculous go well together. Although Freud himself does not mention this, let alone speak of or consider the possibility of ridiculous masters, it can be inferred from his theses. Moreover, if Freud and psychoanalysis can teach us anything about the master, it is that the master always has one foot in the improbable, the unbelievable, the incredulous. The master is by definition ridiculous, and yet we should beware of ridiculous masters and take them seriously! In other words, even if they are ridiculous, they are masters. And that is precisely why they are dangerous.

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# Hysterical Authority

*Candela Potente*

For Jacques Lacan, analysis begins with an invitation: “Away you go, say whatever, it will be marvelous” (Lacan 2007, p. 52). This strange imperative to “say whatever” coincides with the analysand’s sense of the analyst as the “subject supposed to know.” But although the analysand expects the analyst “to know,” she actually produces knowledge herself. Even more, Lacan insists that the analyst is not really supposed to know very much at all. And yet it is only because the analyst is treated as an authoritative figure, as a subject who knows, that the analysand can herself produce meaning. Eventually, it becomes possible for the analyst to “fall” as the master that, in a sense, she never really was.

Authority in the analytic setting, then, works in a somewhat paradoxical way—it appears to be constructed through the necessary assumption that the analyst knows, and although it exerts its power by not appearing as an assumption at all, it ultimately fulfills its function by revealing itself as a mere presupposition. One can then ask: at what point does the analyst’s knowledge reveal itself as presupposed? How does the analysand make this discovery and what does it entail? What is the analyst’s authority? And if it is the analysand that institutes her authority in the first place, what is the analysand’s relationship with authority?

## *Asymmetrical Discourses*

Although the analyst is expected to have knowledge that the subject of analysis does not have, Lacan often emphasizes that knowledge is on the side of the analysand. Because of the invitation to “say whatever,” it is actually the analyst who institutes the analysand as the subject supposed to know, as Lacan states—“This is after all not in such bad faith, because in the present case the analyst cannot put his trust in any other person” (Lacan 2007, p. 52). Even though it is the analysand who knows, the function of the subject supposed to know is given to the analyst, who in turn can only trust the analysand with knowledge. It is with this paradox that the question of authority begins.

At the same time that the analyst is given this authoritative function, the analysand is given a specific position. In the context of his well-known theory of the four discourses, Lacan points out that the analyst marks the analytic experience with “the hysterization of discourse,” defined as “the structural introduction, under artificial conditions, of the hysteric’s discourse” (Lacan 2007, p. 33). When someone undergoes psychoanalysis, they pass through the discourse of the hysteric, as the analyst asks certain questions and pauses on specific elements of the analysand’s discourse, causing the analysand to be addressed as a divided subject. It is this position from which the hysteric addresses the Other in the hysteric’s discourse. This divided or barred subject becomes attentive to the Other’s wants: what the “hysterization of discourse” institutes, therefore, is a constant confrontation with the analyst’s desire (Fink 1997, p. 131). The analysand, in this way, occupies the position of the hysteric regardless of her psychic structure (which could or could not be hysterical).

Now, the asymmetry of discourses appears in the fact that, although the analyst is addressed as the subject who knows, she addresses the analysand from a completely different position. Lacan not only notes that the analyst does not know much at all,

but goes as far as to say that he learns everything from his analysands, that it is from them that he learns what psychoanalysis is about (Lacan 1975, p. 34). This asymmetry can be clearly seen in Lacan's formalization of the discourses of the hysteric and the analyst: while the analyst, who occupies the place of the object  $a$  (the cause of desire), addresses the analysand as a divided or barred subject, the analysand—passing through the discourse of the hysteric—occupies the place of the barred subject but does not address the analyst as the object  $a$ , that is, as the cause of her desire. Instead, the analysand addresses the analyst as  $S_1$ , which is the master signifier, the signifier that needs no further justification.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the subject supposed to know is addressed as the master in analysis because the analysand is occupying the position of the hysteric.

Lacan points out that the hysteric always wants a master and for the master to know a lot of things, to the extent that he speculates about the fact that the hysteric might have invented the master in the first place (Lacan 2007, p. 129). The hysterization of discourse in analysis means that the analyst, by positioning the analysand as a hysteric, is consequently positioned by the analysand as the master. The analyst, therefore, occupies two positions at once—the one from which she addresses the analysand and the one from which she is addressed by the analysand. This structural asymmetry is what makes psychoanalysis possible, because without the presupposition of the analyst as the locus of knowledge, no meaning can be produced, even if it is the analysand who in fact produces it.

From the perspective of the discourse of the hysteric, then, the analyst is the figure of authority in the analytic setting—even more, she is the master. However, we know that in a certain sense, the analyst's authority is hypothetical, and that her interventions, as Lacan emphasizes, must be equivocal rather than theoretical,

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<sup>1</sup> It is only in the discourse of the master that  $S_1$  occupies the dominant place.

suggestive, or imperative. He explains that analytic interpretation is not made to be understood, but rather “*pour produire des vagues*” (Lacan 1975, p. 35), which means to create ambiguity while evoking the expression “*faire des vagues*”: to make waves or rock the boat. Psychoanalytic interpretation, for Lacan, is “often established through an enigma,” and he states:

It is an enigma that is gathered as far as possible from the threads of the analysand’s discourse, which you, the interpreter, can in no way complete on your own, and cannot consider to be an avowal without lying. It is a citation that is sometimes taken from the very same text, on the other hand, from a given statement—such as one that can pass for an avowal, provided only that you connect it to the whole context. But you are thereby appealing to whoever is its author (Lacan 2007, pp. 37–38).

The function of the enigma involves a “half-saying,” which is why Lacan points out that the analyst cannot complete the enigma on her own. The analyst merely cites from the analysand’s discourse; it can only pass for an avowal if it is placed in the context from which it was taken. The analyst’s authority is framed in a rather surprising way here when we consider this description of psychoanalytic interpretation as an enigma that tiptoes around the analysand’s discourse, citing it either very quietly or slightly less quietly if a reference to the context makes it unequivocally clear that it was, indeed, a citation. The enigma surreptitiously points to the analysand as the author of meaning in analysis—she is the one who completes the analyst’s enigmas and who produces the context from which the analyst cites.

Interestingly, this half-saying is also what allows for the analyst to fulfill the expectations of the analysand: “What one expects from a psychoanalyst is [...] to get his knowledge to function in terms of truth. This is why he limits himself to a half-saying” (Lacan 2007, p. 53). Because “truth can only ever be said by halves,” it is only through these enigmatic utterances that the

analyst can be what the analysand expects from her: the subject supposed to know. And yet, the interpretation of these enigmas, as Lacan seems to suggest, is the analysand's work, which in turn reveals that knowledge does not come from the analyst, but from the analysand. The analyst can remain the subject supposed to know as long as she puts into practice her lack of knowledge through enigmatic utterances such that, in time, the analysand can acknowledge herself as the author of the meaning that is produced in analysis.

The analyst's authority, then, is fundamental to the development of the analysis, insofar as the supposition of knowledge is what institutes transference. And through the analyst's enigmatic interpretations, the analysand's expectations are fulfilled since, as Lacan states, "an analysis is what one expects from an analyst" (Lacan 2007, p. 53). But it is because of the enigma that the analysand is eventually confronted with the fact that the analyst's knowledge was merely presupposed. Through her half-sayings, the analyst makes the analysand confront the fact that, rather than knowledge, there was a presupposition of knowledge, and what is more, that presupposition was from the beginning of her own making. As Slavoj Žižek explains it, "the subject discovers that *from the very beginning there was no support in the Other*, that he was himself producing the 'discovered' meaning" (Žižek 2008, p. 171). The revelation that all "discoveries" had all along been *produced* by the analysand, and the Other's support had only been a hypothesis since the beginning of analysis, is what causes the analyst to "fall" as the subject supposed to know. But what causes this revelation?

In the analysand's discovery that knowledge was always produced by her, the way in which analyst and analysand address each other no longer appears to be based on a structural asymmetry, unlike the beginning of analysis when the analysand was hystericized in the analytic experience and the analyst was expected to be the ultimate source of knowledge. Since the analyst

is not “supposed to know” anymore, she is not addressed as the master. Once this asymmetry disappears, it becomes possible to reconceptualize the function of authority in analysis. How does the analysand discover that all along it was actually she who produced meaning? What is it that causes this shift? In order to address these questions, I will turn to Freud and, in particular, his understanding of translation.

### *Translating the Already*

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud often resorts to translation as a metaphor—a use that may be inspired by his own experience translating several books into German, like works by John Stuart Mill, Jean-Martin Charcot’s *Tuesday Lectures*, and two books by French physician Hippolyte Bernheim. Freud sometimes uses translation as a figure to explain psychic processes, and on other occasions, he refers to his technique of dream interpretation as *Traumübersetzung* or *Übersetzen von Träumen*, “dream translation” or “translation of dreams” (Freud 2010, pp. 372, 408; 1982, pp. 354, 388). Robert J. C. Young, who traced diverse instances in which Freud discusses questions of translation, already stressed the importance of translation in Freud’s work. According to Young, Freud’s innovation is in fact to move dream interpretation into the realm of translation (Young in Marcus and Mukherjee 2014, p. 372). I will address the two uses of translation that I mentioned, building upon some of Young’s remarks, and recast the question of translation as the key to understanding how authority works in the analytic setting in the following section.

Freud often takes translation as an operation that explains the nature of psychic processes that involve the transformation of an image or representation (a *Vorstellung*) into various symptomatic expressions through the different reactions of the psychical apparatus towards that image. In his discussion of typical dreams,



for example, Freud recounts the case of a young woman who went through a series of psychical conditions. The first one was a state of confusional excitement in which she expressed a strong aversion towards her mother, often hitting and abusing her, while she was affectionate with an older sister. This state was followed by another, which was both lucid and apathetic, and which involved sleep problems—it is at this stage that Freud began treating her. Many of this young woman's dreams, in more direct or indirect ways, concerned the death of her mother, and as the treatment developed, she began having hysterical phobias, such as an overwhelming fear that something might have happened to her mother, which drove her to frantically go check on her to convince herself that her mother was alive. At this point, Freud explains:

This case, taken in conjunction with what I had learnt from other sources, was highly instructive: it exhibited, translated as it were into different languages, the various ways in which the psychical apparatus reacted to one and the same exciting idea [*er zeigte in gleichsam mehrsprachiger Übersetzung verschiedene Reaktionsweisen des psychischen Apparats auf dieselbe erregende Vorstellung*]. In the confusional state, in which, as I believe, the second psychical agency was overwhelmed by the normally suppressed first one, her unconscious hostility to her mother found a powerful *motor* expression. When the calmer condition set in, when the rebellion was suppressed and the domination of the censorship re-established, the only region left open in which her hostility could realize the wish for her mother's death was that of dreaming. When a normal state was still more firmly established, it led to the production of her exaggerated worry about her mother as a hysterical counter-reaction and defensive phenomenon. (Freud 2010, p. 277; 1982, p. 264)

What this case is able to show is how the psyche, in reacting to one and the same idea or image, can result in various translations into different languages, as Freud suggests. In this context, the difference between languages is a metaphor to explain the difference between these reactions of the psychical apparatus.

And this difference is expressed as several symptoms: the motor expression of abusing the mother, the censored expression that took place in dreams of funerals and mourning clothes, and finally the hysterical expression of extreme worry once a more “normal” state was reached.

What is important here is not only that translation leads to these different versions of how the psyche reacts to an image, but also that those reactions are being identified as translations of one and the same image in the process of interpretation. Translation is what explains not only the difference in the reactions of the psyche but also the coincidence of that to which the psyche was reacting in the first place. Identifying translations as translations is something that is present in the interpretation of dreams before the interpretation itself: according to Freud, there is a first instance of interpretation that is the very act of reproducing the memory of a dream, which he calls a “re-translation” [*Rückübersetzung*]. Freud notes that this re-translation can be more or less fragmentary, but it does not make the dream any less enigmatic than it was before (Freud 2010, p. 83; 1982, p. 77).

By considering the reproduction of the dream as a *re-translation*, Freud draws attention to an instance of translation that took place beforehand, that is—as above—the psyche’s reaction to a given image. In fact, when Freud addresses the question of why we often forget our dreams, he mentions as a possible reason “that the different arrangement of the ideational material in dreams makes them untranslatable, as it were, for waking consciousness” (Freud 2010, p. 75). If dreams turn out to be untranslatable for waking consciousness and are forgotten, they cannot be interpreted. In this sense, the process of dream interpretation always begins with some degree of translatability, and it is what results from this first instance of translation that the analyst must then, once again, translate.

I turn now to the question of translation as dream interpretation, of which Freud offers several examples in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, like in the context of his explanation of counter-wish

dreams. These are dreams in which there is “a wish that I may be wrong” or a wish-fulfillment of masochistic inclinations, which is a component “in the sexual constitution of many people” (Freud 2010, p. 182). As an example of this “mental masochism,” Freud offers the following case:

I will quote one such dream, produced by a young man who in his earlier years had greatly tormented his elder brother, to whom he had a homosexual attachment. His character having undergone a fundamental change, he had the following dream, which was in three pieces: *I. His elder brother was chaffing him. II. Two grown men were caressing each other with a homosexual purpose. III. His brother had sold the business of which he himself had looked forward to becoming the director.* He awoke from the last dream with the most distressing feelings. Nevertheless it was a masochistic wishful dream, and might be translated thus: ‘It would serve me right if my brother were to confront me with this sale as a punishment for all the torments he had to put up with from me.’ (Freud 2010, p. 182)

As an interpretation of this young man’s dream, Freud offers no less than a translation of the reproduction of the memory that his patients bring to him (which, according to Freud, is itself a re-translation). He first synthesizes the analysand’s account of the dream into three separate elements, and then renders the account of the patient’s dream into conscious terms in a first-person formulation. Freud’s translation is based both on the reproduction of the dream and on previous associations that this analysand brought up with regard to the relationship with his brother.

One of the most important aspects of this understanding of translation as a technique of dream interpretation concerns not only the process of translation itself, but also the act of identifying what is being interpreted as already translated, as well as the analysand’s free associations. In fact, Freud also uses the term “translation” to refer to interpretive techniques with which he disagrees—for example, when he points to the shortcomings of the decoding method, which “treats dreams as a kind of cryptography

in which each sign can be translated into another sign having a known meaning, in accordance with a fixed key” (Freud 2010, p. 123). He warns against overestimating the importance of symbols in the interpretation of dreams, which would mean reducing the work of dream translation [*Traumübersetzung*] to the translation of symbols [*Symbolübersetzung*], and stresses the importance of the dreamer’s associations (Freud 2010, p. 372; 1982, p. 354). Translation, then, only refers to a transformation of certain signs into others, but that does not necessarily follow the technique of dream interpretation that Freud proposes. In other words, translating by itself does not guarantee anything. It is fundamental to identify what must be translated (not merely the dream, for example, but the dream in the context of a series of free associations) as well as to recognize a translation as a translation (that is, understand a dream or a given set of symptoms as diverse translations that result from the psyche’s reaction to an image). The question, then, becomes the following: what is the result from this process of psychoanalytic translation?

An important point that Young makes is that, according to the principles that Freud lays out in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the meaning of dreams is not in the dreams themselves, but in their invisible origins (Young in Marcus and Mukherjee 2014, p. 372). He refers to Jean Laplanche’s notion of detranslation [*detraduction*], which consists in a dismantling and reversion of translation. For Laplanche, “*analytic* interpretation consists in undoing an existing translation, one that is spontaneous, possibly symptomatic, in order to find below it what it ardently desired to translate.” Thanks to this undoing, a “better” translation becomes possible: one that is less repressed and more complete (Laplanche 2008, p. 327, my translation). The manifest content, for Laplanche, is a bad and incomplete translation. Through the process of detranslation, it is possible to find the latent content that eventually led to that bad translation. It is in this sense that an existing translation is undone.

What results from this process of detranslation, however, is not an original in the way that the original is understood in linguistic translation: it is, as Young explains, a third text, which is the analyst's rephrasing (Young in Marcus and Mukherjee 2014, p. 375). Rather than a process in which there is an original text that precedes a translation, detranslation seeks to unwind an already translated material whose "primary text" is unknown. Instead of "moving forward" (from original text to translation), the process of detranslation "moves backward," seeking to reverse a translated material and yet resulting in a text that is not the original. The process of detranslation does not attempt to retrace the process that led to the translation such that the "primary text" is restored but is instead one that produces a phrasing that could never be compared with the "primary text."

But even if the text that results from the process of detranslation is the analyst's phrasing, it does not discover something radically new because it refers to something that was already there. It is for this reason that Lacan stresses that the analyst's utterances are half-sayings: something from the analysand's discourse is cited enigmatically, which often "moves backward" on the translation that this very discourse contained. While the analyst's phrasing appears as a "discovery" in analysis, it is the analysand who produces this meaning. Now, how does translation explain the shift that makes the analysand see that she produced what seemed to be discovered? How does it explain that the analyst is revealed as a subject who does not actually know?

### *Mere Translation*

Let us consider Lacan's remarks about the equivocal character of analytic interpretations together with Freud's understanding of translation. Freud shows how the psyche translates certain images into symptoms, and how there can be several translations that,

in analysis, need to be identified as translations of one and the same “original,” even if this original is never to be found as such. The analyst, in offering her analytic interpretations, carries out a detranslation of the analysand’s dreams and associations. But these interpretations, to follow Lacan, are always half-sayings. It is the analysand who completes the translations, and it is her discourse from which the analyst cites and on which the analyst’s enigmas are based.

When the analysand discovers that the meaning produced in the analysis was of her own making, the analyst’s mastery reveals itself as hypothetical. This hypothesis does not mean that the analyst has no authority at all, even if her mastery exerts its power through the very fact that it is presupposed. Alenka Zupančič characterizes the analyst’s authority in relation to the temporal development of analysis and the work of repetition. She explains that, in psychoanalysis, it is not enough for the analysand to become consciously aware of something that used to be unconscious. The main problem is how to change the symbolic and imaginary structures in which the unconscious is embodied—for example, in her conduct and relationships with others. These ways in which the unconscious manifests “outside” of the analysand constitutes what Zupančič calls the comic dimension of analytic experience, that is, “the autonomy of the (subject’s) sameness that is operating ‘out there’, doing all kinds of things, involving the subject in various possible and impossible situations, sometimes very awkward ones” (Zupančič 2008, pp. 16–18). This is why Zupančič notes that we can get to know what there is to know early on, but that knowledge alone is not enough, because what is needed is the work of repetition. The analyst, then, is not an authority that insists on pointing out that the analysand is responsible for the things that keep systematically “happening” to her: “the analyst is, rather and above all, the authority that has to give all this ‘happening’ the *time* (and the space) to come to the subject” (Zupančič 2008, p. 18).

This time and space that it takes for these things that keep “happening” to come to the subject involve identifying them as diverse translations of unconscious ideas into specific symbolic and imaginary structures. The work of repetition is fundamental because, without it, these events could not be identified as the translations that they are. A person may learn early in the process of analysis, for example, that her tendency to create conflict with the people close to her is a constant attempt to work through a tumultuous relationship with a parent. However, learning this by itself does not change the fact that she will continue to find herself in explosive arguments with the people around her. She might find herself watching her own actions as if in the third person (the subject’s sameness operating ‘out there’) and only the work of repetition, the repeated and almost comical recurrence of the same events, can allow her to change the external ways in which her unconscious is embodied, to borrow Zupančič’s terms. Because of this repetition, the analysand can recognize those events as translations of a text that is unknown and yet familiar. The analyst does not indoctrinate the analysand into changing her behavior based on what was learned in the analysis, but rather allows the analysand to work through the recurrence of events that, although multiple, are all translations of the same unconscious ideas—sometimes, following Freud’s metaphor, into different languages.

While the analyst might not be a master even though she is addressed as one, she does have a peculiar kind of authority, which involves allowing the work of repetition to take place. To return to the asymmetry with which we started: the analyst’s authority is interpreted by the analysand as that of a master because of the hysterization of discourse in analysis, and yet that authority does not function as mastery on the part of the analyst. Following Lacan’s remarks about half-sayings, the analyst’s authority can be understood as the authority to cite, to utter enigmatic interpretations that the analysand will eventually recognize as

citations from the discourse that she authored. Through the work of repetition, translations can be identified as translations, citations can be identified as citations, and the repetition slowly reveals the analysand's authorship.

The analyst's hypothetical mastery is what allows for the work of repetition to take place in analysis. But at what point does her knowledge begin to appear as presupposed? It is not only the analysand's ability to complete half-sayings, to produce the third text that results from the process of detranslation, or to identify translations and citations as such—in other words, it is not only the analysand's ability to translate that causes the analyst to fall as the subject supposed to know. More importantly, the fall of the subject supposed to know (and her hypothetical mastery) comes with the realization that, in the end, *translation was all there ever was*. The analyst's interpretation, which appeared as a discovery, was in fact *just* translation. Through the work of repetition, that translation can not only be identified as a translation by the analysand, but at the same time, another kind of authority is revealed as belonging to her and as having been at work from the very beginning—I will call it hysterical authority.

Mastery in analysis exists under the form of a presupposition on the part of the analyst; however, the analysand discovers that meaning was not only being produced by her, but that the analyst was (after Freud) merely a translator. At the same time, in order to acknowledge the fact that it is the analysand who was producing meaning from the start and from whose discourse knowledge actually came, it was also necessary to presuppose knowledge in the Other. The analyst's mastery is such only insofar as it is the presupposition that allows the analysand to discover, through the work of repetition and translation, her own hysterical authority, which was at work from the very beginning. In this sense, the analyst's mastery is only revealed as hypothetical once the presupposition is acknowledged, but in order to fulfill its function in analysis, this presupposition needs to not be hypothetical at all.



The psychoanalytic experience requires a structural asymmetry in how the analyst and analysand address each other because it is constitutive of the analysand's authority as a hysterized subject. Because the analysand is hysterized, she institutes the analyst as the master, and because the analyst is addressed as a master and considered to be the source of knowledge, the analysand can produce the knowledge that results from analysis. The authority of the analyst as the subject supposed to know is necessary for translation to be possible, but because it is merely a work of translation, the analysand is able to see that the analyst's knowledge was a presupposition of her own. It is in this passage that the mastery of the subject supposed to know is revealed as the obverse of the analysand's hysterical authority.

The analysand's authority, then, is in the wielding of her power through the hypothesis of a master who can only be ousted, so to speak, through her own work in the position of a hysterized subject. Even more, the analyst's mastery exists only to be ousted. The ousting of the subject supposed to know is inscribed in the asymmetry that makes the analytic experience possible; it is inherent to the very practice of psychoanalysis. Instituting the analyst as the subject supposed to know while being herself the author of discourse and producer of meaning is the analysand's hysterical authority.

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# Our Duty towards Our Master: Hegel's Feelings on Feelings

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Even though there have been countless rigorous and valuable depictions of the effort put into understanding the struggle between the figures of power and subordination, most prominently envisioned by Hegel as the figures of master and slave, lord and bondsman, or master and servant, there is still some room to improvise and put forth a less glamorous illustration of this logic. This illustration should, in the last instance, meaningfully contribute to our understanding of the contemporary image of the master. In *casu nostro*, we will take a closer look at the immanent role feelings play in this relationship, where they are expressed as a duty to the other. The topic of feelings is not usually considered a vital part of Hegel's thought, but that makes it all the more important to take notice when it comes to the fore.

But let us begin with a less obvious reference to the dialectic between the master and servant. The case in point is the renowned encounter between Jesus and Mary Magdalene that nearly culminates in a touch, which was notably preceded by Mary's awe-struck sight of her Rabboni, which is to say, Master (John 20, p. 16). But the impetus for Jesus's return, for his sudden appearance behind Mary's back, could not have occurred without Mary's mourning, without her tears. Jesus was thus summoned by her affects, her weeping up the dead and recognizing him as

the teacher, the master, and the lord.<sup>1</sup> But for a slight moment, she misrecognized him as the gardener, a servant of the burial ground. Due to the change in his characteristics, he becomes unrecognizable, as his voice and image do not align. This aspect is a less essential but nonetheless a revealing detail. Crucially, Mary's affective servitude to the Lord or Jesus is particularly symptomatic regarding the structure of master and servant logic. Any given master arises from such an emotional misrecognition, appearing firstly as a thing like any other. It is only through the mediation of a servant, not only through his labor (*Arbeit*) for the master, but also through his tears and joys that the master acquires his own pleasure. This relocation of feelings from the bearer, who is not built to carry their burden, to the intermediary, who is in this relationship by force of circumstances, whose weight he alone can bear, will be the focus of the article. In doing so, we will also reflect on the role of feelings themselves, which are too often treated as an appendage to more serious matters of reason.

### *From Consciousness to the Master and to His Other*

Now, let us continue by turning our attention to an example all too familiar to us. Perhaps the principal image that is bound up with Hegel, with his dialectical twists and his political turns: self-consciousness's encounter on the battlefield of *mutual recognition*, which culminates in the introduction of the figures of master and servant. This example, as is well known, is introduced in his

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<sup>1</sup> There are other instances of weeping and crying for Jesus. For instance, in Luke's Gospel a sinful woman comes to Jesus and starts crying at his feet. She then begins to wash his feet with her tears, and dries them with her hair, kissing them many times (7:36-50). Although Jesus, when Mary Magdalene tried to touch him, asked her not to cling to him (*mé mou háptou*), to keep her distance from him, he used the touch of the sinful woman as a universal expression of the forgiveness of sins. Jesus forgives her many sins because of her love and affection.

*Phenomenology of Spirit*, as a form of unfolding of consciousness, from sense-certainty to reason. Although it is one of the most famous episodes in the history of philosophy, the specificity of the implications of our reading makes it worth briefly summarizing.

The passages in question illustrate consciousness's winding path to itself through various stages that begin with life in its pure state, a state that does *not* contain within itself any desire (*Begierde*), a state where consciousness is presented only with sensuous-certainty (*sinnliche Gewissheit*). This mode of being further unfolds into the notion of the conscious I, which sees in otherness the negative moments of its essence and so commits itself to its sublation as the only way of gaining true certainty. Hegel characterizes this striving as the desire that was missing in the immediate state of certainty. This struggle of consciousness with others and itself concludes in actual self-consciousness. At the initial point of actualization, consciousness is bereft of the sensual matter that first held it in its own solitude and solipsism as consciousness immerses itself in the interplay with other consciousnesses.

The individual self-consciousnesses are now staring into each other face-to-face "in the way ordinary objects do" (Hegel 2018, p. 110). Since nothing has yet happened between them, they are simply immersed in the being of life, in self-feeling (*Selbstgefühl*),<sup>2</sup> a self that is merely felt or feels itself in desire. Until they bring about the abstraction of an immediate being and thereby stand on their own feet as self-consciousness, their independence is non-existent. The truth of their actions here consists in presenting themselves as objects, as this is their only way of expressing certainty in themselves. The only thing that upholds the tension of this face-off is the sensuous certainty of both self-consciousnesses.

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<sup>2</sup> Self-feeling ranges from pre-reflective sensations (*Empfindungen*) through sovereign feelings of oneself (feelings at one's disposal) to habitual modes of self-understanding (Dahlstrom 2013, p. 141).

Therefore, there is a need for further development in the construction of self-consciousness in the form of “absolute abstraction” (Hegel 2018, p. 111), which manifests itself as the pure negation of that thingliness of the other in which the two self-consciousnesses are trapped. By removing everything extraneous, all the determinations that are not a reflection of their doing, they can only affirm that they are not bound to any particular existence since they act as pure beings-for-themselves. The tension reaches its peak here as the double needs to be removed and sublated.<sup>3</sup> In one fell swoop, the battlefield for life and death with the other self-consciousness opens up, for certainty must be affirmed *through* the other and *in* the other. This is why the most accurate depiction of this confrontation can be found in cases such as the low-budget horror cult film *The Evil Dead II* (Raimi et al. 1987), where the protagonist faces off with his possessed malevolent self in a slapstick fight, rather than Sergio Leone’s classic *Once upon a Time in the West*, which pits the hero against the antagonist and is accompanied by Ennio Morricone’s perfectly intertwined soundtrack.

The renunciation of this double risk, of risking one’s own head and the head of another, in whom one’s being is presented as an externality, does not lead to perdition since it is in this way that one becomes an ordinary person. Rather, the choice to engage in a life-and-death struggle seems pernicious, since certainty of one’s existence is in the last instance assured only in dying. It

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<sup>3</sup> The work of self-consciousness is always present in a twofold form. So from the very first form, self-consciousness is already caught up in double work: “It must sublimate its otherness. This is the sublation of that first two-sided ambiguity and is for that reason itself a second two-sided ambiguity. First, it must set out to sublimate the other self-sufficient essence in order as a result to become certain of itself as the essence through having sublated the other. Second, it thereby sets out to sublimate itself, for this other is itself” (Hegel 2018, p. 109). Such overtime labor expressed as “the redoubling of the double magnifies an active negativity—a repeated stutter or glitch—in the stillness of pure emptiness” (Aumiller 2018, p. 270). It is how self-consciousness savors its certainty.

appears that the only way for self-consciousness as such to prevail is for both self-consciousnesses striving for their recognition to eliminate one another. Thus, in the end, the winner is left with less than nothing, because through the “abstract negation,” what is left is only a dead unity or an immersion in the thingliness of consciousness.

If everyone involved were content with this scenario, then the path of self-consciousness would end here, in complete annihilation. Naturally, this is not the case. Feeling the fear of its own impending death shakes self-consciousness to its core since “life is as essential to it as self-consciousness” (Hegel 2018, p. 112), and this is not without consequences. The first self-consciousness yields, as it realizes its attachment to life by being unable to endure this absolute negation. This experience radically transforms the relationship between the two. They are no longer on equal footing as one self-consciousness is now confronted by a consciousness that appears in the form of a thingliness that succumbed to the necessity of life. In this game of existential Russian roulette, the other consciousness shrugs its shoulders in the face of this resignation to life and seems to take the initiative. By gaining autonomy, this self-consciousness now assumes the role of *master*, while the non-autonomous consciousness, which is subordinate to life, is content to serve the role of *servant*.

In more abstruse terms, a master is a master in that he refers to the “object of desire” (Hegel 2018, p. 113), to the object with which he is confronted (and able to negate) and to the consciousness for which the thingliness or the independence of being is what is essential. This independent being, over which the master has sovereignty and power (*Macht*), is held firmly by the servant, for his life depends on it. The servant, because of his servant-being, is not able to negate things, to eliminate them, but he is able to process, to rework, to manipulate them. And the master’s primacy or mastery in this relationship rests precisely on this substitution in the form of the servant’s work, who assumes management of

the annoying external things for him, so that he can provide a way of bringing about their pure negation. In doing so, namely, relegating the work, the master does away with them, and in the same stroke satisfies himself in pleasure (*Genüsse*), since he is able to only concern himself with being-for-itself. The servant is thus indirectly, through a chain of non-essential activity (*Tun*), subjugated to the master, but it is *only* through this mediation (via the servant) that the master refers to the thing as such. Moreover, the servant not only does laborious tasks for the master, he must also anticipate the master's wishes and desires in his work and behavior.

In Altman's *Gosford Park* (Altman et al. 2001), a whodunit murder mystery film, the housekeeper, Helen Mirren as Mrs. Wilson, in disclosing the circumstances of the murder, explains a more important detail, namely, the essential role that the servant occupies in the relationship to the master: "What gift do you think a good servant has that separates them from the others? It's the gift of anticipation. And I'm a good servant; I'm better than good, I'm the best; I'm the perfect servant. I know when they'll be hungry, and the food is ready. I know when they'll be tired, and the bed is turned down. I know it before they know it themselves." Normally we would recognize in this the absolute subservience of the servant, who lives only for the master's whims. But the idea behind his submission is more precise: the perfection shown by the servant is in fact a reflection of the fact that this is the master's doing.

The master turns out to be consistent with his initial wager, as he radically abolishes the thingliness, all privileged modes of being, and settles down into a passivity whose equilibrium is supported by the servant's labor. In hindsight, however, the other side of this relationship comes to the fore, as the master, in his eagerness to enjoy his *idleness*, made a miscalculation and unbeknownst to him threw away his independence. He thereby appeared as the opposite of what he wanted to be. Meanwhile, the servant in executing his work acquires the opposite of what



he immediately is—true independence. The master now functions as a doll converted from his hollow body, which the servant unknowingly conducts. A well-known depiction of the servants' role can be found in Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (Tarantino 2012), where the “house slave” Stephen is the one who articulates the outrage at the sight of the freed former slave Django riding on a horse instead of the master of the estate. The slave's bond to his master is so strong that, even upon his master's death at the end of the film, Stephen runs to his body and cries frantically. Here it is best to refer to Malcolm X, who emphatically points out this contradictory behavior:

When the house started burning down, that type of Negro would fight harder to put the master's house out than the master himself would. [...] When you come up through the gate when he's sitting on the master's porch, then he'll bare his fangs and get ready to bite you. Not because you're threatening him, but because you threaten his master who has trained him not to protect himself but to protect the *property* of the master. (1990, pp. 29-36)

What is essential in this tragicomic scenario is that the experience of a life-and-death struggle, an encounter with pure negativity, leaves its mark on the servant. It is not only a fear for this or that limb, or this or that particular moment, but as briefly already mentioned a fear for the servant's whole being, a feeling of “fear of death, this absolute master” (Hegel 2018, p. 115). The sight of death, the experience of pure nothingness manifests in itself a *sensual experience*, in which Hegel subjectivizes the essence of the substance. An absolute negativity which permeates the experience of self-consciousness - this universal detachment from natural existence, which, let us stress once again, the servant achieves exclusively through work - entails all the intricacies of dialectical logic. And it is only through this movement of the negative that restlessness or unrest (Unruhe), an affective inflection that characterizes self-consciousness, itself becomes apparent.

## *Affects of Desire and Affects of Fear*

In light of such a negative experience, Alexander Kojève was right when he declared that “to speak of the ‘origin’ of Self-Consciousness is necessarily to speak of a fight *to* the death for recognition” (my emphasis, Kojève 1969, p. 7). According to Kojève’s influential reading on the hard-fought path of self-consciousness coming to itself, the inevitable struggle to death is a struggle for pure prestige that functions in terms of *desire* directed towards another *desire*, that is to say, desire for recognition.<sup>4</sup> In this respect, it is essential to take into consideration that desire forms “structures of felt capacity that promote the exercise of power via various forms of agency” (de Courville Nicol 2011, p. 3). This should not be understood as a mere manifestation of inclination or drive, but as a moment of practical human will or the universal structure of self-determination.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Just as a side note: the core principles of the mutual recognition logic in Hegel can be found back in his Jena period. There Hegel explicitly identified the struggle for recognition with the Hobbesian *bellum omnium contra omnes* of individuals in the precontractual state. To abandon that relationship is precisely to produce the reality of right in general (*Erzeugen des Rechtes überhaupt*), i.e. to enter into a relationship of mutual recognition (*aner kennende Beziehung*) (Dahlstrom 2013, p. 145). There is also a second aspect of Hegel’s Jena discussion on the struggle for recognition that breaks with the Hobbesian account on the question of the motivation for this state of mutual alienation. In Hegel’s account, an individual finds herself in this state because of an underlying desire to be honored rather than merely to be preserved or empowered. And there is one final reading of this struggle that can be extracted from Hegel’s Jena period: he posits love and family as preceding and thereby informing the struggle for recognition. Being recognized in the family’s love constitutes a precondition for the formation of an independent consciousness.

<sup>5</sup> It is important to point out that there is a difference between self-determination, viewed by Hegel in his phenomenological framework, and the self-determination of logic. The former is, as already mentioned, self-determination as the self-determination of self-consciousness, whereas the latter pertains to the concept of the concept.

This can be expressed as either desire or fear that dictates the way one is able to determine oneself. Scilicet, it is the practical capacity of self-realization to determine self-consciousness, which can be made based on the feeling of pleasantness (*Angenehmheit*) that comes to the fore when the demand for determination and the randomness of determination overlap. Or, conversely, unpleasantness (*Unangenehmheit*), which is the failure of this encounter as an external determination (*Fremdbestimmung*), turns out to be a necessary moment of self-determination. An example of this can be found in James Joyce's short story *Eveline*. The narrative revolves around the fate of the titular character, who is reflecting on whether to leave her broken home, which is ultimately sealed by her fear. Despite the hopelessness that lies ahead, she is incapable of taking a leap of faith: "She set her white face to him, passive, like a helpless animal. Her eyes gave him no sign of love or farewell or recognition" (Joyce 2004, p. 259). In retrospect, the twofold encounter of the servant with the master—the particular one in the individual struggle for recognition and the absolute one, before which his whole being trembles—becomes the means of endowing the servant with a working (class) consciousness in which *desire* will evaporate and be replaced by servitude. As already mentioned, things turn out differently for both the master and the servant.

In Kojève's hands, the master is non-dialectically executed, a faith so unceremonious that the master's twilight is mentioned almost in passing in a footnote: "the Master is simply killed, and he dies as Master" (1969, p. 225). The servant's nature, on the other hand, acquires exclusive rights over dialectical labors, but his prospects seem as hopeless as the master's. The servant quickly casts off his pure capacity to work and merges it together with the capacity to conceptualize his own death and thereby overcome it. The same pitfall that made the master fall from grace, namely the ambiguous sublation of otherness, now stands as the driving force of self-emancipation, emancipation from finitude and absolute

mastery. Now, if Kojève was aiming to highlight the right impasse registered in the overlapping of death and desire, he missed that the fear of death is not a random solitary affect, as it is woven together with anxiety and resentment. This affective immediacy namely forms the foundation of the uneven relationship between the master and the servant. It does not merely reflect a personal predisposition of a subjugated subject, but expresses a structural predicament that impacts agency as such, especially since affective expression concerns reason.

Let us briefly recap Hegel's own presentation of the deadlock between the master and servant and their inflictions. The exchange between master and servant is reciprocal, the master enjoying the products of labor, the servant feeling the effort of this labor. The master, by mediation, also receives all the by-products of this relationship, including feelings (*Gefühle*)<sup>6</sup>, which is crucial for our exposition of his character. We usually think of feelings as immediately given, as something that springs up in us spontaneously. For Hegel, who follows Kant, the course of events that brings forth their existence is, of course, not so simple. Since sensual consciousness is also the result of mediation with a sensual impression, which means that it is the opposite of itself, feelings cannot be directly given but are rather given as a negation of immediacy.

Thus, the feeling of fear caused by impending death, which drives the servant to the edge of the metaphysical precipice, does not touch the master. And this makes the servant all the more susceptible to anxiety, as his own being is shaken to the very core, but in this existential drama he is firmly supported by the work that is forced upon him. What is perhaps less obvious is that the

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<sup>6</sup> In a broader sense, Hegel uses feeling, emotion, and sensation interchangeably, especially in the *Encyclopaedia*, where it has a central place in the philosophy of the subjective theoretical spirit. However, there are specific differences between them that he highlights. For us, the most important detail is understanding feeling as the most concrete sense. On the relationship of senses, see Enc. (1) §369-370 and Enc. (2&3) §446-448.

result is emancipatory. As Hegel points out: “in his service he [the servant] sublates all of the singular moments of his attachment to natural existence” adding to this “through work, this servile consciousness comes round to itself” (Hegel 2018, p. 115). The master has based his consciousness on the object of desire, which, by its pure negation, maintains a certain “self-feeling.” This is an important detail, to which we will return later. In this way, satisfaction is expressed as a mere disappearance because it cannot settle on an object. For the servant, on the contrary, through work, desire expresses itself as a repressed desire, which tames the disappearance so that the negative relationship towards the object becomes the servant’s form of realization. In stepping out of itself, the work-servant consciousness ensures independence for the object through work and formation (*Bildung*), but by doing this, it importantly also gains independence for itself.

What we have before us is a self-conscious servant, to whom the object offers stability, even if he is held by the image of a master whose shadow weighs a ton and who seems to be the only one in the pair committed to feelings. However, it should be pointed out that the servant’s object of labor and formation is not only a sign of firm positivity because, according to Hegel, it contains within itself the very element of fear that drove the servant himself from the battlefield. That other being-for-itself, being-for-itself of the master before which he trembled in fear, thus “becomes in formative activity [as the form of formed things] an [servile] object to itself” (Hegel 2018, p. 117). He internalizes this fear and is now able to become aware of it through reflection. And here Hegel importantly adds, “without formation [which is here accompanied by labor], fear remains inward and mute, and consciousness does not become for it itself” (Hegel 2018, p. 116). Only fear can sober up a servant’s head and he can become his own head and thereupon headstrong. Meanwhile, the master is not too bothered by the servants’ path of self-discovery, which, on the positive side, also allows for a certain distance to be maintained between them.

In order to fully justify the place of sensuality in the relationship between servant and master, it is helpful to read the section in *Phenomenology of Spirit* on the emergence of this dialectical duo together with his *Science of Logic*. Here we can find the following casual remark: “Pain is therefore the prerogative of living natures,” as it is through pain, Hegel emphasizes, that living natures discover that “they are in themselves the *negativity* of themselves” and that “this *their negativity* exists *for them*” (Hegel 2010b, p. 684). For the servant, fear for life is no longer enough to achieve self-consciousness, as there is a certain amount of pain required, pain that can only be embedded in labor and formation. Labor’s emancipating moment is thus the result of hard labor that induces constant affliction, anxiety, and distress. It is work that the Master does not invest, even though he exists only through work. The reason, of course, is that the master is not on the side of life, since he is only interested in the pleasure of eliminating independent being and in being recognized for it. The radical nature of this stance culminates in Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, where the master as monarch is reduced to a bare signature. But his name remains essential.

This reading of the relationship between master and servant clearly shows that the key moments are all an immediate manifestation of emotional affectations (fear, desire, pleasure, etc.),<sup>7</sup> whereby sensuality and perception are through the mediation of reflection transformed into their otherness, into the order of the reason. This is not a surprising reading, since it can be found, for example, in Hegel’s contemporary Karl Rosenkranz, according to whom, in Hegel’s hands, affects overlap with other activities of the mind, and thus the senses are already colored by thinking,

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<sup>7</sup> We are touching here on the traditional ancient themes of psychology, which include *inter alia* *Gefühl* (*pathos* and *affectus*), *Lust und Unlust* (*hedone* and *lupe*), *Neigung* (*orexis*, *inclanatio*), *Leidenschaft* (*pathos*, *passio*), *Glückseligkeit* (*eudaimonia*), *Willkür* (*prohairesis*), and *Wille* (*voluntas*).

and thinking is infused with feelings. This creates the appearance of a system that promotes the rationality of feeling, which is contrary to all philosophies that recognize in feeling the unity of inner life, the core of spiritual functioning, because they proceed from the premise that feeling is a function that is superior to the concept. It is not surprising, therefore, that a proper exposition of Hegel's subjective spirit, in which senses, feelings, and others are placed, is usually absent from discussions, since it has been obscured by the glamor of speculative logic. Part of the explanation for this degradation of feelings in the context of German classical philosophy can be found in the shadowy figure of the movement, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, who continually addressed conceptual challenges to the thinkers of that time from the position of sensuality.<sup>8</sup>

### *Feeling the Emptiness in Crying*

Before drawing any final conclusions, we need a bit of context regarding Hegel's ambiguous nature of feelings. Affects namely have their own field of operation. As we have pointed out, the concept of life is itself a key element in Hegel's inquiry into the relationship between the two consciousnesses. However, the second aspect of life opens up an additional perspective as it concerns corporality and its emotional dimension. Hegel himself points out a few decades after publishing the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in the *Encyclopaedia*, how the Idea can only be actualized in itself in the body "in which it is [not] only Life, [but ...] existence as Spirit" (Hegel 2004, p. 24). Or, as he put it a few hundred pages later in

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<sup>8</sup> To take just one of his definitions of feeling, which circumvents reason: feeling is a sense of the supersensible, it is a sense that does not concern the visible world, but its content is reflected (through *Sinnes-Empfindung* or *Geistes-Gefühl*) in "knowing based in faith" (Jacobi 2004, p. 402).

the same work: “The body is the middle term by which I come together with the external world [...] so, if I want to actualize my aims, then I must make my physical body capable of carrying out this subjectivity into external objectivity” (Hegel 2007, p. 135). And even more specifically, in the section on Anthropology, the body becomes the sign of the soul, the externality in which it “feels itself” (ibid., p. 136), relating only to itself and setting the stage for “the higher awakening” (ibid., p. 140) of the soul to the I. This individualization of life, which is not only a function, reattaches Hegel’s philosophy to the contingencies of the world and in relationship with the latter establishes a space of agency and work. A similar conceptual shift can be traced back to Kant,<sup>9</sup> who considered the body essential in the structuring of thoughts or in the constitution of consciousness, under the premise that thought cannot be separated from corporeality.

This in no way implies that it is necessary to renounce the metaphysical primacy of reason itself. On one hand, it only acknowledges bodily sensations as essential in constructing a reasonable reality and thereby reaffirms the exclusivity of the servant’s role in establishing the field of self-consciousness. On the other hand, the body’s banishment in favor of the plight of consciousness returns to affect the self with unforeseen ferocity. This occurs most prominently in the form of anxiety about the entire essence of consciousness when confronting the other or in its extreme form trembling the depths of the self while risking her life. In his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Kant stunningly almost repeats this climax of the struggle for recognition when he highlights the horror of death that the individual

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<sup>9</sup> Conveniently, the *Anthropology* itself provides us with a definition of melancholia that not only is clinical, but also oddly enough renders Kant’s own struggle with this “weakness” (2006, p. 97) ironic, even tragic: a “melancholic [hypochondriac]” man is well aware that the train of his thought does not move properly, but he has “insufficient control over himself to direct, restrain, or impel the course of his thought” (ibid., p. 96).



is faced with. The difference is that Kant is more precise as he equates the void of death with the void of sensation:

The void of sensations we perceive in ourselves arouses a horror (horror vacui) and, as it were, the presentiment of a slow death which is regarded as more painful than when fate suddenly cuts the thread of life. (Kant 2006, p. 12)

It therefore seems that feelings are inseparable from even the most speculative endeavors. However, such affects do not have to reflect metaphysical impasses, as they are also present in more mundane circumstances, for example, in crying, through which, according to Hegel, “pain is transformed, is excreted by the soul from its corporeality” (2007, p. 82).

A few years ago, a book was published whose title captures the spirit of what we are aiming at here. The book by László Földényi is titled *Dostoyevsky Reads Hegel in Siberia and Bursts into Tears*. Several biographies highlighted that Dostoyevsky managed to get his hands on a few books during his time in Siberia, but the only author who is mentioned by name is *Hegel*. The premise of the book rests on a speculation of sorts that the book in question was the Lectures on the philosophy of World History<sup>10</sup> and that the tears were a reaction to Hegel's absolute devotion to reason. For instance, the aforementioned book mentions one of Hegel's passages: “Reason cannot stop to consider

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<sup>10</sup> See A. J. Vrangél, “Dosztojevskijjel Szibériában,” in Istenkereső, polkoljáró. Kortársak beszélnek Dosztojevskijről (Budapest: Aurora, 1968), 137–156. In English, Vrangél's memoirs are partially included in Peter Sekirin, *The Dostoyevsky Archive: Firsthand Accounts of the Novelist from Contemporaries' Memoirs and Rare Periodicals, Most Translated into English for the First Time with a Detailed Lifetime Chronology and Annotated Bibliography*, (Jefferson, N.C., and London: McFarland, 270 Notes to Pages 21–41 1997). Hegel is mentioned in connection with Dostoyevsky and Vrangél's common studies in Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Years of Ordeal, 1850–1859* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 189.

the injuries sustained by single individuals,” and continues, “for particular ends are submerged in the universal end” (1975, p. 43). For Dostoyevsky, the radicalism of this principle rests on his own traumatic experience of the suffering, death, and defenselessness of man, which is presumably in stark contrast to Hegel, for whom, in Dostoyevsky’s eyes, we must look away from all affairs that are not of reason, from all that is not subject to the master, and from everything before which man is helpless. He himself stuck on the outside of the universal festivities of the history of reason, Dostoyevsky felt, hypothetically of course, the dread of nothingness. Overwhelmed, he could do nothing but weep *or*, the alternative presented by Földényi’s book, write and rebel, as embodied by his fictionalized memoir *The House of the Dead*.

However, Hegel may carry too heavy of a burden in this depiction. On the contrary, is it not Hegel, as we have already introduced through the relationship between master and servant, who takes the trouble to persevere all the forms of the spirit. The tensions and excesses that are manifested in the development of reason, in the demand for recognition and in the relation to things that are bound up therewith, are to a certain extent already imprinted in the very science of knowledge. Hegel opens up this science not by depriving the experience of sensuous certainty of its dignity, not brushing it aside, but rather taking it as seriously and necessarily as any other form of reason. There is a place for reflection on the structural place of the rabble and blunting (*Abstumpfung*) of the labor process. If Dostoyevsky wept, he did so for the right reason, namely the dread of nothingness, but with a misplaced emphasis.

Alternatively, we can offer a speculative reading of this curious incident. It refers to the explication of logic in the early passages of the *Encyclopaedia* where Hegel points to the scope of dialectics by highlighting how “even feeling, bodily as well as mental, has its dialectic” (Hegel 2010a, p. 131). To this he immediately adds that “everyone knows how the extremes of pain

and pleasure pass into each other: the heart overflowing with joy seeks relief in tears, and the deepest melancholy will at times betray its presence by a smile” (ibid.). In this context, it would have been more likely that there was a glimmer of hope that sparked Dostoevsky’s cry. It is namely well known that Russian readers and students saw in Hegel’s Lectures an intoxicating and even prophetic value.<sup>11</sup> Especially the idea that by reading history one could become acquainted with the plan of Providence<sup>12</sup> was very influential. But there is also a more agreeable reading if we refer to the emotional tensions present in the relationship between master and servant. Crying in Hegel’s philosophy is not just a random physical affect. In crying, one “externalizes [...] the inner tearing apart of the sensing person caused by a negative, – pain” (Hegel 2007, p. 82). For the servant, just fearing for one’s life is no longer enough to achieve self-consciousness, as there is a certain amount of pain required, pain that can only be embedded in labor and formation. So it was not unHegelian of Deleuze to have said somewhere that a philosophy that causes no tears, no one to cry, is worthless. These characteristics are of no concern to the master, who therefore has no reason to cry.

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<sup>11</sup> See Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago, 1949) and *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Thought* (New York, 1964); Hans Küng, *The Incarnation of God: An Introduction to Hegel’s Theological Thought as Prolegomena to a Future Christology*, trans. J. R. Stephenson (Edinburgh, 1987); Timothy Bahti, *Allegories of History: Literary Historiography after Hegel* (Baltimore, 1992); G. B. Shaimukhambetova, *Gegel’ i vostok: Printsipy podkhoda* (Moscow, 1995); and Du-Yul Song, *Aufklärung und Emanzipation: Die Bedeutung der asiatischen Welt bei Hegel, Marx, und Max Weber* (Berlin, 1987).

<sup>12</sup> “Our cognition consists in gaining insight into the fact that what is purposed by eternal wisdom comes about not only in the realm of nature but also in the world of actual [human events] and deeds. In this respect our consideration is a theodicy, a justification of God” (Hegel 2011, p. 85).

## *Self-Feeling or Worse*

To conclude, let us return to the function of the body. The body is there for a simple reason: for sensation not to crumble away and for life to persist. The servant, himself fearing death, is aware of that, meanwhile, the master's relationship to this precarious situation is less clear in *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Fortunately, we can help ourselves again with Hegel's *Encyclopaedia*. The body is volatile and in need of a structuring principle. Control over the body can be realized only in the embodied individual as "self-feeling," a feeling of oneself, which is a result of specific processes in relation to nature that establish certainty for a particular individual. In the context of self-feeling, Hegel is explicating the soul in which "the subject as such posits [its determinations] within itself as its feelings" (Hegel 2007, p. 114). We already mentioned the detail that the master, as presented in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, is holding himself together by negating the object and thus preserving self-feeling. It is essential insofar as it shows how the master in this procedure, in contrast to the servant, is immersed in a particularity of the sensation. The master follows the particular image of the subject and "at the same time [as he posits these determinations in itself] joins together with itself as subjective unit" (ibid.). As such, the master exists as self-feeling, and yet he is this "only in the particular feeling" (ibid.). Even though we saw that the master was caught up in the struggle for recognition, he is determined by this particularity of feeling. However, if the master is left fixated on this particular feeling, then we are giving the master over to madness. Then what else is madness than the fixation in a particular determination, or, as argued by Hegel, as a "thing [...] of finitude that is held within it" (ibid., p. 115).<sup>13</sup> Now

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<sup>13</sup> "In this determination it is capable of falling into the contradiction between its subjectivity, free for itself, and a particularity which does not become ideal in subjectivity and remains fixed in self-feeling" (Hegel 2007, p. 115).

the master is no longer just stupid, as Žižek points out, but also crazy or mad. This insistence on a particular overdetermining feeling is perhaps the reason that the master never cries and never falters or questions himself. He is caught in his own *asocial* world of resentment and hubris that, nonetheless, as we have showed, needs another as the thing and another consciousness for which this thingliness is essential. While the master seems oblivious to the happenings of servants who can freely commune in their everyday life, the servants themselves are fundamentally tied to the expression of feelings as a sort of social bond. A bond between the servants that rests on the fear of death and the pain of work, but a bond nonetheless.<sup>14</sup>

It is precisely at this point that the figure of the contemporary capitalist master harbors a particular risk to the social bond as such. To shed away his clothes and start worrying about work and the feelings of others. Let us not forget that Hegel was largely inspired by Aristotle in conceptualizing the relationship between master and slave. Admittedly, the relationship is less subtle, having the master as the bearer of reason and the slave as the purveyor of affects,<sup>15</sup> but in this manner the stakes are clearer. For example, the capitalist master readily makes use of or refers to the so-called emotional intelligence, which relies on empathy and social skills. The personification of this figure is Elon Musk, who may not have empathy for individual workers but all of whose endeavors are undertaken for the survival of humankind – a future-oriented empathy for humankind. And this hope has also been embraced

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<sup>14</sup> It is necessary to recognize that fear is intrinsically embedded in self-consciousness as this self is preserved through fear, since “fear is the feeling of my self,” but, and this is crucial, simultaneously a feeling “of an evil that threatens to destroy my self-feeling” (Hegel 2007, p. 210).

<sup>15</sup> The slaves are subject to the senses and to desire and to the physical work that the master forces them to do. It is on the basis of this relationship that the human community is formed as an organic whole of the actualization of this reason.

by protesters in Iran, who have been chanting for Elon Musk to come to their aid.<sup>16</sup> However, the social bonds are premised on the work and tears of the servants and on the idea of the master's exclusion from life and his lack of concern for it. The duty of the slave, the servant, and the worker is therefore to relieve the master of his burden of empathy, of feeling and acting upon that sentiment. You either have an insensitive master *or* worse—we lose reason.<sup>17</sup>

As is well known, the relationship between the master and the servant is expressed through the struggle for recognition of individual consciousness. What is usually overlooked is that the path to self-consciousness is not only paved by negation and renunciation, but also feelings of desire and fear. That the struggle for recognition is intertwined with strong feelings should not, in retrospect, seem unusual as one's own life must be put on the line. After all, one has to risk and sacrifice everything for recognition and certainty of oneself. Feelings may not reflect the spirit as such, but they are a necessary form of the internalization (*Innewerden*) of the spirit.

And it was in this spirit that Mary Magdalene was overwhelmed by her feelings. Let us not forget that she first fled “trembling and bewildered” with Salome from the scene from which Jesus's body disappeared “for they were afraid” (Mark

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<sup>16</sup> To avoid confusion, the issue is not that the Iranian protesters are wrong, as the spirit of the necessary revolution was heard in the chants of “No Mullahs, No Shah, Just Democracy” on the same day. What is at stake is that the noblest and purest people, causes, and ideas are much more susceptible to succumbing to reactionary solutions, which are always at hand, than to the servants of hope who keep people's dreams alive. This makes it all the more important to reject the symbolic gestures that inscribe in radical movements the seeds of their doom, which the outreach to Musk certainly is.

<sup>17</sup> There are two distinct ways of abolishing the master. By addition or subtraction. The second one is based on the necessity to act and to have done away with masters based on transcendence, in the natural order or their assumed position of exception, in the name of reason and knowledge.

16:8). Despite knowing that she might encounter the walking dead son of God at any moment, her restlessness did not give her peace, but it was in this way that she found or grasped herself as other than herself. She returned to the tomb and wept when she first laid eyes on Jesus and mistook him for the gardener. This discordance between her self, who could only recognize a public worker, and herself coming to grasp with her otherness that can recognize the master is in full display. Her weeping was not out of love, gratitude, or sorrow for her Rabboni, but because she underwent the struggle for recognition and, as a servant, committed herself to the duty to the Lord, the absolute master—death. This duty is never solitary as it is always paired with the right. It is a binding relationship that enables “affirmative freedom” (Hegel 2008, p. 157) as it restricts the arbitrariness of the master’s actions, binding in the sense that they bind together in a union. The right of the master is therefore the duty of the servant.

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# Caught in the Web. Media and Authority, Between Old and New

*Yuval Kremnitzer*

An ever-increasing number of world leaders who have risen to power in the liberal-democratic world over the past decades expose the need to rethink such fundamental concepts as authority, sovereignty, legitimacy and power in the modern state. The ascendancy of leaders such as Trump, Erdoğan, Netanyahu, and Putin is perceived as a new political phenomenon, one that often stumps and astonishes scholars of political science. It is easy to classify this new kind of political power as an updated version of populism, especially based on its widespread harnessing of resentment towards the elites, among other things, as a source of influence. Nevertheless, it would seem that the concepts formulated by populism studies fall far short of encapsulating the phenomenon. They fail to provide an explanation for the apparently global nature of the emerging trend, and more importantly, they seem unable to account for the new patterns of legitimation, political discourse, and authority characteristic of this new kind of politics.

The new right seems profoundly antagonistic and transgressive in regards to established liberal norms. In this it resembles the pre-totalitarian atmosphere as described by major commentators such as Arendt (2017, pp. 328-336) and Adorno (2020, pp. 17-19). This startling resemblance gives rise to the troubling expectation that ideological galvanization is soon to present itself. This is certainly a possibility, but far from a necessity. And

indeed, this very expectation might be a serious hindrance in coming to terms with our contemporary political reality. What if our very expectation, based on historical experience, in effect masks what is truly new about new-authoritarianism, namely, its ability to garner support and legitimation based on nothing but its transgressivity? If populism is too broad of a notion to capture what is unique about contemporary, right wing authoritarianism, then the somewhat hasty comparison to 20th-century movements such as fascism and Nazism risks being too narrow. While the comparison is understandable and significant, one is quickly struck by the absence in contemporary authoritarianism of an ideological vision of society such that would mobilize the masses, which seems to have been characteristic of 20th-century political movements. If what we are facing today is a species of totalitarianism, it is a totalitarianism without totality.

In what follows, I suggest, therefore, focusing on what seems to be a quintessential trait of the new politics, which is its direct appeal to the obscene as a source of power. This characteristic is especially striking when it comes to Trump, Netanyahu, and Berlusconi, as attested to by the spirit of hedonism or even vulgarity that surrounds them, in their ability to say things that are taboo, their disregard for the rules of political discourse, the public use of winks and “dog whistles” (i.e. the positioning of the obscene as the center of the transmitted message), and so on and so forth. No wonder such displays elicit the astonishment and frustration of political scholars and commentators. Patterns of discourse and actions that have traditionally been considered destructive to political figures are turning out to be secret weapons for securing power in the hands of these new leaders. They also pose a theoretical challenge to our ideas about political authority and legitimacy.

A good way to elucidate the theoretical challenge this present paper attempts to address is by referring to Hans Christian Andersen’s story “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” which

illustrates a fundamental paradigm of modern thinking on the subject of authority. According to this paradigm, authority is nothing but external attire and all it takes to uncover this fact is to look at it with eyes free of the chains of traditional political culture.<sup>1</sup> If only we can gain enough insight—with the help of critical thinking, rejection of ideology, and recognition of the systems of power—we shall see that underneath the clothes, the people who hold the power are mere flesh and blood, and their nakedness will be exposed to all. And yet, the new authoritarians flaunt their nakedness, in the sense that their patterns of recruitment, legitimation, and maintenance of power are in fact based on the exposure and blatancy that they themselves perpetrate. Much of their appeal lies in this act of exposure.

One way of explaining the global nature of new-authoritarian legitimation patterns would be to link it to the development of new media. In order to establish the relation between the new politics and new media condition, it is necessary to address fundamental questions regarding new media. The fundamental question in this regard is what can be labeled the web's democratic paradox. In its first stages, the internet seemed to promise to advance democracy, enabling unprecedented freedom of speech and pluralism. This faith was founded on firm bases: the web's decentralized framework, the possibilities it opened up for individual self-expression, and individually-tailored use—all of which were perceived as the direct opposite of the centralized, unidirectional, homogenous broadcast media. While in some areas the web might have fulfilled its democratic promise, in other terrains it delivered

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<sup>1</sup> To borrow the terms of Ernst Kantorowicz's classic essay, the king's "attire" is that which distinguishes between his "natural" or mortal body and his immortal body, the body politic that represents the continuity of the nation. The king's insignia—his "ring, tiara, and purple"—are material objects that signify the transformation of a pretender to the throne into a king, and their removal, conversely, strips him of the king's dignity and authority, the consequences of which are often dreadful. See Kantorowicz 1956, pp. 35-6.

the opposite outcome. Phenomena such as online shaming, conspiracy theories, and hate groups have found the internet fertile ground for their toxic social effects, displaying social behaviors that were associated in the 19th century with the “crowd”: a lack of judgment, loosening of the inhibitive effect of social norms, and diffusion of the limits of the self. John Suler coined the term “the dis-inhibition effect” (2004) to describe how, paradoxically, online media enforces a new mode of disinhibition that is not experienced as a release of the self, but as an injury to its integrity.

The internet, which began as a promise to radically democratize human communications, a promise to deliver us from the remainders of authority inscribed in the very centralized nature of broadcast—which allows, as it were, for authority figures to speak at us, putting us in the position of passive spectators. Yet somehow, this decentralizing medium of the internet has come to host and proliferate a culture ridden by conspiracy theories, shaming, and cyberbullying, and a corresponding politics of obscenity, in which disinhibition endows certain politicians with a unique type of aura and authority, quite similar to that which, according to Freud’s famed analysis, attaches to the leader of the crowd (Freud 1949, p. 102). The only difference is that our crowd behavior, so to speak, is no longer eruptive, but somehow integrated into our daily lives.

Now, the notion that these things—new authoritarianism and new media—somehow belong together is embarrassingly obvious, and yet, at the same time, I would argue, it is profoundly puzzling, posing some deep theoretical challenges. We soon run into a bifurcation, a cross in the road. Political theorists and social scientists who study the new wave of populist authoritarianism tend to view technology as epiphenomenal to their topic, a mere means of communication, utilized for effective propaganda, whereas theorists of technology tend to view the transformation in technology as almost a lone factor, certainly the determining one. But this is not merely a problem of the scholarly division

of labor, a matter of perspective; what is at stake is a profound puzzle regarding the very nature of power.

Why is it puzzling? It is puzzling because, in this conjuncture of technology and authority, in terms of mastery, we have two, opposing complaints. When it comes to technology, we tend to complain that we have not yet, and maybe can no longer, master technology, our instruments have turned against us, and we are dealing here with a slave revolt that we cannot crush. In the words of philosopher of technology Bernard Stiegler, it is an issue of questioning “what power (*pouvoir*) do we have over our power (*puissance*)?” (Stiegler 1998, p. 21). Our means of mastery have turned against us. In politics, on the other hand, we tend to complain that we have not yet shaken off the shackles of old masters. Indeed, we are witnessing the rise of something that resembles the primordial, mythological, uncastrated father Freud writes about in his *Totem and Taboo*, a leader who governs by means of standing outside social laws, unencumbered by the inhibitions and taboos that define social life (Freud 1950, pp. 91-2).

There seems to be a short circuit between two opposite tendencies: we get a strong sense that technology is heralding us towards a post-human future; it decentralizes, disrupts, diffuses, and deindividuates (Deleuze 1992, p. 5), whereas authority, and in particular authoritarianism, seems to be all too human, an atavistic, primordial mode of attachment, firmly rooted in the archaic, mythological past, maybe even our animal nature. Technology leads us towards an impersonal and hyperrational world, to such an extent that it renders human subjectivity outmoded, threatening some of the core, essential features of our human subjectivity, ushering in a post-human age. Authority, on the other hand, anchors our subjective identifications to particular authority figures and seems to be hopelessly primitive and irrational.

Somehow, the forward rush and constant disruption driven by new technologies coincides with the return of the repressed, and so we find ourselves pushed towards a (pre)theoretical choice:

either we view the transformation in media technology as fundamental, and the political and cultural content of the moment as epiphenomenal, or the other way around: what we are seeing is yet another return of the repressed, and technical media is ultimately but a means of its expression.

To mention just two quick examples: for a philosopher of technology such as Bernard Stiegler, the story of our moment is about how the dialectics between disruptive technological innovation and its subsequent absorption into culture, the phase in which it becomes second nature, absorbed into the background, is something digital technology no longer permits, for it has made disruption its eternal entelechy, so to speak (Stiegler 2019, p. 52). One way of grasping this point would be to notice how generations are a trait now possessed by technology, not by culture. We have a 2.0 etc. for all of our devices, and can no longer sustain a relationship between generations in society. For Stiegler, the cultural and political phenomena we observe are epiphenomenal of this fundamental arrhythmia of digital technology we have reached. Nonetheless, he hangs his hopes on law and culture somehow reigning in digital disruption (*ibid.*, pp. 232-3).

On the other hand, an intelligent analyst of contemporary global power, such as historian Timothy Snyder, is capable of observing how, while sharing some qualities with both tyranny and totalitarianism, a regime such as Putin's

functions not by mobilizing society with the help of a single grand vision, as fascist Germany and Italy did, but by demobilizing individuals, assuring them that there are no certainties and no institutions that can be trusted...the Putin regime is imperialist and oligarchic, dependent for its existence on propaganda that claims that all the world is ever such. (Snyder 2022)

While these are certainly valuable observations, touching on a significant difference between contemporary authoritarianism and its 20th-century predecessor, for Snyder, not only is media

technology epiphenomenal, an instrument of propaganda, but, because of that very perception, he identifies the nihilism of Russian propaganda with the older generation of passive TV spectators, and hangs his hopes on a new generation for whom the web has become second nature, to fight for democracy. These are not just parallel arguments, different perspectives: they form a contradiction and it is impossible to reconcile them. So, which is it? Where is the locus of power?

The wager of my intervention here is that this contradictory attitude towards mastery might provide us with an opportunity to approach the contradictory nature of mastery as such. So, let this be our guiding hypothesis: Technology and authority—their impossible conjunction is the contradiction of mastery.

Let us begin by conceptually developing the tension between authority and technology. Then, we shall turn to Lacan in order to pose this (non)relation more precisely, and in direct correspondence with the technological event of our time, namely, the emergence of a world thoroughly networked by computers. With this, we shall come full circle in order to ask some fundamental questions about the relation between the medium of the web and the cultural contents that plague it.

### *Authority and Tradition—A Hermeneutical Circle*

In her well-known essay “What is Authority?” Arendt approaches the object of her essay, Authority, obliquely, making clear right from the beginning that authority is no longer known to us, a thing of the past, felt by us only through the symptoms of its—probably fatal—crisis.

In order to avoid misunderstanding, it might have been wiser to ask in the title: What was—and not what is—authority? For it is my contention that we are tempted and entitled to raise this question

because authority has vanished from the modern world. Since we can no longer fall back upon authentic and undisputable experience common to all, the very term has become clouded by controversy and confusion. Little about its nature appears self-evident or even comprehensible to everybody, except that the political scientist may still remember that this concept was once fundamental to political theory, or that most will agree that a constant, ever-widening and deepening crisis of authority has accompanied the development of the modern world in our century. (Arendt 1961, p. 91)

So, authority is a thing of the past. This brief formula captures both what is perhaps the most essential feature of authority, and the reason for its epistemological unavailability. As we shall see, this unavailability or opacity of authority is a constant, and yet also what underwrites its profound transformation in modernity. Authority and tradition, I argue, form a hermeneutical circle, which, in one way, is precisely what made authority such an elusive concept, and is, in another way, all there is to know about both terms.

Let us begin with the modern, epistemological barrier: definitions of authority rely on a concept of tradition, whereas definitions of tradition rely on a concept of authority. We understand tradition to be that form of life in which authority is, or was, in full sway, and authority, as a mode of power that relies on tradition for its legitimacy. This is why “traditional” societies are the original object of anthropology, as it is what fascinated modern researchers about them—authority at its purest is the authority of a life form, of the unwritten rules of society, without recourse to grand mechanisms of control and enforcement such as the law and state bureaucracy. What, in the absence of modern mechanisms of power, holds such societies in order (Maine 1914, pp. 359-383, Mamdani 2012, pp. 21-23)?

Take Max Weber’s classical discussion of the three sources of legitimacy. In his famous lecture *Politics as Vocation* (1946), Weber mentions three sources of legitimacy: 1. Tradition. 2. Legality.



3. Charisma. In his lecture, Weber quickly puts aside tradition as a source of legitimacy and focuses instead on legality and charisma, presumably, as the latter two remain relevant to the modern society that is the topic of his lecture.

What is striking about the two sources of legitimacy he does develop is their polar opposition. The connection to the charismatic leader is personal, whereas legality is appealing in its impersonal impartiality. Whereas the charismatic leader is defined by his mandate, that is, in Weber's terms, he is judged on the basis of his ability to attain goals and fulfill purposes, the legitimacy of legality lies in its instrumental and formal rationality, standing above, or underneath, the political debate over values and goals. It is technical or instrumental. It is the mechanism required for the accomplishment of any policy and the appraisal of its reasonability, the very medium in which the political debate can take place.

Today the two sources of modern legitimacy mentioned by Weber seem to be locking horns, entangled in a direct confrontation. Legality has come under attack mostly from the political right as politically biased ("the deep state"), undermining its claim for neutrality. This politicization of the neutral medium is a main feature of the new right, arguably, the core message of a new type of post-ideological charismatic authoritarianism. On the opposite side of the political fence, legality has become a strange political battle cry, which unwittingly participates in the politicization of that which draws its legitimacy from being a neutral medium.

Is there something outside the forced choice between charisma and legality that seems to underlie our current predicament? Perhaps there is something to be gained from what Max Weber discarded, namely, tradition. In contradistinction from both charisma and legality, whose appealing rationale is thoroughly discussed by Weber, tradition's appeal is defined by Weber tautologically — it is the legitimacy afforded to 'the eternal yesterday', to that which always-already precedes us. (Weber 1946, pp. 78-9) Tradition draws its authority from being tradition. Implicitly, we

inherit from Weber a notion of traditional legitimation as uncritical, the unthinking acceptance of that which comes down to us. As such, it is lost to modernity. We can no longer naively rely on that which has come before.

And so, it is certainly to Arendt's credit that she approaches authority as primordialily lost to modernity. But Arendt does not simply identify authority with the most primitive, with origin or beginning. Arendt famously argues that authority as a concrete cultural experience was absent from Greek culture, and thus comes to us from the Romans, who then, retroactively, constitute the Greeks as their—and therefore our—intellectual authorities or forefathers. In Arendt's account, western Political philosophy in its entirety emerges against this blank, this absence, which therefore could be said to occupy a position somewhat analogous to Heidegger's Being, the forgetting of which constitutes in his account western metaphysics.

For Arendt, our entire political tradition, beginning with Plato and Aristotle, is a massive forgetting of authority. The notion of authority, which implies an obedience in which freedom is retained, is inaccessible as long as we rely on the Greek division between despotic, coercive rule, natural in the household and illegitimate in the city, which is founded on freedom. (pp. 105-6).<sup>2</sup> And yet the “origin” of authority is not sought by Arendt in the Greek's own forerunners—she doesn't turn, as Heidegger did, to

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<sup>2</sup> Nicole Loraux's impressive study of the structural, mythical presence of stasis—civil war—in Greek culture and thought, can be interpreted as lending credence to Arendt's claim. The Greeks develop against an experience of a centuries-long civil struggle, organized to a large extent around the tension between a form of rule derived from the *oikos*, the family household bound to the necessities of nature, and the *polis*, the city. See Loraux, 2006, 15-44. Authority, it is implied in Arendt's account, is neither familial nor political, but rather resides in their point of extimacy, precisely the place Agamben reserves for stasis (Agamben 2015, p. 16). Elsewhere, Agamben explicitly links the question of authority to civil war. There, he seems to imply, the struggle is to a large extent around the very possibility of authority's existence alongside power (Agamben 2005, pp. 86-87).

the pre-Socratics, or as an anthropologist might, to an even more traditional society — but rather to the Greek’s successors, the Romans. Authority, as it emerges from Arendt’s account, is at once primordially lost, and somehow secondary, restorative, reactive. It is, as Arendt picks up from the word’s etymology, an act of augmentation, specifically, of the foundations, thereby retroactively constituting them as such, as foundational. Authority is nothing but this circularity between establishment and reinforcement: a foundation operates as such — as truly foundational — only insofar as it has to be repeatedly augmented, only as long as we cannot tear it down and erect a new edifice in its stead. It is hallowed ground.

Implicit in Arendt’s account of the secondary, retroactive place of authority in western history, is indeed a theory of its very historicity. It is because the west originally lacks an authoritative foundation that philosophy — not only political philosophy — is born, and the placing of that very philosophy as an authoritative foundation cannot but have a dialectical result, pushing us to search for firmer ground, and undermine it, again and again.

Compare, if you will, Lovejoy’s famous thesis to Arendt’s. For Lovejoy, “the great chain of being” that came to form the underlying ontological preposition of the greater part of western history was a compromise formation, an attempt to account for conflicting demands, at once philosophical and religious, that the ground of reality would be both transcendent (otherworldly) and effective (in the realm of the senses) (Lovejoy 2001, pp. 45-6). Plato’s ideas were the first philosophical articulation of such a double, contradictory demand.<sup>3</sup> For Arendt, Plato’s theory of ideas as a transcendent standard emerges directly from the absence of, for the Greeks, the experience of authority. In the absence of

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<sup>3</sup> Agamben traces the political genealogy of this very same tension. For Agamben, our fundamental notions of power are a secularization of the tension between God’s sovereign power and his providential governance of the world (2011).

authority, standards lack, she suggests, an efficiency of their own and can only become instrumental tools in the hands of philosopher kings (p. 110). Can we conceive of an efficacy that is different in kind from the compulsory action of one body on another? This, as we shall see, is indeed the problem raised by Arendt. Authority is eclipsed, for us, because we find it next to impossible to think of such a modality of power, a power not measured by its actualization. Its effectiveness is increased in direct proportion to its remaining virtuality. What makes authority difficult to grasp is precisely its strange, indirect presence.

Since authority is unapproachable, inaccessible, we might get a better understanding of Arendt's interpretation of it if we follow her strategy and approach it through its very disappearance, by means of that which eclipses it. Significantly, Arendt views the rise of the functional view of society as the other side of the decline of authority.

There exists a silent agreement in most discussions among political and social scientists that we can ignore distinctions and proceed on the assumption that everything can eventually be called anything else, and that distinctions are meaningful only to the extent that each of us has the right "to define his terms." Yet does not this curious right, which we have come to grant as soon as we deal with matters of importance—as though it were actually the same as the right to one's own opinion—already indicate that such terms as "tyranny," "authority," "totalitarianism," have simply lost their common meaning, or that we have ceased to live in a common world where the words we have in common possess an unquestionable meaningfulness ... [the] theory implicitly challenging the importance of making distinctions is, especially in the social sciences, the almost universal functionalization of all concepts and ideas. A convenient instance may be provided by the widespread conviction in the free world that communism is a new "religion," notwithstanding its avowed atheism, because it fulfills socially, psychologically, and "emotionally" the same function traditional religion fulfilled... (Arendt, p. 102)

For Arendt, the fact that we can speak of a function of authority already means that it is utterly lost to us. Although Arendt doesn't quite spell it out, we may offer several different ways in which authority as it emerges from her essay is the obverse of the functional:

1. If authority is lost once we can speak of it as a function, this is because authority "functions" to the extent that it is taken for granted, presupposed, operative insofar as it forms the very background of our reality: "the groundwork" of the world, as Arendt puts it (p. 95). It is to be taken on trust, implicitly. To view it as a function is the first sign of its malfunctioning, so to speak, its loss of immediacy and transparency. If authority cannot be taken for granted, it cannot be taken at all, would be the idea. In this sense, authority is necessarily veiled; we are not to see behind its curtain. Recall the famous quote attributed to Bismarck, according to which laws and sausages are two things about whose production processes the public should not be made aware. The function of authority is mysterious, indeed, the mystery as to its functioning is the essential ingredient of its unique functionality. This is one way of understanding the importance of ceremony, or what Walter Benjamin called "Cult Value" for traditional authority (Benjamin 1969, p. 7). And hence the appearance of authority via the medium of crisis—it only comes to view when things are not quite right, where there is a significant enough disturbance to the "smooth running" of things. As Agamben notes, the senate's authority was invoked, in Roman law, in the "interregnum," in the time between one established, or posited order, and the next, in the vacuum of power (Agamben, 2005, p. 79).

2. Authority does not perform a function. It is profoundly anti-instrumental, and cannot be viewed as a means to an end. We know this, although we hardly understand it—authority is not something to be executed or realized, but is a virtual presence that accompanies power, giving it or withholding from it symbolic support. It ceremoniously augments acts and institutions by

sanctioning them, permitting them a symbolic entrance into the space of possibility. This is perhaps the key to its fraught distinction and relation to power, as we commonly understand that term, a relation “at once antagonistic and supplementary” (Agamben 2005, p. 80). Authority is not something to be enforced; it does not hinge on its realized effects and it is “more than advice, less than a command,” as the famous quote from Mommsen describes it. Authority is superfluous, signatorial, and yet, as such, essential.

3. Authority is substantial, it attaches itself to concrete individuals—a person or a tradition. It is never, as Arendt emphasizes, “authority in general.” It is rooted or seeks to be so, and is by no means something transferrable and translatable in the way that a function is. Put in problematic functional terms, it is precisely what endows a person, an institution, or an activity with substance, a dimension of depth, gravitas, the corporeal density of material, as opposed to formal, distinction.

4. Authority belongs to a substantial *We*, a pre-individual sense of community, of a commitment to *our* way of life. To view it as a function is to view things externally, as it were, from a sociological, scientific point of view, which can only conceive of society as a functional construct. Authority, as we have already indicated, is directly linked to the mysterious way in which I am inscribed into a given community. It is a view from within a medium of tradition, hence Arendt’s turn to the particular history she sees herself an heir to, the history of western political thought. This is also why, in her account, when authority is intact, it brings together freedom and hierarchy. Properly authorized, things are in their right place, so to speak. There is an accepted hierarchy, a sacred order. Hierarchy and freedom coincide, insofar as I can see my concrete freedom as inseparable from the totality to which I belong. It is, say, as a father that I realize myself, as a son and a citizen of my country, as opposed to a liberal, formal-legal abstraction. It is an order in which differences—between the young and the old, between men and women, between nobles and serfs—must be accepted and reinforced.

5. Authority is paradigmatic. It belongs to an order in which the singular is not posed as the opposite of the general rule, but as its expression or manifestation. The link between authority and charisma (Agamben 2005, pp. 83-84), has to do with this feature. Authority is not an office, a role—a function—that can be fulfilled. Terms like a position of authority, or “the authorities,” betray the extent to which we can only understand authority in functional terms. The mystery raised by Lorraine Daston as to the now lost meaning of paradigm as rule, and not as its opposition (Daston 2022, pp. 8), is not merely analogous to the eclipse of authority, but belongs to one and the same constellation. As emerges from Daston’s study of rules, the capacities associated with learning from example (discretion) are inseparable from structures of authority, such as monasteries (Daston 2022, pp. 41-44). To learn the lessons of the paradigmatic exemplar is the other side of the coin, which could also be described as learning to respect authorities. Both aspects belong to, depend on, and reinforce a medium of tradition.

6. Finally, authority is grounded in the law insofar as it is both given and transcendent, a medium in which society is constituted rather than itself a constituted, man-made order. This is what distinguishes it from tyranny, according to Arendt:

even the most draconic authoritarian government is bound by laws. Its acts are tested by a code which was made either not by man at all, as in the case of the law of nature or God’s commandments or the platonic ideas, or at least not by those actually in power. The source of authority in authoritarian government is always a force external and superior to its own power; it is always this source, this external force which transcends the political realm, from which authorities derive their “authority,” that is, their legitimacy, and against which their power can be checked. (Arendt 1961, p. 97)

The law is operative in an authoritarian structure, insofar as it is precisely not a function anyone can master, that is, precisely

insofar as the law has no human author, and no human can place themselves in the position of its author.

### *Authority, Old and New*

Although Arendt never quite fully spells it out, there is an intimate link between the topic of her most famous book, totalitarianism, and the topic of one of her most famous standalone essays, authority. While these two political concepts are in many ways diametrically opposed, both occupy a space that the major opposition in western political thought, between legitimate rule and rule by force, seems to deny.

Instead of saying that totalitarian government is unprecedented, we could also say that it has exploded the very alternative on which all definitions of the essence of government have been based in political philosophy, that is the alternative between lawful and lawless government, between arbitrary and legitimate power. It defies, it is true, all positive laws ..., but It operates neither without guidance of law nor is it arbitrary, for it claims to obey strictly those laws of nature or of history from which all positive laws always have been supposed to spring ... It is the monstrous, yet seemingly unanswerable claim of totalitarian rule that, far from being "lawless" it goes to the sources of authority from which positive laws received their ultimate legitimation, that far from being arbitrary it is more obedient to those suprahuman forces than any government ever was before, and that far from wielding its power in the interest of one man, it is quite prepared to sacrifice everybody's vital immediate interests to the execution of what it assumes to be the law of history or the law of nature. (Arendt 1998, p. 461)

Totalitarianism is neither tyranny, the rule of one against all, nor is it democratically legitimate, the rule of the many against one, and the very same can be said of authority as explored by Arendt, which is undoubtedly legitimate, although its source



of legitimacy is certainly one that transcends the polity and its freedom. There is an implicit thesis that emerges when we bring together Arendt's reflections on totalitarianism and her reflections on authority: totalitarianism lays claim to a direct contact with the transcendent, mysterious source of authority. We might say that in its modern blend of legitimate and illegitimate rule, of lawlessness and law, totalitarianism comes to occupy the logical space left open by the absence of authority. In a way, much of the horror of totalitarianism is attributed by Arendt to its coming to assume the *function* of authority.

What about contemporary, new authoritarianism? Arendt's account so far helps us appreciate the extent to which our new authoritarianism is structured as an anti-authoritarianism. If the unwritten law for Arendt, is—we could say, as such, as unwritten—what serves as the ultimate standard of any authority figure, what are we to make of a Trump or Netanyahu, who are precisely capable of attaining authority and garnering legitimacy by means of transgressing these very unwritten laws? New authoritarianism, it would seem, lays no claim to a “higher law,” say, the laws of nature, as in pseudo biological racism, or history, as in communist interpretations of the laws of materialist dialectics governing the historical process. Instead, it makes direct contact with the unwritten law underlying authority, by calling attention to its elusive, implicit presence, and rebelling against it.

Authority as described by Arendt is one, historically significant way of making the mystery of language – the fact that it always already precedes us, that it is the medium in which we are individuated – legitimate. The new modality of authority, on the contrary, is premised on the illegitimacy of anything we are called upon to take on trust. Do your own research! is the injunction of the internet conspiracy theorists, their version of Kant's dare to know! The new authoritarian leader appears as the one who exposes the false pretense of the established institutions and norms

on which we rely. Rather than participating in the ceremonial mystery of authority, new authority figures appear to be radically anti-ceremonial, tearing down all the symbolic facades of power.

### *The Censor, the King, and the Pen*

In the classical modality of authority, the figure of authority, say the king, gives body (figure) to the unwritten law that authorizes him, but he is not its source. In his Seminar II, to which we shall return, Lacan gives this dimension of the “the law in so far as it is not understood” in his words, a psychoanalytic name: censorship.

By definition, no one is taken to be ignorant of the law, but it is never understood, for no one can grasp it in its entirety. The primitive who is caught up in the laws of kinship, of alliance, of the exchange of women, never has, even if he is very learned, a complete vision of what it is in this totality of the law that has a hold over him... That is censorship. It is the law in so far it is not understood. (Lacan 1991, p. 127).

Lacan’s point about censorship is subtle and can be easily missed. Censorship turns an impossibility into a prohibition. The law has an unknowable, unwritten dimension. In order to become full subjects of the law, censorship forbids us from admitting something everybody knows all too well. In this way, censorship “symbolizes,” by means of prohibition, what is structurally impossible in the law. What is untotalizable about the law, its unsayable, unknowable dimension, is totalized by isolating special well-known things and making them forbidden from discourse. This is one way in which to understand the strange feature of “taboo,” noted by Freud, its reference to both the prohibited, terrifying thing and the prohibition itself. (Freud 1950, p. 21) By making something “taboo,” we isolate the areas of discourse that we are to circumvent, so as not to encounter head

on what, in discourse, is for us thing-like, non-discursive in its effect—sheer opacity. Lacan makes his point by means of a rather humoristic—and strangely current—example, in which the law forbids us from saying that the king of England is an idiot under penalty of death by beheading.

If it is forbidden to say that the king of England is an idiot, under pain of having one's head cut off, one will not say it, and in consequence of this sole fact, one will be led into not saying a great many other things—that is to say, everything which reveals the glaring reality that the king of England is an idiot... the subject of the king of England has many reasons for wanting to express things which have a most direct relation with the fact that the king of England is an idiot. Let us say it passes into his dreams... the subject dreams that he has his head cut off. (Lacan 1991, p. 128)

Censorship forbids us, that is, from making explicit what everybody knows, what can only be alluded to, hinted at, expressed indirectly, a driver of subtle subversion—that, underneath the crown, there is a human being just like us, more or less an idiot. He is merely fulfilling a function. To make the mechanics of authority explicit is tantamount to sacrilege—it points out the constructed, arbitrary structure of rule. To admit this is taboo. Making public what everybody knows involves a strange “reflective” twist. It transforms that which “everybody knows” into something which “everybody knows that everybody knows.” It discloses an open secret. From this point on, you may go on ignoring it, but, you are, as it were, explicitly implicated in the act of censorship. The subject of such open secrets is a figure of the “big other,” as dubbed by Slavoj Žižek, the other supposed to believe, the subject whose innocence must be protected. To bypass censorship is to make the “innocent” other aware of what everybody else already knows.

What interests Lacan in censorship is its productive function. The forbidden statement incites much psychic activity in the subjects of this king of England, and censorship appears by

means of their dreams: being unable to say that the king is an idiot, the subject dreams that he has his head cut off. So, where are we now? Everyone is allowed, indeed incited, to say that the king of England is an idiot. It even seems to be inscribed into the ceremony of coronation—in a video that went viral, in the days leading to the coronation of Charles the III, we all had to watch Charles get annoyed at a pen, like him, failing to fulfill his one and only function—to produce a signature!

We are ceremoniously anti-ceremonial. Furthermore, we now have kings, authority figures, that ceaselessly display their idiocy, making themselves utterly immune to such ridicule. Not only immune—the more they are mocked, the stronger they seem to get. Has censorship been lifted? Are we no longer under the influence of the unwritten law, the law insofar as it is not understood? Does it no longer have a hold on us? We can mock the king, and the king makes a mockery of himself, but we still dream—now more than ever—that our heads have been cut off. Our fantasy of being seized by blind mechanisms of power, being headless subjects, is the clearest sign that censorship is more powerful than ever at the very moment it seems to have disappeared. It is within this dream that we need to search for what could be called the censorship of censorship.

### *From Substance to Network*

We have seen, on Arendt's part, that authority is occluded by functionality. Now let us turn to look at how things appear from the other side, as it were, from the side of the domain of intelligibility of functionality, namely, technology. Philosopher of technology Gilbert Simondon describes the technical mentality (and technical being) as juxtaposed to the rationale of religion, like figure to ground.

Technicity appears as a structure that resolves an incompatibility: it specializes the figural functions, while religions on their side specialize the functions of ground; the original magical universe, which is rich in potentials, structures itself by splitting in two. (Simondon 2017, p. 169)

Simondon's juxtaposition, or bifurcation to use his terms, of technology and religion, it might be noted, is taken by him to be more primitive than the bifurcation between theory and practice. What he terms "magic" is his attempt to capture the primordial ground of intelligibility, "before" the seemingly primordial distinction between figure and ground, without automatically falling into the trap of "the night in which, as the saying goes, all cows are black" (Hegel 2018, §16), that is, a situation in which no significant difference can emerge. According to Simondon's account, in the magical phase of being, technology and religion are conjoined. Magic, for Simondon, is both religious technology and technological religion. This primal unity of technology and religion in magic is brought up by Simondon in his account of the centrality of singular points in space, such as mountain tops, in which there is a meeting between human and cosmic powers (Simondon 2017, pp. 180-1). And so, Simondon's magical phase is emphatically pre-historical. It is a present that can have no before and no after. In it, space and time form privileged sites of conversion, where human, finite agency and the cosmic absolute come together. While concentrated in such privileged sites, it is unclear how such an ultimately flat ontology can allow for transformative events, for moments that introduce a gap between "before" and "after," to introduce a significant tear in the fabric of space and time thus woven together. Nonetheless, rather inexplicably, this "magical" phase bifurcates, as it cannot sustain the polarity it holds together, and the primal bifurcation is that between religion, which seeks to grasp things in their super-phenomenal totality, that is, it inquires after the ground of being, and technology, which seeks

to grasp things in their phenomenal partiality. Technology thus arises as functional to its core, and in bifurcation with religion.

A mode of knowledge *sui generis*, that essentially uses the analogical transfer and the paradigm, and finds itself on the discovery of common modes of functioning—or of regimes of operation—in otherwise different orders of reality that are chosen just as well from the living or the inert as from the human or the non-human. (Simondon 2012, p. 1)

If authority is effaced by the functional view, then it is precisely technology, or the technical mentality that does the effacing. Consider the two postulates Simondon offers for the technological mentality:

1. The subjects are relatively detachable from the whole of which they are a part.
2. If one wants to understand a being completely, one must study it by considering it in its entelechy, and not in its inactivity or its static state. (Simondon 2012, pp. 3-4)

If authority belongs to a substantial whole, technology is what tears it apart. If authority is to be grasped as pure virtuality, technology is all about actualization. If authority preserves and sacralizes the past, technology finds its end in the open-ended future, it has to materialize itself in ever more concrete form. It is, so to speak, that which understands its own being as developmental, as that which, beginning abstractly, must find in development its concrete existence (Simondon 2017, pp. 25-29). Simondon develops a full-blown philosophical account of technical objects, which hinges on the realization of the fundamentally de-essentializing nature of the technical, its pure functionality. To paraphrase Heidegger, Simondon's point can be summed up by the slogan: "the essence of technology is (to demonstrate that) nothing (is) essential." If authority belongs to a sacralizing intelligibility,

technology is its direct opposite, desacralizing everything, stripping it down to its function. In terms of the distinction made famous by Kant, technology is the mother of understanding, and authority the mother of reason. Understanding analyzes and tears apart, whereas reason demands that things should be brought together into a comprehensible—if uncomprehended—totality.

This is why Simondon conceives of the network—what he has in mind is a power grid, but also communication networks—as the highest realization of the inessential nature of the technical. Indeed, without explicitly avowing it, it seems evident that in the technical network Simondon detects a new, perhaps higher phase of the primordially lost magic.

It is the standardization of the subsets, the industrial possibility of the production of separate pieces that are all alike, that allows for the creation of networks ... it is not a question here of the rape of nature or of the victory of the human being over the elements, because in fact it is the natural structures themselves that serve as the attachment point for the network that is being developed; the relay points of the Hertzian 'cables', for example, rejoin with the high sites of ancient sacredness above the valleys and the seas. Here, the technical mentality successfully completes itself and rejoins nature by turning itself into a thought-network, into the material and conceptual synthesis of particularity and concentration, individuality and collectivity—because the entire force of the network is available in each one of its points, and its mazes are woven together with those of the world, in the concrete and the particular. (Simondon 2012, p. 9)

And so, we arrive at our first, possible definition of the network, from the standpoint of the philosophy of technology: The network is precisely a way to realize (in the dual sense of the term) the part-whole relation in a non-organic, insubstantial way. Neither the part nor the whole are substances, only their reticular relation, whose primary aim is to prevent them from stabilizing

into anything resembling the philosophical notion of substance. From substance to network, if you will. Ultimately, for Simondon, the network is the way in which virtuality is actualized as such, paradoxical as this must be. To make this more readily graspable, let us look at how Simondon describes the ideal (i.e. fully realized or concrete) technical object:

The essential lies in this: in order for an object to allow for the development of the technical mentality and to be chosen by it, the object itself needs to be of a reticular structure. [...] If one imagines an object that, instead of being closed, offers parts that are conceived as being as close to indestructible as possible, and others by contrast... [with] a very high capacity to adjust each usage, one obtains an open object that can be completed, improved, maintained in the state of perpetual actuality... The postindustrial technical object is the unity of two layers of reality—a layer that is as stable and permanent as possible, which adheres to the user and is made to last, and a layer that can be perpetually replaced, changed, renewed, because it is made up of elements that are all similar, impersonal, mass produced by industry and distributed by all the networks of exchange. (*Ibid.*, p. 12)

This is quite a striking description of the smartphone, especially considering its author passed away in 1989. The point is that it is through participation in this network that the technical object always remains contemporary to its use, always new. A perfected technical object is a concrete manifestation of the network, and the network is actualized virtuality, a system for perpetual entelechy. Of course, this leaves out not only the way such functionality itself functions symbolically (Baudrillard 1996, pp. 110-113) but also the ontological radicality of this realization, or what drives us towards such a realization (Kremnitzer 2022, pp. 148-9), not to mention the question of our addictive relation to these little gadgets, the manner in which we enjoy them, and the perverse content they seem to engender, but we are getting ahead of ourselves.



Before we move on to Lacan, let us explicitly address the major theoretical challenge we have stumbled upon here. In speaking about authority, we found ourselves talking about a certain relation to our linguistic being, our being in language, the way it always precedes us, and is unknown by us. And while speaking about technology, we were made aware of the radically de-essentializing, disruptive effect of technology, perhaps culminating in the medium in which we find ourselves today. When it comes to inquiries about language and media, there seems to be something akin to the famous uncertainty principle in physics: the more one focuses on the effects of historically particular technical media, the less one is capable of grasping mediation as such, namely language, and vice versa.

We might get a little aid here from Marshall McLuhan, best known for his oft quoted and mostly misunderstood slogan: “The medium is the message.”

In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message ... the instance of the electric light may prove illuminating in this connection. The electric light is pure information. It is a medium without a message, as it were, unless it is used to spell out some verbal ad or name. This fact, characteristic of all media, means that the “content” of any medium is always another medium. The content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print, and print is the content of the telegraph ... when the light is used for brain surgery or night baseball [it] is a matter of indifference. It could be argued that these activities are in some way the “content” of the electric light, since they could not exist without the electric light. This fact merely underlines the point that “the medium is the message” because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action. The content or uses of such media are as diverse as they are ineffectual in shaping the form of human association. Indeed, it is only too typical that the “content” of any new medium blinds us to the

character of the medium ... the electric light escapes attention as a communication medium just because it has no “content.” And this makes it an invaluable instance of how people fail to study media at all. (McLuhan 1994, pp. 7-9)

McLuhan is not known for the clarity of his argumentation, and so it is easy to miss the full significance of what is here postulated. What is at stake is nothing short of the very distinction between a medium and a mean. We may therefore reconstruct his argument and pick up a few crucial points: A medium is not to be understood as a specific use of technology, a specialized function, say, a ‘means of communication’. The medium is what emerges in the gap between the use of a technology, its function, what he calls content, and the message, we might say its significance—the way it reshapes our very “groundwork,” the way we associate and act. The difficulty in studying media, the reason why McLuhan quite rightly argues that we mostly fail to study it, is precisely that the medium is an entity of the gap between our intentional use of things, as a means to ends, which is the viewpoint of technology—but also, mind you, of power—and what happens to us, the way we are, in our very activity, inscribed in a medium we cannot quite be cognizant of.

For our purposes here, what matters is the striking resemblance between McLuhan’s account of media and Arendt’s analysis of authority, as the groundwork and flipside of functionality. But it also adds a significant twist to it. In itself, the medium is totally transparent, indeed, a matter of indifference, and it can only come to view when covered over by content, in its very eclipse, as it were. We need only add, as Lacan does, that this also pertains to our natural language.

As Lacan puts it apropos of the terms we used above of figure and ground; both are, as it were, manifestations of the gap: “Where is the background? Is it absent? No. Rupture, split, the stroke of the opening makes absence emerge—just as the cry does not stand

against a background of silence, but on the contrary, makes the silence emerge as silence” (Lacan 1978, p. 26).

The background is not anterior to the discontinuity of the gap, but a product of it. It is only with the cry—something that breaks the silence, and stands out as the primordial signifier without a signified—that silence is made present precisely as a dense medium, the palpable presence of the unspoken, the unspeakable. Here Lacan takes us one important step beyond McLuhan—if indeed the content of a medium is always another medium, then the content of speech, our natural medium, is silence as a medium, the presence of absence—or the unconscious. The medium as such, in its purity, is the gap between the lines, so to speak, the erotization of signification, the sense that something lurks in the background behind what is presented to us. This would be the zero point of intuition, the sense for sense.

What is important to note at this point, however, is the reversal that took place between the functional, or technical, and authority, reminiscent of Benjamin’s famed opening thesis on history, the puppet and the dwarf. In that famed parable, Benjamin suggests that the seemingly automated puppet “historical materialism” would win consistently, as long as the ugly dwarf secretly operating it, namely “theology,” was kept out of sight (Benjamin, 2006, 389). The power of the parable has much to do with the way in which it reverses the standard relations between technology and religion, where industrial technology replaces and renders superfluous religion, by reinserting religion as the very invisible “driver” of the machine’s automatism.

In Arendt’s account, authority had to veil functionality, above all, its own. Had we known how it works, so to speak, the magic would have been gone. And maybe it has. McLuhan offers his intervention at a point in which, on the contrary, functionality is foregrounded, and it is the media effect, the background structuring of our life, that is veiled by it.

In traditional authority, the eternal past of time immemorial is sacralized, and change is either absorbed by it or denied. In a technologically mediated environment; change is foregrounded and preservation of the past loses its internal rationale, and so the repetition that precedes us, so to speak, acquires instead the form of haunting insistence. As Joan Copjec put it:

Modernity was founded on a definitive break with the authority of our ancestors, who were no longer conceived as the ground for our actions or beliefs. And yet this effective undermining of their authority confronted us with another difficulty; it is as if in rendering our ancestors fallible we had transformed the past from the repository of their already accomplished deeds and discovered truths into a kind of holding cell of all that was unactualized and unthought. The desire of our ancestors and thus the virtual past, the past that had never come to pass, or was not yet finished, weighed disturbingly on us, pressing itself on our attention. (Copjec 2007, p. 65)

One primary function of tradition is the social organization of involuntary memory: festive days are collective occasions for the evocation of the mythical past—the form of signification that the past takes, precisely insofar as it eludes articulation. As tradition loosens its hold, we are faced, individually, with the burden of the mythological, virtual past, which is why modernity is so often theorized in the context of the affect of anxiety.

The break instituted by modernity did not cause the past to become effectively dead to us, its retreat turned out to be modal (that is, it became a matter of the virtual, not actual past) rather than total. We were thus not left simply alone in a cloistral present cut off from our ancestors, but found ourselves alone with something that did not clearly manifest itself. Anxiety is this feeling of being anchored to an alien self from which we are unable to separate ourselves nor to assume as our own, of being connected to a past that, insofar as it had not happened, was impossible to shed. Our implication in the past was thus deepened. For, while formerly a subject's ties to her

past were strictly binding, they were experienced as external, as of the order of simple constraint. One had to submit to a destiny one did not elect and often experienced as unjust. But one could rail against one's destiny, curse one's fate. With modernity this is no longer possible. The 'god of destiny' is now dead and we no longer inherit the debts of our ancestors, but become that debt. We cannot distance ourselves efficiently from the past to be able to curse the fate it hands us, but must, as Lacan put it, bear as *jouissance* the injustice that horrifies us. (Ibid, p. 66)

We might say that in modernity we are progressively faced with the unwritten law—a term which historically has been translated to both custom, tradition, and natural law—as such, that is, as unwritten, hauntingly present in its virtual, unrealized modality. Differently put, traditional authority is a way to give a legitimate, indeed, central, cultural place to (primary) repression. Primary repression is the emergence of the very space of repression, structurally preceding any repressed content (Freud 1953). It is, in this context, the very marking of an alien territory, extimate to the self. There is a knowledge the subject does not possess that is vital, crucial, to their very being. One way of describing a traditional way of life would be to say that in it, one attributes to tradition and its authority figures that very absent knowledge. It is, say, what the gods know, what we might get echoes of via their messengers, and through the mediation of those trained in reading their signs. With modernity, repression is repressed—it is precisely by knowing full well how things function that we are effectively mystified as to their effect on us. And so, one dramatic consequence of this redoubled repression, or redoubled censorship, is the transformation of our relation to anxiety. It is as if the idea of censorship has become more terrifying for us than any terrifying content deserving of censorship. We can accept, maybe even welcome, the most terrifying reality, so long as we can consider it known by us, uncensored. Hence the appeal of transgressive authority figures—in their transgression, they expose the

myriad of unwritten rules governing the public space of political appearances. There is a strange enjoyment that accompanies our witnessing of such behavior. It comforts us by confirming our worst expectations and bringing them into the open.<sup>4</sup>

Does this not equally describe the reversal in the relation between power and authority? More explicitly than anyone else, Foucault advanced the notion of “technologies of power,” often pitted against older, symbolic models of authorization. According to this understanding, the modern modality of power is technological. Power in modern societies has no center, and is very much understood as a sort of headless “instrumentality,” a machine producing effects. While the process described by Foucault is real and of the highest significance, the problem is that this theoretical framework fails to account for the manner in which authority insists, precisely as that which is veiled by the very open, decentralized mechanisms of power. The message ingrained in the very manifestation of power. Authority, we have said following Arendt, is a thing of the past. But precisely as such, under modern conditions its mode of appearance is that of the return of the repressed: forgotten, but not gone. Foregrounding technology should not lead us to think of authority as historically outdated, but rather to consider its modes of insistence.

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<sup>4</sup> We could consider in this context the subtle, yet crucial difference between the two examples provided by Octave Manoni in his famous essay on disavowal. The Hopi go through a terrifying experience—at first confronted by evil spirits, then realizing those very spirits were portrayed by their relatives. The outcome is *communitas*, in the anthropological sense: they take on the role of deceivers, assuming the duty of scaring their own children into the bonds of community. The story of Casanova is quite different—what terrifies him is the discovery that pretending (to possess magical powers) does not really protect him from the “effects of the signifier,” from the magic of symbolic castration.

## *Lacan: Between Science and Authority*

From the very beginning and until the end of his teaching, Lacan was constantly, and explicitly struggling to position himself precisely in light of the tension we have discussed above, under the terms of authority and technology. Psychoanalysis, as he understood it, is a technique, with serious, deep commitments to science, one indeed that Lacan does much to formalize, and yet it has an author, and one Lacan sees himself committed to augment, to borrow Arendt's language.

Famously, seminar II includes a stand-alone lecture given by Lacan on psychoanalysis and cybernetics. Lacan was well aware of the tremendous stakes raised by what was then known as cybernetics (Liu 2010). In the seminar, Lacan articulates what he takes to be the common ground of cybernetics and psychoanalysis, namely why, that is, cybernetics should be of interest to those, like him, committed to a psychoanalytic framework.

Why are we so astonished by these machines? It may have something to do with the difficulties Freud encountered. Because cybernetics also stems from a reaction of astonishment at rediscovering that this human language works almost by itself, seemingly to outwit us. (Lacan 1988, p. 119)

Both cybernetics and psychoanalysis stem from the astonishment that human language presents itself as working by itself—almost. What will advance Lacan's thinking here is what looks like rhetorical flourishes—the “almost,” which allows one to pay attention rather to its malfunctions, and the way such an encounter with language seems designed to outwit us, that is, the game of temptation and deception integral to our being in language, its erotic dimension.

One way to condense the lesson emerging from Lacan in this seminar and subsequent ones is to say that science and authority are divided by a common object, for which we might propose

the catchy name of knowledge without knowers, the mode of knowledge that has the unwritten law as its object. Notions like structure, system, and network, are ways to describe a phenomenon that behaves as if it was purposefully organized, as if it knew what it was doing. Lacan's term for this is "knowledge in the real." Even if we suspend or even preclude the possibility of their intelligent design by an external subject, that is, the notion of an author, the word "self" seems to impose itself in their description: they are self-organizing, self-regulating, etc. Only they do not have a self; or do they? No doubt, it is the fascination with this question that is in no small part responsible for our current forays into artificial intelligence. Can something lifeless, of our own creation, become like us? And if so, will it prove to have gained the mysterious spark of life, or will it prove that we never had it to begin with?

As a first—very problematic, as we shall soon see—approximation, we could say that authority, for which psychoanalysis proposes the name "transference," as understood by Lacan, is a way to view this knowledge without knowers—it would be better to say "with without," to mark the positive aspect of that which is missing—from within, as something we are primordially entangled in, caught in the web as it were, whereas techno-science is a way to view it from without.

As to the first, consider the following definition of the unconscious, proposed by Lacan in Seminar II:

The unconscious is the discourse of the other...not the discourse of the abstract other, the other in the dyad, of my correspondent, nor even my slave, it is the discourse of the circuit in which I am integrated. I am one of its links. It is the discourse of my father for instance, in so far as my father made mistakes which I am absolutely condemned to reproduce... (pp. 89-90)

We are inscribed in the circuit as a domain of fate, encountering a certain insistence from the past, which we are bound to repeat.



Note that the discourse of the father, the inscription in a chain of tradition, is already presented by Lacan as one way in which we might be inscribed within the network of signifiers, one way in which we might inscribe ourselves in language, one way to subjectify the fact that “everything is always there.”

It is precisely Lacan’s “functionalization” of language, him viewing it as a network, that allows him later, in Seminar XI, to condense the primary inscription within a network of signifiers—or primary repression—with the formula: a signifier represents the subject to another signifier, which Lacan will never tire of repeating. He was justifiably proud of it—the formula captures the co-emergence of a split subject or a subject of the unconscious and a quasi-totalized network, a language that “almost” functions by itself, and also points to the erotic nature of our inscription within a network, the troubled relation we have with what supports us in the symbolic, the master as a signifier, that incites us to language by its very mysterious nature, suggesting to us that somewhere, behind our backs as it were, lies the knowledge we are missing, the knowledge that would make us whole.

And so Lacan pushes a “functional” view all the way back, to describe the emergence of a speaking subject. At the same time, Lacan is acutely aware of the ways in which electronic, indeed, digital media, which he sees as a realization or materialization of the symbolic alters in a fundamental way our “native” inscription within language.

[T]he entire movement of the theory converges on a binary symbol, on the fact that anything can be written in terms of 0 and 1. What else is needed before what we call cybernetics can appear in the world? (p. 300)

Here he emerges as an indispensable resource for pondering the technologically realized network, the internet. In his aforementioned lecture on cybernetics and psychoanalysis, Lacan presents the function of the symbolic, as he will do again and again,

with reference to the door. As he puts it in the lecture, what makes the door symbolic is that: “[t]here is an asymmetry between the opening and the closing... the door is a real symbol, the symbol par excellence, that symbol in which man is passing” (p. 302).

We can read this as a condensed version of themes that Lacan will later elaborate upon: our entrance to the symbolic has to do with it being more closed than open, so to speak, the way in which its closing is what makes the idea of an opening alluring. This is also a way to invoke the mythical, or existential dimension of the symbolic, its function as a trial which alters us.<sup>5</sup>

And yet, something in the emerging technology, which makes the game of presence and absence into its prime operator, seems to transfer the symbolic from the terrain of the human sciences, which Lacan calls the science of conjecture, into the realm of technoscience, thereby altering it radically:

Once it has become possible ... to construct an enclosure, that is to say a circuit, so that something passes when it is closed, and doesn't when it is open, that is when the science of the conjuncture passes into the realm of realization of cybernetics. (p. 302)

There is much to be said about this dense paragraph, and the lecture to which it belongs, but for now let us only take from it another possible definition of the network: a network is that which opens by closing and closes by opening. In that respect, the web

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<sup>5</sup> This is one dimension in which Simondon seems to have incorporated the lessons of psychoanalysis, without explicitly avowing it. In his ambitious book on individuation as a process, Simondon proposes what looks like an intensification of the drama of individuation from one domain of being to the next. Human social and psychic life is a higher domain of life in his account, precisely because of the high degree of tension held together in the co-articulation of the social and psychological. The preindividual mutates in human life to the transindividual, an extimate domain (neither transcendent nor immanent), which each individual must confront in a singularly mythical trial. (Simondon 2020, pp. 313-314)

is structured like the unconscious (Lacan, 1978, 143). But in its strange structure, it also crosses paths with the fraught subject known to social studies as the “masses,” or “crowds.”

### *Crowds and Power: The Two Faces of the Masses*

The discourse around the term “crowd,” which garnered considerable theoretical attention at the turn of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, directed the focus of sociological thought toward the ostensibly threatening and disorganized facets of “the people,” the amorphous, mythical apparition of the political subject.

As Giorgio Agamben had pointed out, in many European languages, the word for “people” has a double and often contradictory meaning (1998, p. 176). On the one hand, “the people” denotes the sovereign body of citizens, the collective that forms the polity, as in “we the people.” On the other hand, “people” denotes the popular masses, the rabble, the shapeless crowd devoid of political or social order that constitutes a main threat to the moral order. The “people” thus denotes two opposing concepts in terms of legitimacy: on the one hand, the people are the polity from which the political system draws its meaning, the subject in whose name political leaders are able to govern. On the other hand, the people are that hard-to-pinpoint segment of the population that has abandoned the official values of the polity and endangered its stability.

It is worthwhile to note that, at the same time that anthropology began to move away from the image of the “savage” as underdeveloped and wild, and began to study, precisely, the unwritten laws of “primitive people”, that something like a collective “savagery,” a new barbarism, had made its impression at the very heart and center of modern, urban life, in the figure of the “crowd.” The notion of the “crowd” was rejected, yet subtly integrated by

mainstream sociological theory in notions such as Durkheim's effervescences, the "magical" bond of the social (Borch 2012, pp. 70-78). It is as if the "primal," which has disappeared from "un-developed" cultures, whose citizens are now no longer treated as lawless "savages," has returned at the very heart of modern, urban life. As Fredric Jameson noted long ago, it took the "real abstraction" of custom as an effective medium for organizing the lives of Europeans, for the abstract notion of the social to appear as an object to be studied scientifically (Jameson 1976, p. 12).

Gustave Le Bon became a pioneer in the field when he pointed to what seemed to be psychological traits unique to the crowd: it was not a mere collection of individuals, as Le Bon suggested, fused into a unity with its own, unique psychology (Le Bon 2001, p. 2). When we study the crowd as a subject with its own personality and psychology, we see that there is a unique element of freedom in the crowd, despite, or perhaps because of its threatening nature—the freedom from individuality (ibid, 4). It is perhaps no accident that the very same Le Bon saw himself as the true originator of the mass-energy equivalence, made so consequential by Einstein's equations (Le Bon 1909, Jammer 2009, p. 72). In the psychology of the crowd, what Le Bon detects is profoundly analogous to nuclear fission—the explosive surplus energy derived from the release of the energy invested in holding the unit together. Elias Canetti captured this transformation best in his book *Crowds and Power*:

There is nothing that man fears more than the touch of the unknown... All the distances which men create around themselves are dictated by this fear. They shut themselves in houses which no-one may enter, and only there feel some measure of security... It is only in a crowd that man can become free of this fear of being touched. That is the only situation in which the fear changes into its opposite... As soon as a man has surrendered himself to the crowd, he ceases to fear its touch. Ideally, all are equal there; no distinctions count, not even that of sex. The man pressed against him is

the same as himself. He feels him as he feels himself. Suddenly it is as though everything were happening in one and the same body. (1978, pp. 15-6)

The crowd frees the person from their individuality, from the partitions erected between their private space and whatever is external and foreign to it. That is the source of both its charm and its horror. But the same goes for the collective. The crowd is distinguished from all other modes of collectivity. It is the potential energy released when the energy invested in containing the social unit erupts. Canetti begins his analysis by distinguishing between the “open crowd” and the “closed crowd,” even though it might be more accurate to term them the “opening crowd” and the “closing crowd.” The former’s intention is set on removing boundaries, while the latter aims to erect and preserve them:

The natural crowd is the open crowd; there are no limits whatever to its growth; it does not recognize houses, doors or locks and those who shut themselves in are suspect... In its spontaneous form it is a sensitive thing. The openness which enables it to grow is, at the same time, its danger... The closed crowd renounces growth and puts the stress on permanence... It establishes itself by accepting its limitation. It creates a space for itself which it will fill. This space can be compared to a vessel into which liquid is being poured and whose capacity is known. The entrances to this space are limited in number, and only these entrances can be used; the boundary is respected whether it consists of stone, of solid wall, or of some special act of acceptance, or entrance fee. (Ibid., pp. 16-17)

Canetti here distinguishes between two orders of social organization. The natural order is that of the open crowd, and therefore, its domestication, in the form of the closed crowd, can only be partial. Of course, the appeal of the open crowd, which according to Canetti is the desire to overcome the barriers at the foundation of social life, raises questions about the precedence of this kind of organization: without boundaries and barriers, what is

there for it to open or remove? Since the open crowd is described as a kind of anti-cultural drive, an impulse to remove the partitions put up by culture, it presupposes the existence of these partitions. What Canetti puts forth here is a notion of pre-individual social substance, which predates any individuated subject by definition, the primordial, mythological “soup” from which individuation arises and to which it returns (even if such a primordial ground is retroactively projected by the individual).

Perhaps this is why for Freud, the distinction between the crowd and the organized group, a distinction analogous to Canetti’s open and closed crowds, is smaller than we would like to imagine. In his essay on group psychology, Freud disputes the sharpness of the distinction between the wild, or open, and the civilized crowds: “groups of the first kind stand in the same sort of relation to those of the second as a high but choppy sea to a ground swell” (Freud 1949, p. 26).

What Canetti likens to a dynamic, formless liquid and the receptacle that aims to contain it, Freud compares to another vast liquid mass—the ocean. The formations of crowds are like waves breaking on the beach; although it is their visible power that makes an impression on the onlookers, this power is only a pale expression of their underlying power, the power of the deep currents—the permanent if elusive “substance” of the social order. As if he had intuited the mass-energy equivalence implied in mass psychology, where other observers see disorder, Freud sees an expression of the most primordial elements of order. What explodes in the crowd is the same power that, under normal conditions, holds the social unit together.

Freud makes an illuminating remark in this context in his essay about group psychology. Not only are the members of the group themselves not released from inhibitions, their inhibitions are in fact what make them a group (Freud, *Group Psychology*, pp. 91-2). The crowd, in contrast to its common reputation, is not deprived of restraint; on the contrary, it becomes a crowd because

of its collective inhibitions. Only the leader is free of restraint; the crowd is only following his commands. We will recall that Freud sees the group as the reincarnation of the prehistoric “primal horde,” that is to say, the early—or primordial—structure of society. The paradox of our era is that this deep underlying reality, the primal structure of control, becomes invisible precisely because it is no longer underlying—it is out in the open for all to see and, as such, everyone looks past it. The changes that have taken place in the media, in the lines demarcating the private and public spaces, in the boundaries between the legitimate and the obscene, have brought this foundational element to the surface: the “liberation” brought about by the transgressive leader is in fact testimony of ongoing subjugation. The formula is: “the more we are prohibited, the more he is allowed.”

This is also why, where others see a leaderless mass, Freud sees an expression of a deep yearning for the worst kind of leader, a leader in the image of the primal father Freud outlined in *Totem and Taboo*. Even the “spontaneous,” “ephemeral” crowd is not really without leadership. Quite the contrary. The unique identification mechanism Freud describes in his essay, explains the complex relationship between the masses and the liberated leader—a leader unfettered by inhibition. Freud describes identification with the transgressive leader as a process by which “the individual gives up his ego ideal and substitutes for it the group ideal as embodied in the leader” (*ibid.*, p. 102). In other words, the leader directly embodies the “commonness” of the masses, their (at least potential) lack of boundaries formed through the leader’s uninhibited behavior. This behavior, in turn, leads the crowd to live up to the transgressiveness attributed to it through the power of “suggestion,” the Freudian equivalent of Tarde’s “imitation” (*ibid.*, pp. 99-100). What Canetti, and others like him, see as spontaneous and leaderless manifestations, Freud perceives in terms of a complex mechanism of identification, driven by the transgressive elements of the masses. He sees evidence of this in

the contrary phenomenon—the panic that seizes a truly leaderless crowd, which ultimately leads to its dispersion (ibid, pp. 45-6). A rallying crowd, even one that is wild and riled up, according to Freud, is always under some form of leadership, even if it is but an idea of leadership (the way that Jesus is the leader of the Church).

Freud does not pass up the opportunity to remind his readers of the fragility of their independence, and of the arrogance of their self-image as individuals who are distinct from the crowd, protected behind ironclad doors and steeped in self-consciousness. Nevertheless, Freud also admits that the same primeval human characteristic that serves as the focal point of his essay—the elimination of the self in favor of an uninhibited leader—is equally characteristic of the transient crowd. The crowd that Canetti terms “open,” is for Freud only a surface manifestation of primordial structures of control. However, it is a temporary, fleeting manifestation. It would appear, in light of this fundamental contradiction, that a profound transformation must take place in the transition from the transient to the permanent crowd, a transition that allows for the emergence of an open-closed crowd, a stable or semi-stable transgressive group. This transformation, the emergence of stable masses bearing the characteristics of the transient, as well as the global nature of the phenomenon, calls for an examination of the changes that have taken place in the public arena, and in particular, the changes in the media landscape.

### *Opening Medium, Closing Medium: The Crowd between Television and the Internet*

While Canetti’s distinction between two kinds of crowds may not be entirely convincing with respect to its original object, it might be useful in describing the difference between types of media. Indeed, in the spirit of Canetti’s distinction between open and closed crowds, Noam Yuran offers a distinction between television and the internet in terms of their social significance.



Television, argues Yuran, drawing on Durkheim, is a sacred space, because it splits humanity into two: those who are on television, and those who can only watch it from the outside. Crossing this boundary constitutes a dramatic transformation, akin to crossing the line between the sacred and the profane. One may say that being on television is a way to differentiate and extricate oneself from the anonymous crowd of television viewers. The internet, on the other hand, does not offer this same kind of polarized division of reality. In Yuran's words, "the spatial structure of the Internet does not allow for holiness, because the web does not divide reality into two. Unlike television, the Internet does not provide the possibility of distinguishing the inside from the outside" (Yuran 2019, p. 70).

Yuran proposes a media-oriented analysis of a difference expressed in everyday speech, the fact that, unlike television, you can never be "on the Internet." Unlike a broadcast, a term containing the idea that "everyone" is watching the same thing at the same time, a kind of tribal gathering at the bonfire, one might say, the internet does not have a center from which content is broadcast and to which our collective gaze is turned; in the same way, the internet does not guarantee a space of shared meaning. On the other hand, it is also impossible to be completely off the internet. In other words, the internet appears to be the medium of rumors. The rumor is an archaic model of viral propagation, which online replaces the centralized model of the broadcast. As Mladen Dolar explains, rumors are able to spread wildly due to the fact that there is no need to internalize them: we do not have to believe the rumor in order to pass it on. We can even explicitly disbelieve it and still spread it ("I don't believe it of course, but I heard that...") (Dolar 2021, pp. 144-5).

There is another sense in which gossip serves as a "primal" social substance: sharing a piece of gossip is an old modality of forging intimate bonds, of enacting the minimal structure of society, as a bond between two to the exclusion of a third party.

This excluded third is a prototypical figure of the big other as the sustainer of the public sphere, an innocent agent supposed to believe, the agent for the sake of which we “keep up appearances” in public. The internet emerges as a public forum for intimate transgression.

And so, the internal logic of the rumor also defines our relationship with the medium: we hear about what happens online, whether we want to or not. Even if we are not active online ourselves, our friends’ friends’ friends are; even if not, we will still hear about it on television.

At this point it is useful to go back to Canetti’s definition, not as a distinction between two kinds of crowds, but as a second-order distinction between two means of communication within the crowd. Television is a closed medium, or rather a closing medium, one that frames and differentiates between outside and inside. The internet, on the other hand, is an open medium, or rather an opening medium; that is to say, the internet erodes the distinction between the open crowd and the closed crowd.

Canetti’s original terminology was intended to define the erosion of the distance between the private and the public in an open crowd, Freud’s unstable crowd, on the point of discovering the wondrous phenomenon of the loss of the ego. Translating Canetti’s thought process to means of communication allows us to add nuance to his thesis regarding the degradation of the border between the private and the public: what is eroded is not the border between the private and the public, but the border between a complete elimination of the border, the terrifying liberated mass, and a hunkering down within the border. This erosion may offer a preliminary explanation for the emergence of the semi-permanent “open” crowd, a phenomenon that various thinkers thought necessarily transient, while at the same time suggesting why such a crowd fails to provide the satisfaction of the transient open crowd.

## *Media Reflectivity and the Plurality of Social Media*

It is a commonplace observation that a medium becomes what it is, so to speak, reaching its self-reflectivity, with the emergence of a new medium. The camera, precisely by being a superior technology, better equipped to capture reality, made painting aware of itself as a medium, propelling painting into what we today call modernism, the exploration of its means of expression: of color, shape, etc. Along similar lines, we have seen how the internet reveals to us what broadcast was—it was essentially a medium drawing a sharp, ontological line between being in it, say being on television, and watching it from outside. This is why its self-reflective moment is to be found in reality TV, shows exploring what it is to be on TV, exploring the unique media effect of television.

The network, on the contrary, has no proper inside, nor a proper outside. Its lack of interiority is made clear when we consider, for instance, that the mark of a true internet celebrity, or event, is precisely its spilling over into old media, being reported about in television and newspapers, what many today call “legacy media,” and which we predominantly consume—if at all—via the internet. With Lacan we might say—to be in the circuit, is to be outside of it, and vice versa.

The internet as a medium is organized around this very problematic. We might say that both platforms and algorithms, say, the machinery of the internet, and its users, are inescapably asking themselves what is it to be in a network—they are asking this in their practice of course, not explicitly. The reason why there must be social networks in the plural is that each platform proposes a specific answer to this paradoxical being. Certainly, social networks are business ventures, aiming to make a profit. But in order to do so, they need to offer a new way of being in the network. And while what distinguishes one social network from the other is precisely their unique answer to that question, they all share this one feature of oscillation: we oscillate between

being outside of them, incapable of getting in, or inside, incapable of getting out. Social networks' infamous addictive character has everything to do with this erotic dimension. Anyone who has ever dipped their toes, so to speak, into a new social network can attest to this experience: at first, one is seduced, and repelled, precisely by the experience of being an outsider. There are unwritten rules—some social, some technical—that make it hard to become an insider. Other people will tell you—you only get it once you have so many followers (tweeter), or once you have given this much opportunity for the algorithm to study your embarrassing, unconscious preferences (TikTok). After a certain, imperceptible threshold is crossed, you have not arrived, but you are nonetheless caught. All of a sudden, it is hard to get out.

One simple way in which TV reveals itself as a medium is when we turn it on in the background—the content is clearly irrelevant, and it is the background presence that is enjoyed. Can one turn on the internet in the background? Clearly not, which goes to show that we can also never turn it off. This feature of the web, always lurking in the background, never quite there, is incarnated by the new social type produced by the internet—the creep.

If, as Foucault teaches us, the figure of the sinner mutated, in disciplinary societies, in the figure of the pervert, then certainly in our age the pervert has mutated into the creep, lurking in the background. Lurking is the way passive spectators on social networks—such as myself—are described, their suspected presence creeping everybody out. Those who cannot seem to manage to make an entrance, no doubt out of fear of creeping everybody out, serve the function of making the strange absent presence of the network appear.

The political polarization of internet culture between right wing trolls who get a kick out of offending the sensibilities of progressives who in their turn get a kick out being outraged by the trolls transgressivity (Nagle 2017) expresses, at the level of content, the medium's formal truth. It is precisely because of the

felt absence of a solid symbolic space in the sense developed by Arendt that social boundaries must be constantly transgressed and regimented. Paradoxically, we feel the pressure of the unwritten law ever more acutely, ever more confusing, the more we try to exorcise it and render it explicit.

Can these features of the network illuminate the new type of authoritarianism everywhere on the rise? As an empirical statement of fact, new authoritarian leaders seem to be masters of new media. Trump was the president of Twitter, and anyone who follows Israeli politics cannot fail to note that Netanyahu has now become the TikTok candidate, in the process of rising again to power. Should this be written off as an effective propaganda, a more effective manipulation of the medium?

The hypothesis I have begun to advance in this paper suggests a more substantive relation here. What is unique about the charisma of such figures of power, is the way they lie by means of an act of exposure. We are fascinated by their very capacity to transgress the unwritten law. In this sense, the conspiracy theorists who support them are closer to the truth than outside observers: their dear leaders do indeed uncover a secret power that lurks in the background, out of sight, only that power has no center, no author, and no substance until it is transgressed.

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# Whose Servant Is a Master?

*Slavoj Žižek*

There is a general narrative gradually emerging of what has been going on in recent decades—to cut a long story short, it is the return of what was repressed in the age of modernity and Enlightenment. More precisely, the antagonism we encounter today is not just that between the Enlightenment and its repressed, it is at its most basic an antagonism that runs through the Enlightenment edifice itself, back to Ancient Greece: the antagonism between Plato and Aristotle, Sparta and Athens, French Revolution and English reform, rationalism and empiricism, egalitarian freedom and liberty rooted in customs. It is the antagonism between radical egalitarian universalism and a particular experimental approach, and the truth by far is not on the side of a cautious empirical approach.

The dissatisfaction with the hegemonic ideological coordinates expresses itself in the guise of its opposite, as a redoubled surplus-enjoyment: not the surplus-enjoyment and/or surplus-value that sets in motion the capitalist edifice but a surplus over this surplus itself, a surplus palpable in the obscenity of the populist discourse permeated by racist and sexist enjoyment (see Dolar 2021, p. 167). We are learning the hard way that modernity's attempt at dispensing with traditional forms of domination (father of the family, master, etc.) and installing secular democracy has failed: the dimension of the master is returning with a vengeance in all its forms (patriarchal values, political authoritarianism, religious fundamentalism, etc.). It was clear already to Freud that the decline of paternal authority is an ambiguous process: the father as

a figure of moral authority enables the child to adopt a stance of moral autonomy resisting the pressure of their peers and of their corrupted social environment. Following Freud, in his study on authority and family written back in the 1930s, Max Horkheimer made the same point, while, in the same spirit, Adorno pointed out that Hitler was not a paternal figure. And in his classic *Auf dem Weg zur vaterlosen Gesellschaft* (1966), Alexander Mitscherlich analyzes in detail the process by which paternal authority is lost and how it gives birth to new forms of domination.

The obvious answer to this crisis is: no authorities should rule the people, people themselves should reign. But in today's populism, the dark, obscene side of this appeal to the people has also made itself palpable. The 'People' to which populism refers does not exist: populism is by definition a mask of power, it is a fantasized entity evoked by new masters to justify their role as the servants of the people, enabling them to dismiss their opponents as the enemies of the people. The first step towards populism was made centuries ago, when, to counter the loss of traditional authority, a leader (king) proclaimed himself a servant. Friedrich the Great defined himself as "the first servant of State," and this is how, from the early Enlightenment onwards, a master has justified his rule: he is, in reality, the greatest servant, the servant of all his subjects/servants. But there are various modalities of this position of "serving the servants," from technocracy and religious fundamentalism to obscene master-clown, or even, as Mao Ze Dong can be characterized, to a "Lord of Misrule," a master who periodically organizes a rebellion against the order installed by himself. The obscene master is not a direct reaction to the failure of the traditional master; its figure is a reaction to the fact that knowledge ( $S_2$ , the agent of the University discourse) cannot properly function at the place of the agent of a discourse (social link), so that it has to be supplemented by a new obscene figure (see Dolar 2021, p. 174). Insofar as the obscene Master operates as a superego figure, we should recall here Miller's old

claim that the superego is on the side of  $S_2$ , not on the side of  $S_1$  (the master-signifier that totalizes a symbolic space). The point of this disintegration is not that the empirical bearer of a symbolic function (father, leader) cannot live up to his symbolic mandate (say, that a father doesn't properly function as a father) but that this mandate itself is losing its power (see Dolar 2021, p. 123).

The reaction to this predicament is double. We can reluctantly accept the need to return to some form of social authority since, if the symbolic Law (Name-of-the-Father) loses its authority, desire itself (sustained by the prospect of transgressing it) vanishes. Along these lines, some Lacanians claim that the problem today is the decline of the Name-of-the-Father, of the paternal symbolic authority: in its absence, pathological Narcissism explodes, evoking the specter of the primordial Real Father. Consequently, we should try to restore some kind of Law as the agent of prohibition. Although this idea is to be rejected, it correctly points out how the decline of the master in no way automatically guarantees emancipation but can well engender much more oppressive figures of domination. Is, however, the return to Prohibition as sustained by the Law the only way out? It seems that the very last Lacan, aware of this problem, proposed another solution which Miller, in his reading of Lacan, calls "cynical"—we cannot return to the authority of the Law, but what we can do is act as if we sustain the Law... in short, Miller's solution is: we are psychotics trying to play normal hysterics. Miller has fearlessly spelled out the political implications of this stance: a psychoanalyst "acts so that semblances remain at their places while making sure that the subjects under his care do not take them as *real* ... one should somehow bring oneself to remain *taken in by them* (fooled by them)." (Miller 2008, p. 109) The axiom of this cynical wisdom is that "one should protect the semblances of power for the good reason that one should be able to continue to *enjoy*. The point is not to attach oneself to the semblances of the existing power, but to consider them necessary" (ibid., p. 112). (Miller repeats here

the famous line from Kafka's *The Trial*: the law is not true, it is just necessary.) Is this cynical stance the only way out?

Another perhaps more refined form of the return of the repressed is that the repressed returns as a fiction, and, well-aware that it is only a fiction, we fully commit ourselves to it emotionally. The TV spectacle we were able to watch on 9 September 2022—the ceremony of Queen Elisabeth's burial—reminds us of how the British monarchy embodies a similar paradox: the more not only the British monarch but also United Kingdom as a state lost its superpower status and became a local power, the more the status of the British royal family become the stuff of ideological fantasies all around the world—according to the official estimates, the ceremony was watched by 4 billion people around the world. We should not dismiss this as ideology masking actual power relations: the British royal fantasy is one of the key components enabling actual power relations to reproduce themselves. This fantasy doesn't concern only the present royal family: remember how, in 2012, an archaeological excavation was commissioned by the Richard III Society on the site previously occupied by Grey Friars Priory. The University of Leicester identified the skeleton found in the excavation as that of Richard III as a result of radiocarbon dating, comparison with contemporary reports of his appearance, identification of trauma sustained at the Battle of Bosworth and comparison of his mitochondrial DNA with that of two matrilineal descendants of his sister Anne. He was reburied in Leicester Cathedral on 26 March 2015, and, again, the burial ceremony (where only a hundred or so people were expected) was witnessed by over one hundred thousand people. Facts like these cannot be dismissed as reactionary fantasies: the correct insight they bear is the distinction between the symbolic top of power and the actual executive power. Kings and queens reign, they don't rule; their reign is ceremonial and as such crucial.

There is yet another way to mystify the distinction between the monarch's reign and executive power: to focus on how the

traditional dignified master is already per se interchangeable. Since it is a contingent body attached to a name (and as such a purely performative agency), nothing really changes if it is replaced by a double. It is no wonder that leaders, and precisely those who were perceived as unique, are as a rule suspected to have doubles who appear publicly on their behalf (from Tito to Saddam). But is it true that nothing changes? The ideological fantasy is that everything may change. In Ivan Reitman's *Dave* (1993), Dave Kovic, a good-natured and caring temp agency operator, by a staggering coincidence looks exactly like the actual President of the United States, the philandering and distant Bill Mitchell. As such, when Mitchell wants to escape an official luncheon, the Secret Service hires Dave to stand in for him. Unfortunately, Mitchell suffers a severe stroke while having sex with one of his aides, and Dave finds himself stuck in the role indefinitely. The corrupt and manipulative Chief of Staff Bob Alexander plans to use Dave to elevate himself to the White House—but unfortunately, he doesn't count on Dave enjoying himself in office, using his luck to make the country a better place. A prior version of this fantasy is provided in Alexandre Dumas's *The Man in the Iron Mask*: Philippe, Louis XIV's twin brother, is locked in a prison with an iron mask on his face so that nobody can recognize him; the three musketeers and d'Artagnan liberate Philippe and replace Louis (who is put in a prison with iron mask) with him—Philippe becomes the Louis XIV we all know, leading France to glory.

A more radical solution is provided by the figure of a Stalinist Leader who is the very opposite of a monarch: he is definitely not a traditional master, also not an obscene master, and also not an agent of liberal-democratic stance or of contemporary scientific knowledge based on rational reasoning and experimentation. He is rather a pathological distortion of the University discourse, the return of its repressed: in Stalinism, the master-signifier directly overlaps with the space of knowledge. There is no post-truth here, no obscene multiplicity and self-irony: knowledge is acting as Truth itself.

But why a master at all? The other way to deal with the decline of traditional authority is the anarchist way, and anarchism is having a revival today, from Noam Chomsky to David Graeber. Anarchism is not against public power—Catherine Malabou, another neo-anarchist, refers to Jacques Rancière, who asserts “radical equality between citizens who are considered able to both command and obey.” (Catherine Malabou’s words in: Malabou and Balibar 2022, p. 179) There is an essential relationship between the lot and democratic expression: there is public power, but “true democracy would rely on the contingency of who governs and who is governed because governing does not require any particular skill.” (Ibid.) In his reply to Malabou, Étienne Balibar gets to the crux of the problem:

The anarchist will say that we are able to imagine and realize in practice now an alternative social fabric because the whole society could, one way or another, emerge from forms of self-government and self-organization that can be experienced and experimented with at the level of cooperatives, towns and so on. Today, this idea is becoming increasingly influential and people give us examples of what the Kurdish fighters tried in Rojava, what the Zapatistas are trying in Chiapas, and so forth. From there they extrapolate and say what works at the local level could work at the global level, provided you find the right forms of federation. (Étienne Balibar’s words in: *ibid.*, p. 182)

Malabou herself points out two other problems; first, anarchism is becoming today a key feature of global capitalism: “Our current epoch is characterized by a coexistence between a *de facto* anarchism and a dawning or awakening anarchism. *De facto* anarchism is the reign of anarcho-capitalism, which is contemporaneous with the end of the welfare state, creating in citizens a feeling of abandonment—just think of the state of hospitals and healthcare today. My contention is that current capitalism is undertaking its anarchist or libertarian turn: a generalized ‘Uberization’ of life.” (Catherine Malabou’s words in: *ibid.*, p. 178) Second, this anarcho-capitalism is the other side of

a new authoritarianism: “Authoritarianism does not contradict the disappearance of the state; it is its messenger—the mask of this so-called ‘collaborative’ economy which, by bringing professionals and users into direct contact through technological platforms, pulverizes all fixity.” (Ibid., p. 179) One should only add here that this mask is not only a mask, but it is also the hidden truth of the anarchic collaborative economy.

What this means is that the rising authoritarianism is the other side of the disappearance of the state—more precisely, of the most precious function of the state, that of providing public services. We thereby touch upon the vast domain of public services (healthcare, education, etc.) which cannot be provided through expanding cooperatives and other forms of local self-organizations. Balibar makes this point clear: “If you look at the poor in American suburbs, mainly African Americans and other migrant groups, what they suffer from is the fact that America never really had a welfare state or a social state in the British, French, or German sense. The catastrophe for them is not that there is too much state, it’s that there is not enough of the state.” (Étienne Balibar’s words in: *ibid.*, p. 184) So yes, popular mobilization outside party politics and state apparatuses is needed—but communities evoked by anarchists rely on a thick texture of ‘alienated’ institutional mechanisms: where do electricity and water come from? Who guarantees the rule of law? To whom do we turn for healthcare? The more a community is self-ruling, the more this network has to function smoothly and invisibly.

So we have to be very cautious and precise when speaking about the fall of traditional authorities, and especially when we link this fall to the disintegration of the big Other: this disintegration is not a straightforward process of approaching what Miller called “generalized foreclosure,”<sup>1</sup> a state in which the big Other no longer serves as the symbolic space in which subjects

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<sup>1</sup> Miller introduces the term “generalized foreclosure” in his lesson of 1986-7 *Ce qui fait insigne*. See Miller 1986-7.

communicate (the idea is that, today, each of us is caught in our own bubble, where our own messages are merely echoed back at us). Is the chaotic digital space of “fake news” nonetheless not a new form of the big Other, a chaotic public space in which influencers fight for numbers of clicks? When we engage in spreading (fake or not) news on Facebook; we are not directly ourselves there, we play a certain role in this new big Other. And is the space of Cancel Culture not also a very strict form of the big Other in which those “canceled” are excluded from the public space? This is what makes so misleading the description of the generalized foreclosure as a carnival without limitation in which every entity is an exception. Duane Rousselle claims: “Today the exception has become the universal. The ‘carnival’, as Lacan called it in his interview with a journalist in 1974, has become a carnival without limitation of place thanks to the power of the virtual, which has modified the category of perceptual space.” (Rousselle 2020) But is there really no limitation in this carnival? Does the limitation, in some sense much stronger than the paternal prohibition that elicits the desire to transgress it, not return with a vengeance in the Politically Correct Woke or Cancel Culture? The characterization of Woke as “racism in the time of the many without the One” (ibid.) may appear problematic, but it hits the mark: in an almost exact opposite to the traditional racism, which opposes a foreign intruder posing a threat to the unity of the One (say, immigrants and Jews to our Nation), Woke reacts to those who are suspected of not having truly abandoned old forms of the One (“patriots,” proponents of patriarchal values, Eurocentrists, etc.). This is why the Woke stance provides the supreme case of how permissiveness turns over into universal prohibition: in a Politically Correct regime, we never know if and when some of us will be canceled for our acts or words, as the criteria are murky.

This murkiness brings us to another key aspect of every actual edifice of state power: no matter how democratic and responsive to its subjects it is, one can easily detect an implicit but unmistakable signal in it: “Forget about our limitations—



ultimately, we can do whatever we want with you!” This excess is not a contingent supplement spoiling the purity of power but its necessary constituent—without it, without the threat of arbitrary omnipotence, state power is not a true power and it loses its authority. And we have to stop playing games of limiting power to a rational-democratic extent: we have to accept this excess fully. It is the Trumpian populists who undermine it.

Consequently, a paradox I argue for is that false opposition is to be left behind: we do not overcome alienation by disalienation, we do not overcome the master by eliminating it, and we do not overcome public power by limiting it to useful public services. The non-alienated autonomous liberal individual is itself a product of alienation in capitalist society; a master effectively serving the people, taking care of them, is a fetish created to prevent the possibility that individuals will themselves take care of themselves; the idea of power serving society justifies power and thus obfuscates its constitutive excess.

But does this not involve a contradiction with Lacan’s claim that there is no big Other? How should we read together the fact that the big Other does not exist with our utter self-sacrificial reliance on the figure of an Other? The obvious reading of the fact that there is no big Other would have been for the bearers of authority to admit their lack of qualification for exerting authority openly to those subjected to them, and thereupon to simply step down, leaving their subjects to confront reality as they can—Hannah Arendt outlines this gesture apropos parental authority:

Modern man could find no clearer expression for his dissatisfaction with the world, for his disgust with things as they are, than by his refusal to assume, in respect to his children, responsibility for all this. It is as though parents daily said: ‘In this world even we are not very securely at home; how to move about in it, what to know, what skills to master, are mysteries to us too. You must try to make out as best you can; in any case you are not entitled to call us to account. We are innocent, we wash our hands of you. (Arendt 1961, p. 191.)

Although this imagined answer of the parents is factually more or less true, it is nonetheless existentially false: a parent cannot wash their hands in this way. The same goes for saying: “I have no free will, my decisions are the product of my brain signals, so I wash my hands, I have no responsibility for crimes that I committed!” Even if this were factually true, it is false as my subjective stance. This means that “the ethical lesson is that the parents should pretend (to know what to do and how the world works), for there is no way out of the problem of authority other than to assume it, in its very fictionality, with all the difficulties and discontents this entails.” (Schuster 2020, p. 219)

But, again, how does this differ from Miller’s cynical solution? Paradoxically, it is that the subject, although fully aware of their incompetence to exert authority, assumes it not with a cynical distance but with full sincerity, ready even to sacrifice their life for it if needed. The opposite of fundamentalism is the awareness that the authority we refer to has no real fundament but is self-referentially grounded in an abyss. Let’s take a perhaps surprising example: the finale of Wagner’s *Rhinegold*, which ends with the contrast between Rhinemaidens bemoaning the lost innocence and the majestic entrance of the Gods into Valhalla, a powerful assertion of the rule of Law. It is customary to claim that the Rhinemaidens’ sincere and authentic complaint makes it clear how the triumphant entrance of the Gods into Valhalla is a fake, a hollow spectacle; however, what if it is precisely the saddening background of the Rhinemaidens’ song that bestows upon entry into Valhalla its authentic greatness? The gods know they are doomed, but nonetheless they heroically perform their ceremonial act. This is why we are not dealing here with the usual fetishist disavowal but with a courageous act of taking a risk and ignoring the limitations, along the lines of Kant’s *Du kannst, denn du sollst!*—I know I am too weak to do it, but I’ll do it nonetheless—a gesture very much the opposite of cynicism. In Wagner’s opera, the cynic is Loge (Loki), the embodiment of

knowledge (S<sub>2</sub>), the demi-god of fire, Wotan's clever, manipulative executive servant who does not follow gods to Valhalla; he says in an aside that he is tempted to destroy the complacent gods by fire, but he will think it over. Far below, the Rhinemaidens mourn the loss of their gold and condemn the gods as false and cowardly—Roger Scruton writes of this lament: “And yet, ever sounding in the depths, is the lament of the Rhine-daughters, singing of a natural order that preceded the conscious will that has usurped it. This lament sounds in the unconsciousness of us all, as we pursue our paths to personality, sovereignty and freedom...” (Scruton 2017). These are the last voices that are heard in the opera, “piercing our hearts with sudden longing, melting our bones with nostalgic desire,” before the gods, “marching in empty triumph to their doom,” enter Valhalla to a thunderous orchestral conclusion (ibid.). Is this triumph really empty? Is there not in it a heroic dignity, an indication that Wotan is taking a risk, well aware that his authority is not properly grounded?

But, again, are we here not back at the cynical position—authority is not true, just necessary? No, because, to quote Miller himself, the cynical position “resides in saying that enjoyment is *the only thing that is true*,” while in the case evoked by Arendt, the fiction is truer than reality, and thus we are ready to risk our life for it precisely because it is a fiction—we are back at Lacan's “the truth has the structure of a fiction.” “There is no big Other” does not mean that if there is no God, then everything is permitted—as Lacan knew it, it means the exact opposite, that everything is prohibited, and to break out of this prohibition I have to act counterfactually. “There is no big Other” is not a cold description of the state of things—such a description implies that I occupy the place of a big Other, a neutral view of reality, in the same sense that universal historicism exempts me from historical relativism. “There is no big Other” means that, in a maximum of subjective engagement, I have to identify myself as the hole in the big Other, as the crack in its edifice.

So, to finish, one has to correct Lacan here: the last, most radical, subjective position is not that of the analyst. After achieving this, after traversing the fantasy and assuming that there is no big Other, the only way to avoid cynicism is to heroically pass to the position of a new master.

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# Rage Against the Machine: Adorno, Hegel, and Absolute Mastery

*Jamila M.H. Mascot*

In one of his *Three Studies on Hegel* (1963), Adorno argues that “rescuing Hegel – and only rescue, not revival, is appropriate for him – means *facing up to his philosophy where it hurts most* [*wo sie am wehesten tut*]” (Adorno 1993, p. 83). Adorno takes aim at the pain that Hegel’s dialectic causes the non-conceptual by dissolving its polymorphous matter into the cold logic of thought (Adorno 2004, p. 24).<sup>1</sup> The *rage* deployed by the Hegelian system against the non-conceptual and the collateral damage it produces along the way, in turn, gives rise to Adorno’s *outrage* in the *Negative Dialectics* (1966), where he delivers his final verdict on the untruth of Hegel’s philosophy of identity.<sup>2</sup> Deeming Hegel’s system a “kind of philosophy [that] sides with the big guns,” Adorno never wonders whether suffering is only inflicted by the concept on the non-conceptual or whether the concept also *patiently* endures its pain when confronting the limits of its experience (Adorno 1993, p. 83).<sup>3</sup> Does not the Absolute also suffer insofar as it pushes against its limits (*Grenzen*), which shape it as

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<sup>1</sup> “The system, the form of presenting a totality to which nothing remains extraneous, absolutizes the thought against each of its contents and evaporates the content in thoughts” (*ibidem*).

<sup>2</sup> See “Idealism as Rage” (Adorno 2004, pp.22-24): “The system is the belly turned mind, and rage is the mark of each and every idealism” (p. 23).

<sup>3</sup> See Gérard Lebrun, *La patience du concept* (1972).

both a complete and infinite totality (Mascat 2014b, p. 137) or, in Adorno's words, as "something infinite and conclusively given" (Adorno 1993, p. 86)?

Suffering is not foreign to Hegelian speculation; it is undoubtedly part of the experience of the phenomenological consciousness, of its *pathway of doubt* and *way of despair*, as well as of the life of the *Geist* affected by "the seriousness, the suffering, the patience and the labour of the negative" (Hegel 1977, pp. 10, 49). The question is rather whether and when such pain could ever disappear, namely, if the Absolute could ultimately enjoy a painless existence and be impervious to all discomfort by virtue of its absoluteness.

Contingencies can be taken as the litmus test of the speculative mastery of Hegel's Absolute and of his philosophy as a science of freedom (Mabille 1999, p. 364). Therefore, this paper engages with the modal category of *contingency* (*die Zufälligkeit / das Zufällige*) as it appears in the *Science of Logic*, as well as with the *contingencies* (*die Zufälligkeiten / das Zufall*) that occur in nature and in the realm of the spirit to revisit the painful endurance of the Hegelian concept, which Adorno took for a monster of cruelty and Gérard Lebrun considered a master of patience.

If the contingent is the limit *par excellence*, the specter that haunts the Hegelian system and that which may endanger and sabotage the very speculative enterprise of the Absolute, what is the fate of contingencies in the dialectical economy of the concept? Does the *calvary* of the speculative consist in the dialectical torment of unceasingly and unsuccessfully attempting to *overcome* (*überwinden*) and *eliminate* (*entfernen*) the contingencies of the world?<sup>4</sup> Is the contingent the "speculative Good Friday" of Hegelian philosophy (Hegel 1988, p. 71)?

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<sup>4</sup> The *calvary* of Absolute Spirit is evoked in the last passage of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel 1977, p. 493). In § 145 of the *Encyclopedia* Hegel writes, "Now, *overcoming the contingent [dies Zufällige zu überwinden]*, so

## 1. The Torment of the Absolute

In the *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno evokes different instances of pain. On the one hand, he argues that pain exists in the world and the crime of Hegel's philosophy is to give it a speculative foundation: "Its agony is the world's agony raised to a concept" (Adorno 2004, p. 6).<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, and seemingly contradictorily, Adorno remarks that "the smallest trace of senseless suffering in the empirical world belies all the identitarian philosophy that would talk us out of that suffering" (Adorno 2004, p. 203). By opposing the grip of speculative reason, the absurd experience of pain simply undermines the truth of speculation itself. Instead, Adorno argues, "The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth" (*ibid.*, p. 17). Adorno identifies the many targets of the dialectical harm caused by Hegel's philosophy: "They are non-conceptuality, individuality, and particularity – things which ever

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*construed, is generally the task of knowing [Erkennens], on the one hand, as much as in the domain of practice, on the other, it is a matter of not standing pat with the contingency of willing or arbitrary choice [Willkür]. Nonetheless, especially in the modern era, it has often happened that contingency has been elevated to an illegitimate level and accorded a value in relation to nature as well as the spiritual world that does not in fact suit it" (Hegel 2010b, p.216, emphasis added). Along the same lines in the Introduction to his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, Hegel remarks that, "The sole aim of philosophical enquiry is to eliminate [entfernen] the contingent. Contingency is the same as external necessity, that is, a necessity which originates in causes which are themselves no more than external circumstances. In history, we must look for a general design, the ultimate end of the world, and not a particular end of the subjective spirit or mind; and we must comprehend it by means of reason, which cannot concern itself with particular and finite ends, but only with the absolute" (Hegel 1975, p. 28, emphasis added).*

<sup>5</sup> As Adorno writes in the *Negative Dialectics*, "It is the horror that verifies Hegel and stands him on his head. If he transfigured the totality of historic suffering into the positivity of the self-realizing absolute, the One and All that keeps rolling on to this day—with occasional breathing spells—would teleologically be the absolute of suffering" (Adorno 2004, p. 320).

since Plato used to be dismissed as transitory and insignificant” (p. 8). By worshipping the laws of identity, Hegel’s dialectic hurts everything it dismisses as an expression of “lazy *Existenz*” (ibid.): it smashes the merely accidental and ephemeral, it crushes the right of the non-identical, it annihilates the concrete under the weight of abstract categorization,<sup>6</sup> it asphyxiates the individual and the singular in the name of the universal, which shows no “sympathy with the utopian particularity that has been buried underneath the universal” (p. 318), and, finally, it dissipates the very substance of being under the cognitive power of reason. Adorno stands up for all that resist the brutal constraint of the Hegelian concept by reclaiming the primacy of the non-identical against the imperative of identity thinking. However, as Alison Stone has highlighted, Adorno’s notion of the non-identical is in the end nothing but a regulative concept – like Kant’s notion of the Thing-in-itself – which he employs to circumscribe a “zone of resistance” against the expansion of the “insatiable principle of identity” (Stone 2014, p. 1135).<sup>7</sup> In fact, the concept of the non-identical does not express any knowledge of the singular things that it strives to assert and rather serves as a mere placeholder: the non-identical only names the side of things that no concept can reach or master. Drawing

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<sup>6</sup> In the second essay of his *Drei Studien zu Hegel*, entitled “The Experiential Content of Hegel’s Philosophy”, Adorno provides a much more generous reading of Hegel’s understanding of experience and of the empirical. According to Adorno, “Hegel went beyond the limits of a science that merely ascertained and arranged data” rooting experience into the speculative and rejecting any positivistic drift. Therefore, Adorno remarks that “because of his idealism, Hegel has been reproached for being abstract in comparison with the concreteness of the phenomenological, anthropological, and ontological schools. But he brought infinitely more concreteness into his philosophical ideas than those approaches, and not because his speculative imagination was balanced by a sense of reality and historical perspective but by virtue of the approach his philosophy takes by virtue, one might say, of the experiential character of his speculation” (Hegel 1993, p. 66-67).

<sup>7</sup> See also Stone 2014 and Tertulian 1983.



on the pain of the non-identical – “what the concepts suppress, disparage, and discard” (Adorno 2004, p. 9-10) – Adorno defines the task of negative dialectics. Its prerogative, he explains, “would consist of the qualities that [philosophy] downgrades as contingent, as a *quantité négligeable*,” and whose legitimacy and dignity are to be reclaimed (p. 8). Such negligible contingencies lying under the yoke of the *Begriff* are the unsettling *others* that reveal the *untruth* of Hegel’s philosophy despite its efforts at grasping and reconciling them through its dialectic (p. 5).

In the opening lines of his *Margins of Philosophy*, Jacques Derrida emphasizes the importance of the *limits* of philosophical thought as points of encounter where speculation comes into close contact with that which cannot be reduced to it, namely, its *other*: “*Its other: that which limits it and from which it comes in its essence, its definition, its production*” (Derrida 1982, p. x). The question is, thus, to what extent the *recalcitrant others* of speculation – such as madness and irrationality, faith and the sacred, the mundane and the transient, and pure contingency – push philosophy to the limits of its conceptual resources and challenge the validity of its speculative ambition (Desmond 1992). The danger comes from the *margins* of the Absolute, where the Absolute meets its *limits*. This is precisely the issue raised by Derrida: “To think its other: does this amount solely to *relever (aufheben)* that from which it derives, to head the procession of its method *only by passing the limit*? Or indeed does *the limit, obliquely, by surprise, always reserve one more blow for philosophical knowledge? Limit/passage*” (Derrida 1982, p. x-xi, emphasis added). Derrida evokes the unsettling and unpredictable character of liminality suggesting that the limit is always twofold: it is *one’s own limit* – the limit one can push or overcome – and *the other as a limit* in its untamed and ungraspable nature.

Indeed, if the Hegelian dialectic functions as a reductive mechanism that simply relocates the other-of-thought into the speculative script of *the pure concept conceptually comprehending*

*itself* [*der sich begreifende reine Begriff*], which is the ultimate achievement of the *Science of Logic*, and brings the non-identical back into the cage of identity, then the dialectical deployment is painless for the concept, while its speculation is *unlimited* and anaesthetic (Hegel 2010a, p. 752). If, on the contrary, the dialectic's unfolding happens through pain, insofar as the Absolute only gains its absoluteness by meeting its own *limits* and suffering from them, its painful mastery testifies to the torments of the speculative.

## 2. *The Contingency of Contingency and its Necessity: A Logical Digression*

Adorno's statement that philosophy as negative dialectics should assert the denied right of the non-conceptual seems to recall that made by W.T. Krug in his *Letters on Latest Idealism* (1801), one of the most well-known provocations in the history of Western philosophy. In it, Krug required the system of the Absolute to deduce his pen, a demand that Hegel repeatedly derided and rejected. However, Adorno's and Krug's interests in contingencies are driven by quite different concerns. Adorno relies on non-conceptual singularities to denounce the totalitarian character of Hegelian philosophy, whereas Krug aims to point out the weakness of a philosophical system – in this case Schelling's transcendental idealism – that is unable to conceptually grasp and give account of the totality of knowledge, including of the most contingent things. Hegel's famous reply to Krug in the article *Wie der gemeine Menschenverstand die Philosophie nehme*, published in 1802 in the *Critical Journal*, seems to confirm Adorno's preoccupation that the non-conceptual is doomed to be dismissed by the Hegelian dialectic: Krug's pen is of little interest to speculation, whose main *raison d'être* lies in the effort to “put God again absolutely at the head of philosophy as the sole ground of everything,

as the only *principium essendi et cognoscendi*” (Hegel 1985, p. 299). Almost thirty years later, in a note to § 250 of the *Encyclopaedia*, Hegel returns to this episode with the same sarcasm: “It was in this – and other respects too – quite naive sense that Herr Krug once challenged the Philosophy of Nature to perform the feat of deducing *only* his pen. One could perhaps give him hope that *his* pen would have the glory of being deduced, if ever philosophy should advance so far and have such a dear insight into every great theme in heaven and on earth, past and present, that there was nothing more important to comprehend” (Hegel 2004, p. 23, § 250 add.). In Hegel’s view, Krug’s alleged naivety remains emblematic of a widespread misunderstanding of the mission of philosophy, which he never ceased to despise: “The infinite wealth and variety of forms and, what is most irrational, the contingency which enters into the external arrangement of natural things, have been extolled as the sublime freedom of Nature, even as the divinity of Nature, or at least the divinity present *in* it. This confusion of contingency, caprice, and disorder, with freedom and rationality is characteristic of sensuous and unphilosophical thinking [...as] it is quite improper to expect the Concept to comprehend – or as it is said, construe or deduce – these contingent products of Nature” (ibid., trans. modified).

But what is the relationship that the Hegelian system entertains with contingencies? Studies on the notion of *contingency* in Hegel’s logic pave the way towards further questioning the status of the *contingent* in his philosophy. The works of Dieter Henrich (1971), Bernard Mabille (1999), and John Burbidge (2007) in particular have definitively proven the logical and ontological dignity of this notion.<sup>8</sup> In the *Logic*, Hegel places contingency at the heart of his treatment of the *Wirklichkeit* and defines it as the identity of the possible and the actual. While referring to

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<sup>8</sup> See Henrich 1971; Mabille 1999; Burbidge 2007; Di Giovanni 1980; Houlgate 1995.

the modal categories of traditional logic, Hegel reverses Kant's hierarchy of priorities, making actuality as *konkreter Gedanke* superior to possibility, which is only one of its merely abstract moments: "When we therefore say of something that 'it is possible', this purely formal assertion is just as superficial and empty as the principle of contradiction, and any content that we put into it; 'A is possible', says no more than 'A is A'" (Hegel 2010a, p. 479). Contingency, instead, is the "unity of possibility and actuality" or "this *absolute restlessness* of the *becoming* of these two determinations" (p. 481). The contingent is a *weak* actual so to say, or, as Hegel states, "The contingent is an actual which is at the same time determined as only possible, an actual whose other or opposite equally is" (p. 480). Interestingly, in Hegel's view, necessity also relates to contingency – its negation – which is in fact incorporated in it, as "the *determinateness* of necessity consists in its having [...] contingency within it" (p. 485). Absolute necessity, the highest stage of *Notwendigkeit*, presupposes contingency as the foundation of its own necessity, since, without the overcoming of its contingent moments, necessity could not be absolute. Thus, contingency itself emerges as *absolutely necessary* or, as has been pointed out, the only *Ur-necessity* recognized by Hegelian logic seems to be the necessity of *Ur-contingency* (Burbidge 2007, p. 47).

Upon closer inspection, however, necessity and contingency, which together determine the logical movement leading from (formal) possibility to the realization of (concrete) actuality, turn out to be worlds apart since the respective definitions of the two categories put them in a relationship of opposition: necessity indicates what *cannot be otherwise*, whereas contingency names what *can or cannot be, while being as it is or otherwise*.<sup>9</sup> Yet, as in a final *coup de théâtre*, following the last steps of Hegel's reasoning, contingency and necessity end up being again very close to each other: contingency refers to that which *has no foundation* in

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<sup>9</sup> See Johnston 2017.

itself and depends on something else, while absolute necessity is only because it is; it has otherwise *no condition nor foundation*. The common lack of foundation, though, has different ontological implications for the two categories and Hegel dispels any possible conflation by distinguishing the freedom enjoyed by absolute necessity, which is groundless insofar as it is *unconditioned*, from that of contingency, which is groundless to the extent that it is *unfounded* – hence abstract and inessential. Therefore, while admitting its necessity (“*contingency* is rather absolute necessity”), Hegel also acknowledges the true and primordial *contingency of the contingent*, as well as its troubling consequences for speculation (Hegel 2010a, p. 488). Indeed, contingency reintroduces a surprising glimpse of immediate being within the logic of essence on its way to the concept. As Hegel highlights, contingency “is the *essence* of those free, inherently necessary actualities [...that] are grounded purely in themselves, are shaped for themselves, manifest themselves only to *themselves* – because *they are only being*” (ibid., *emph. added*). And it is “the very *simplicity* of their being” and “the *freedom* of their reflectionless immediacy” that permeate the interstices of the Absolute, making contingencies a painful reminder of its limitations (*ibidem*).

### 3. *What Happens in Nature*

Dieter Henrich has rightly pointed out that, while the notion of contingency is crucial to Hegelian logic, the “determinate contingent” (*das bestimmte Zufällige*) – i.e. the series of the contingencies that happen – is not, and thus, according to Hegel, does not deserve philosophy’s attention. Nevertheless, precisely because of their non-necessary and inessential character, contingencies in nature and history create a number of problems for speculation (Henrich 1971). Contingencies – the many and multifarious occurrences of the contingent – are characterized

by their ontological insufficiency. *Zufällig* literally means that which is destined *to fall*, that which is null and meaningless, and therefore transitory. In the 1802 article in which he develops his polemic against Krug, Hegel sketches out a scale with several levels of ontological consistency, moving from inanimate objects – such as Krug’s pen – at the very bottom of the scale, passing through organic nature, and ending in a higher realm of the spirit. If a pen is unworthy of interest for speculation (whereas the moon, roses, oak trees, and horses are taken into account by the philosophy of nature), it is not because it is too concrete, but, on the contrary, because it is too abstract (i.e. detached and distant from the totality of phenomena), and thus cannot be grasped by the movement of the concept. Hegel’s ontological hierarchy recognizes the superiority of organic forms (*Organisationen*) and individualities (*Individualitäten*) – such as Alexander the Great, Moses, or Cicero – based on the higher level of subjectivity they achieved (Hegel 1985). In this order, then, a human being is more comprehensible than a planet. Simple things, on the other hand, are determined by an excess of abstraction that makes speculative intelligibility impossible.

Hegel counters the traditional conception of nature as the realm of determinism and makes it the realm of the contingent, a seemingly anarchic universe where the absence of order (*Ordnungslosigkeit*) rules. In Hegel’s terms, externality – which is the main mark of nature as “the Idea in the form of otherness” [*in der Form des Andersseins*] (Hegel 2004, p. 15) – is also the quintessential attribute of the contingent.<sup>10</sup> From this perspective, the *free sway* (*freies Ergehen*) of contingencies that unfolds in nature is nothing but blind chance without the slightest trace of inner necessity, which exists only in the spiritual world (Hegel 2010b, p. 217, add. § 145). Hegel repeatedly stresses that the great multiplicity of organic and inorganic

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<sup>10</sup> In the second part of the *Encyclopaedia*, Hegel defines nature as *die Idee in der Weise der Äußerlichkeit/the Idea in the guise of externality* (Hegel 2004, p. 418).

forms in nature is less a sign of richness than the evidence of its “indeterminable irregularity”. The manifold variety of genera and species that testify to the infinite divisibility of matter proves “the immeasurableness of Nature, which at first excites our wonder,” but it is actually just another mark of its externality and accidentality (Hegel 2004, p. 22, §250). Lost in the “infinite diversity of its shapes” (Hegel 2010a, p. 536), the *history of nature* is dominated “by external contingency and playfulness [*von äusserlichem Zufall und vom Spiele*] rather than by reason [*nicht durch Vernunft*]” (Hegel 2010b, p. 44, § 16 add., trans. modified). In nature, as Hegel writes, “not only is the play of forms a prey to boundless and unchecked contingency [*ungebundene, zügellose Zufälligkeit*], but each separate entity is without the concept of itself” (Hegel 2004, p. 17, §248 add., trans. modified); therefore in nature one cannot appeal to the *concept*, but only to reasons [*Gründe*] (Hegel 2010b, p. 44, §16). In Hegel’s view, at its primordial stages of development, nature can be partially deciphered by the philosophy of nature: it can be portrayed, explained, and above all admired. However, as he stresses, such admiration is still “without concept [*ohne Begriff*]” (*ibidem*) and its “object is the irrational [*Vernunftlose*]” (Hegel 2010a, p. 536). Only in the realm of the spirit, which Hegel conceives as the *being-at-home-by-oneself within-the-other* (*in seinem Anderen bei sich selbst zu sein*), can the concept ascend to its dialectical mastery (Hegel 2010b, p. 60, § 24, add. 2).<sup>11</sup>

While nature displays itself as an “unresolved contradiction” [*unaufgelöste Widerspruch*] for the concept – a definition that resonates strongly with the *Unauflöslichkeit* Adorno so praises as a crucial feature of the non-conceptual – natural contingencies are alien to the *Begriff* insofar as they resist any possibility of conceptual comprehension (Hegel 2004, p. 17, add. § 248). In

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<sup>11</sup> Hegel writes, “Thus spirit relates purely to itself and is therefore free, for freedom is precisely this: to be at home with oneself in one’s other, to be dependent upon oneself, to be the determining factor for oneself” (Hegel 2010b, p. 60, § 24, add.2).

this way, the *impotence of nature* – its conceptual limitedness – is echoed in the weaknesses of the concept facing the raw givenness of the contingent it encounters in nature (Hegel 2010a, p. 536).<sup>12</sup> As Hegel recalls, by holding to inconceivable and irreducible contingency, nature assigns limits (*Grenzen*) to philosophy in a way that allows philosophy to experience its own limits (Hegel 2004, p. 23, § 250). Philosophy’s task, therefore, “consists in knowing the necessity hidden beneath the semblance of contingency,” while acknowledging, at the same time, that “*contingency is still to be accorded its due* even in the objective [*gegenständlich*] world” (Hegel 2010b, § 145, p. 217, *emph. added*).<sup>13</sup> In other words, contingencies cannot be discarded, and the Hegelian concept must learn how to find its way around them.

#### 4. *The Absolute and the Contingent*

Contra Adorno, rather than being a victim of the dialectic, the non-conceptual (or the contingent, in Hegel’s terms) emerges as a destabilizing and painful matter for the concept on its route to the Absolute (Di Giovanni 1980).<sup>14</sup> The challenge for the Absolute is about preserving both its absoluteness and the manifestation of contingencies within it, without which it would be nothing but “lifeless solitude” (*das leblose Einsame*) with neither *pathos* nor *mathos* (Hegel 1977, p. 493, *trans. modified*).

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<sup>12</sup> Hegel writes, “This is the impotence of Nature, that it cannot abide by and exhibit the rigor of the concept and loses itself in a blind manifoldness void of concept [*begrifflose*]” (Hegel 2010a, p. 536).

<sup>13</sup> Hegel adds that “this should not be so understood as if the contingent pertained merely to our subjective representation and that, therefore, it must be completely *set aside* in order to arrive at the truth” (Hegel 2010b, § 145, p. 217).

<sup>14</sup> For Di Giovanni, the final verification for every system of thought is not “whether it dispels irrationality but whether it shows that irrationality is contained in reality itself”, and this is especially true in the case of Hegel’s philosophy, for which reality “would not be self-sufficient if it did not contain its own irrationality (Di Giovanni 1980, p. 193).



Can the sacrifice by the Absolute facing the infinite irreducibility of the contingent thus be interpreted as the highest and noblest expression of its absoluteness?<sup>15</sup> At the end of the *Phenomenology*, Absolute Knowing's plunge into the *night of consciousness* to immerse itself into the exteriority of space-time may be well conceived as the seal of its perfect completeness. The concept of limit (*Grenze*) is, once again, crucial to this passage. As Hegel states, "The self-knowing Spirit knows not only itself but also the negative of itself, or its limit: to know one's limit is to know how to sacrifice oneself." The sacrifice of the Absolute, in Hegel's view, amounts to "the externalization in which Spirit displays the process of its becoming Spirit in the form of *free contingent happening* [*freien zufälligen Geschehens*], intuiting its pure Self as Time outside of it, and equally its Being as Space" (Hegel 1977, p. 492). Absolute Knowing, as Hegel explains, knows itself absolutely *only by knowing its limits*. To *know absolutely* thus means to know how to embrace one's own limitations and conduct the sacrificial act that delivers speculative knowledge to the contingencies of the world. This sacrifice is epitomized by the gesture of *Entlassung*, which intervenes at the climax of the realization of the Absolute, whereby Absolute Knowing frees itself from the form of its pure concept to be reincarnated in the sensuous shape of self-consciousness. The *Entlassung*, which is inaugurated by the recommencement of the phenomenological journey, is an act of liberation: when the Absolute frees itself from its form (*Form*) in order to take on new figures (*Gestalten*) of the spirit, it is the very *Entlassung* of its own form that testifies to "the supreme freedom and security of its self-knowledge."<sup>16</sup>

*Entlassung* resurfaces at the end of the *Logic*, which culminates in the Absolute Idea. Hegel writes:

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<sup>15</sup> See B. Mabille 1999 p. 365.

<sup>16</sup> See F. Ruda 2014.

The pure idea into which the determinateness or reality of the concept is itself raised into concept is rather an absolute *liberation* [...]; in this freedom, therefore, there is no transition [into something else] that takes place; the simple being to which the idea determines itself remains perfectly transparent to it: it is the idea that in its determination remains with itself. The transition is to be grasped, therefore, in the sense that the idea *freely discharges* [*frei entläßt*] itself, absolutely certain of itself and internally at rest. On account of this freedom, the *form of its determinateness* is just as absolutely free: the externality of space and time absolutely existing for itself without subjectivity. (Hegel 2010a, p. 752-3)<sup>17</sup>

As in the conclusion of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, at the end of the *Logic* freedom and absoluteness converge in the polysemy of *entlassen*, to reaffirm that there is liberation for the concept only in the movement of freeing its other, i.e. the non-conceptual or the non-conceivable. The concept “is absolute power precisely because it can let its difference go free [*entlassen*] in the shape of self-subsistent diversity, external necessity, accidentality, [*Zufälligkeit*], arbitrariness, opinion, all of which, however, must not be taken as anything more than the abstract side of *nothingness*” (p. 536). To liberate one’s other, to *let it be* – or as Bernard Bourgeois puts it, “to be liberal” towards its other – is the highest demonstration of the freedom of the concept, as for Hegel “to be free is to liberate.”<sup>18</sup> The freedom of the Absolute, in its true

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<sup>17</sup> At the end of the first part of its *Encyclopaedia* (§ 244), Hegel writes, “Yet the absolute *freedom* of the idea is that it does not merely pass over into *life* or let life shine in itself as finite knowing, but instead, in the absolute truth of itself, *resolves to release freely from itself* [*frei aus sich zu entlassen*] the moment of its particularity or the first determining and otherness, the *immediate idea*, as its *reflection*, itself as *nature*” (Hegel 2010b, p. 303). See also Mabile 1999, p. 321.

<sup>18</sup> See B. Bourgeois’s footnote n.1 in his translation of the first tome of Hegel’s *Science of Logic* (Hegel 2015, p. 51): “C’est un grand theme hégélien celui selon lequel la puissance absolue, d’abord maîtresse de soi, est, en cette liberté vraie d’elle-meme, libératrice de ce qu’elle crée comme son Autre. *Etre libre c’est bien liberer que ça soit au niveau du logique, de la nature ou de l’esprit*” (emph. added).

absolute mastery, thus corresponds to its liberation *in and of its other*, namely *in and of* the infinite domain of the contingent.

At the summit of the dialectical adventure, the hold of the concept (*begreifen*) finds a significant counterweight in the movement of release (*entlassen*) accomplished by the concept itself, which constantly reopens the doors of philosophy to unpredictable spaces and times. The dialectical pain that the sacrifice of its conceptual form causes the Absolute finds a counterpart in the realization of its freedom that, in turn, coincides with the liberation of *its other*, the non-conceptual. Overcoming the contingent is at the same time an act of surrender and of acceptance whereby the Absolute, by assuming its limits and giving free rein to contingency, ends up reasserting its absolute mastery. Its sacrifice, moreover, is not a passive gesture that merely makes room for the contingencies of the world; it rather implies the labor of an active speculative recovery (*Erinnerung*) from the external dispersion of the *Geist* (its *Entäusserung* in nature and in history). Yet, such a speculative *reprise* can only make do with the irreducible inconceivability of contingencies.

### *5. A History of Contingencies*

If the *Phenomenology* settles its account with the contingent through the sacrifice of Absolute Knowing, what about the destiny of contingencies in the realm of spirit, in the ethical life, and in history? The insights that Hegel provides on the matter in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* and in the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* demonstrate a radical hostility towards the contingent that the philosophy of spirit is called upon to dispel in the various domains that it embraces in order to recognize, as the Preface to the *Grundlinien* explains, “in the semblance of the temporal and transient the substance which is immanent and the eternal which is present” (Hegel 1991, p. 20). In the first paragraph

of the introduction to the *Grundlinien*, Hegel expresses an even more categorical judgment about everything that is not posited by the concept itself and is thus relegated to “transitory existence [*Dasein*], external contingency [äußerliche Zufälligkeit], opinion, appearance without essence, untruth, deception.” In his view, it is not “the business of philosophy” to engage with such an infinite and indeterminate matter (Hegel 1991, p. 25). As he further recalls in the addition to §145 of the *Encyclopaedia*, “With regard to spirit and its active manifestation, one must be careful not to let oneself be led astray by the zeal [...] of a rational knowledge, to want to show as necessary or, as one is accustomed to say, to construct *a priori*, apparitions to which belongs the character of contingency.” For this would, at best, amount to nothing more than “vacuously playing around and being obstinately pedantic” (Hegel 2010b, p. 217).

The approach of the philosophy of spirit to contingencies is similar to that of the philosophy of nature, as philosophy as such is not devoted to the comprehension of contingent phenomena, but to the conceptual apprehension of the Idea that reverberates in them. However, the world of spirit (the object of the philosophy of spirit proper) is less dominated by the external necessity of the contingent than is the natural universe. Hegel recognizes the presence of a greater freedom in the realm of spirit than that which nature enjoys, yet contingency also inhabits the spiritual world – which in turn presupposes and relies on the natural world – and manifests itself mainly as arbitrariness. As he remarks in the *Encyclopaedia* (§ 145, add.), “the contingent asserts itself in the spiritual world as well, [...] that contains in itself what is contingent in the form of arbitrary choice, albeit only as a sublated moment” (ibid.). Hegel thus maintains that the task of philosophical knowledge in this context is not to “stand pat with the contingency of willing or arbitrary choice”, but rather to “overcome this contingency” (ibid.). What does Hegel actually mean by that? In the world of spirit, as in logic, the contingent

has two meanings: chance (which is groundless) and contingency proper (which depends on external circumstances and therefore has its grounding in something else). At the level of ethical life, contingency appears as *arbitrary choice* [*Willkür*]. Hegel therefore stresses the importance of properly understanding the role of contingency in the determination and definition of free will, and explains that the actual freedom that allows the individual to freely recognize the inner necessity of the *Sittlichkeit* is often erroneously confused with whim and arbitrariness, which are instead merely the manifestation of the will in the form of contingency. In his view, although free choice is an important component of the will, it ultimately stands for a mere formal freedom that is to be considered the weakest stage of ethical freedom.<sup>19</sup>

However, speculative reason allows room for contingency in the course of history. History unfolds amidst external and unpredictable circumstances. Singular aims, individual interests, and subjective passions feed the progress of history towards its telos, the actualization of freedom. In history, alongside the cunning of reason, a *cunning of contingency* also emerges so that in the spiritual world all liberation is won in hand-to-hand combat with and against contingencies. At the level of lived history – *Geschichte*, literally conceived as the field of *Geschehen*, of events that merely happen – for each individual, overcoming contingency means making do with it by living and acting freely in a world that is neither governed by chance nor driven by Providence. At the level of the philosophy of history (*Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*), where it is a matter of distinguishing the different styles of conceiving history, the self-actualization of the Idea towards the realization of human freedom takes precedence over

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<sup>19</sup> Hegel's critique of the paroxysms of romantic irony and its extreme subjectivism is echoed in the realm of the *ethical life*, in his critique of the arbitrariness of the will which turns away from the objectivity of the world in which it is supposed to realise itself to pursue its volatile and ephemeral goals. See Mascot 2017.

the contingent as an object of philosophical consideration. As Hegel notes, “Philosophy ought not to be a narrative [*Erzählung*] of what happens [*was geschieht*], but a cognition of what is true in what happens, in order further to comprehend [*begreifen*] on the basis of this truth what in the narrative [*Erzählung*] appears as a mere happening [*als ein blosses Geschehen erscheint*]” (Hegel 2010a, p. 519). The philosophy of history, like philosophy in general, is less concerned with the contingent existence of what is (*Dasein*) and rather focuses on actuality (*Wirklichkeit*). History (*Geschichte*), instead, as a positive science only shares a rational basis with philosophy. Like other disciplines such as jurisprudence and geography, it is among those sciences whose “rational beginning passes into the contingent, insofar as they have to bring down the universal into the empirical singularity and effectivity.” If the Idea is history’s essence, its appearance nevertheless unfolds “in contingency and in the field of the arbitrary” (Hegel 2010b, p. 44, add. §16).<sup>20</sup> Therefore, while philosophy is destined to Truth and freed from the burden of engaging with the contingent that inhabits the life of the spirit, history as the sheer recollection of

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<sup>20</sup> See what Hegel writes in the same paragraph of the *Encyclopaedia* about positive sciences (§16 add.): “The positive element of the sciences comes in several forms. First, what is in itself a rational starting-point passes over into something contingent due to the fact that they have to trace the universal back down to *empirical singularity* and *actuality*. In this field of the changeable and the accidental it is not the *concept* but only reasons [*Gründe*] that can be appealed to. Jurisprudence, for instance, or the system of direct and indirect taxation, require definitive, exact decisions which lie outside the *determinateness in-and-for-itself of the concept*. They therefore admit of a wide margin of discretion that may lead to one result for one reason and a different result for another, but is not capable of a final certain determination. Similarly, when pursued down to its individual details, the idea of *nature* fades away into contingencies. Thus, the *history of nature, geography, medicine, etc.*, end up with determinations of concrete existence and with species and genera that are determined by external coincidence and playfulness rather than by reason. *History* belongs here as well, insofar as its essence is the idea, while its appearance unfolds in contingency and in a field of arbitrariness” (Hegel 2010b, p. 44, §16 add.).

events is required to recount and account for the contingencies of the world:

If it is not the truth which is at issue but only narration [*Historie*],<sup>21</sup> as it is the case in pictorial and phenomenal thinking [*im Vorstellen und dem erscheinenden Denken*], then we might as well stay with the story [*Erzählung*] that we begin with feelings and intuitions, and that the understanding then extracts a universal or an abstraction from their manifold, for which purpose it quite understandably needs a substrate for these feelings and intuitions which, in the process of abstraction, retains for representation the same complete reality with which it first presented itself. (Hegel 2010a, p. 519)

Thus, in the last instance, philosophy's overcoming of the contingent amounts to deferring it to the domain of representation.

## 6. The Cunning of *Vorstellung*

Hegel recognizes the right of the contingent to be *represented* and thus assigns to representation (*Vorstellung*) – in its multiple aesthetic, religious and historical manifestations – the task of taking care of contingent events. The division of labor between representation and concept with regards to the spiritual realm of the *Weltgeschichte* corresponds to the disciplinary distinction between history and the philosophy of history. This division follows from the respective functions of each faculty; while the

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<sup>21</sup> *Historie* from the Greek *historia* is a word designating an inquiry into or an account of a series of events. *Geschichte* is the German word deriving from *Geschehen* that indicates originally “the events that happen” rather than their account. Later, from the 15th century onward, *Geschichte* has equated with the meaning originally attributed to *Historie* to designate a narrative or the systematic investigation of historical events. In the above passage, Hegel is using *Historie* as a synonym for *Erzählung*, while *Geschichte* stands for both the series of the historical events and the study of such events (Inwood 1992, p. 118).

*Begriff* (*begreifen* / to seize) aims at grasping the speculative logic of things, the *Vorstellung* (*vor-stellen* / to make present) *re-presents* contents of thought that “have the characteristic of not having been conceived [*nicht begriffen zu sein*]” and thus remain in an external relation of independence (Hegel 1977, p. 624). In Hegel’s view, contingencies can be accounted for within the non-conceptual medium of the *Vorstellung*, the *other of philosophy*, to which he ascribes an ambivalent status at the margins of the *Begriff*. If, on the one hand, the purpose of philosophy is to overcome representation, on the other hand, philosophy could not do without the *Vorstellung* (representation, instead, can do without philosophy).

As Paul Ricoeur points out in his essay “Le status de la *Vorstellung* dans la philosophie hégélienne de la religion” (1985), for Hegel representation is in fact both irreplaceable and inadequate;<sup>22</sup> it is an imperfect and insufficient form of knowledge that is characterized by a residual element of externality and yet remains ineliminable (Lebrun 1972, p. 89). In § 451 of the *Encyclopaedia*, Hegel describes representation as “the intuition recalled to itself by internalization” (*die erinnerte Anschauung*) that oscillates between sensible experience and conceptual thought. Furthermore, in the Preface to the second edition of the *Encyclopaedia* (1827), he points out that representation (as religion) and thought (as science) share the same content even if they express it in distinct ways. The chapter on “Religion” in the *Phenomenology*, nevertheless, insists on the need for philosophical knowledge to supersede the *Gestalt* of representation, and the chapter on Absolute Knowing presents a speculative narrative that has purified its contents of the attributes of the *Vorstellung*, namely of their contingency, their externality, and their temporal nature. Ricoeur suggests thinking of Hegel’s *Vorstellung* as the expression of a figurative thought that includes not only images and symbols, but also language and

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<sup>22</sup> See P. Jonkers 2004 and Mascot 2014a.



conceptually elaborated elements. Representation would thus be *thinkable*, but *never completely thought*, and so according to Ricoeur, a relation of hermeneutic translatability could be established between concept and representation (Ricoeur 1985, p. 58). His proposal, however, underestimates the *recalcitrant otherness* of representation that results from its being bound to time in its simplest and crudest instantiation, namely *time as it goes by*; as Lebrun recalls, representation obeys “the secret sovereignty of duration and time” (Lebrun 1972, p. 77).

The destiny of *Vorstellung* is deeply intertwined with the linear time of succession. Representation is precisely the *recollected intuition* (*die erinnerte Anschauung*, as recalled in §451 of the *Encyclopaedia*) that intuits time, which Hegel in turn defines as “the becoming directly intuited” [*das angeschaute Werden*] (Hegel 2007b, p. 184, §451; Hegel 2004, p. 35, §258). If time is the being that “inasmuch as it is, is *not*, and inasmuch as it is *not*, is,” representation consists in the presentification of this being that comes and goes (*ibid.*). Without representation, that which is lost in time would be lost forever, while by representing it, the *Vorstellung* brings back and rescues what is no longer present (and can thus only be re-presented). In §565 of the *Encyclopaedia*, Hegel provides further details of the specific connectivity performed by the *Vorstellung*: representation “gives the moments of the content of the absolute mind a subsistence-by-itself and makes them, with respect to each other, presuppositions (*Voraussetzungen*) and phenomena that follow each other (*aufeinander folgende Erscheinungen*).” Therefore, the relation representation establishes between disparate phenomena is conceived as “a connection of the happening (*ein Zusammenhang des Geschehens*) according to finite determinations of the reflection.” Representation follows the linear unfolding of discursive narrative, whereas the concept moves in comprehending circles that retrospectively posit rational groundings to their contingent presuppositions (Hegel 2007, p. 264, § 565). The margin existing between *Vorstellung* and *Begriff*

is then configured as the margin existing between time and the thought of time, a *décalage* that can never be completely sublated by the concept and in which the fluctuating limit of Absolute Knowing is to be found. This ineliminable *décalage* epitomizes the nature of representation, which *stands up for the other as other*, and embodies “the affirmative irreducibility of a certain heteronomy” *vis-à-vis* the concept (Desmond 1992, p. 180).

Interestingly, at the very end of the *Phenomenology*, Absolute Knowing also emerges as “comprehended history” (*begriffene Geschichte*). Representation paved the way for this by weaving the chronological series of events as they happen, ordering in sequence the materials of “actual history” (*wirkliche Geschichte*) that the concept is meant to transfigure by elevating them to the level of speculation. Speculation must thus overcome contingencies to achieve the *sense* of the world as it goes, whereas the *Vorstellung* can merely represent the *course* of the world. The contingent, or the inconceivable “as something that happens without being conceived [*ein unbegreifliches Geschehen*]” and which therefore remains on the margins of conceptual comprehension, finds in the *Vorstellung* the possibility of finally being *re-presented* and *made present* (Hegel 1977, p. 493). The cunning of contingency thus translates into the cunning of the *Vorstellung*, which makes representation necessary and ineliminable in the economy of speculative knowledge. The sacrifice of the *Vorstellung* accomplished by Absolute Knowing anticipates the sacrifice of the conceptual form of the Absolute through the *Entlassung* that occurs at the peak of its own consummation and preludes its return to the contingent externality of the world in order for consciousness to begin its journey again. The painful sacrifice of the Absolute eventually discloses the very essence of Hegel’s speculation as a *specular* game of infinite deferrals between concept and representation. Pace Adorno, Hegel’s Absolute cannot spare its *pathos*. And yet, it is through its *pathos* that it proves and celebrates its absolute mastery.

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# Abstracts

## The Master Is Undead

*Mladen Dolar*

The paper takes as its starting point the anecdote of Freud's visit to Slovenia in April 1898, when he by coincidence met dr. Karl Lueger, the burgomaster of Vienna and the notorious antisemitic populist leader whom none other than Hitler later took as the role model. Lueger represented at the time a new type of the figure of the master, after the demise of the traditional paternal figures which served as the models of authority. The anecdote can be taken as emblematic of the political role of psychoanalysis which at its inception had to confront a new type of authority and a logic which stretches from that time up to the present. The paper further considers two cases of new grotesque masters after the political shift of modernity, Marx's confrontation with Louis Bonaparte in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, and the fictional figure of Ubu proposed by Alfred Jarry (roughly at the time of Freud's anecdotal encounter of Lueger) and which Michel Foucault took as the paradigm of "grotesque sovereignty." The second part of the paper tries to figure out how the seemingly excessive figures of new populist masters fit into the structure of what Lacan described as the discourse of the university, which presented for him the discourse that subtends the social ties after the advent of modernity. The populist masters can be taken as the symptoms of that constellation, following Lacan's gloomy predictions of the rise of segregation on the basis of university discourse, with the advancement of science, the common markets and the spread of universalization.

*Keywords:* populism, Bonapartism, grotesque sovereignty, psychoanalysis, university discourse, Freud, Lueger, Marx, Foucault, Lacan

## Burning Down the Ship from “the Inside Out”: Afropessimism’s Ethics of the Real

Frances L. Restuccia

This essay addresses the question of “Black desire” (Frank Wilderson’s phrase in *Afropessimism*) as it pertains to Lacanian ethics (as conveyed in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Seminar VII). Like *Antigone*, *Afropessimism* is “a turning point” in the field of ethics. Lacan poses the same question about Antigone that Wilderson poses regarding the Black: “What does it mean ... [to] go beyond the limits of the human?” After elaborating on Fanon’s notion that “the black ... is not,” Marriott’s conception of *ab-sens* as blackness, and Wilderson’s idea of the Black as Slave, this essay uses and then reverses Žižek’s notion of parallax to suggest that the shift (which these theorists call for) in the (Black) phobogenic nightmare/object (petrified by the “white gaze”), can effect not only collapse of the (white) subject (as it pulls the black rug out from under it) but also a dissolution of the subject-object (racist) structure. As the object refuses to accept its reification (parallax), resisting its relegation to social death, through confrontation with and ownership of the Real hell that especially Wilderson’s Fanonian/Lacanian work insists on, the entire edifice will undergo a sea change as the eye that now looks at the Human sees it as what it is: nothing (reverse parallax). Herein lies the revolutionary desire—which can only arise through an “absolute condition”—that Afropessimism, in the spirit of Antigone, aims to ignite. “Social death can be destroyed,” writes Wilderson, once the ship is burned “*from the inside out.*”

*Keywords:* Afropessimism, Antigone, *ab-sens*, parallax, reverse parallax, social death, abjection, the undead, second death, Black revolutionary desire

## Alas, poor Yorick! ... The Being of Spirit is a Bone *Nathan Brown*

This paper addresses the relation between famous phrases in Shakespeare and Hegel—”Alas, Poor Yorick!” and “The being of spirit as a bone”—which punctuate reflections upon the materiality of spirit. Meditating upon the challenge these enunciations pose to the living thought of dead matter, the author takes Hegel’s infinite judgment as an incitement to consider the problem of existence in *Hamlet* at the level of the material occupation of space. From this perspective, the article argues that *Hamlet* is pervasively concerned with the metaphysical riddles, political implications, and meta-theatrical effects of spirit’s spatial existence—not only in the graveyard scene or in the play’s famous philosophical soliloquys, but also in its subplots and apparently minor episodes. Property, warfare, station, the relation between nature and artifice, the material supports of writing and desire are inscribed in spatial economies of displacement, exchange, and dissolution that persistently accompany and conjoin the play’s intimate psychological dramas and overarching political framework. Ultimately, this is a matter of what it means for bodies to be displayed on a stage.

*Keywords:* Hegel, Shakespeare, Delacroix, space, theatricality, ornament, embodiment

## His Master’s Missing Voice *Eric L. Santner*

The paper offers a reading of Franz Kafka’s late prose work, *Researches of a Dog*, as a literary thought experiment or exemplum of what it means to live a life where a region of being is foreclosed, a region linked to the figure of the Master. In the case of the dogs, it is the realm of human being; for humans, divine being.

*Keywords:* Kafka, Master, dogs

## Earthlings and Spacemen: Life-and-Death Struggle *Bara Kolenc*

There are two fantasies building up the collective unconsciousness of the West today. One is the fantasy of the ultimate recovery of the ‘humanized’ planet – a fantasy of a *return to Paradise*. The other is the fantasy of *Noah’s Ark* – the beginning of space imperialism. The function of both is, of course, to cover the real with the phantasmal shield, for life in space is far from being possible and likewise a recovery of the humanity-friendly conditions on Earth. We might suggest, though, that these two fantasies point to the emerging class division of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: the few who can count on the space asylum, and the rest who cannot – *spacemen* and *earthlings*. Masters and slaves. With turning life into a product, which is the nearing ultimate goal of the biotechnological revolution, the space masters are trying to rise above death as a sorrowful determination of the existent things, and, with this, also above the very dialectic of life and death. They aspire to transcend *life as a living thing* by taking it in hand, by technically managing it, and to become, not only symbolically but also physically, the masters of *life as a substance*. But they essentially fail.

*Keywords:* Hegel, Marx, spacemen, earthlings, masters, slaves, life, death, dead-living, living-dead, garbage, dialectics, biotechnology, space, production, reproduction, capitalism

## Caesar’s Wounds: On the Absolute Master *Gregor Moder*

In Shakespeare’s dramatization of the death of Julius Caesar, Mark Antony delivers a powerful speech that turned the course of events. This article focuses on the rhetorical strategy employed by Antony and determines it as a rhetorical denegation of rhetoric – “I am no orator, as Brutus is” –, similar to the procedure Socrates uses in Plato’s *Symposium*. In addition, Anthony authorizes himself vicariously, not speaking in his own name, but in the name of the dead master, as the voice of Caesar’s wounds. The author discusses this rhetorical procedure as a case of



the theatricality of the very figure of the master. Discussing the role of death as “the absolute master” in Hegel’s dialectic of master and slave/bondsman, as well as in Hegel’s concept of historical repetition, this article suggests that the split between Caesar as a living individual and Caesar as the name of the master captures not only the point about the theatricality of the master, but also the difference between what Hegel called a world-historical individual and his idea of the monarch as suggested in his *Philosophy of Right*.

*Keywords:* Hegel, Shakespeare, master, rhetoric, theatricality, death

## The Master, the Slave, and the Truth upon a Membrane *Jure Simoniti*

The paper argues that the archetypal staging, in which the master ends the struggle by risking his life, is primarily not about providing some sort of “transcendental form of sociality,” but rather serves to unfold an entirely novel measure of truth. Hegel invented a new logical space of truth which neither refers to anything *an sich* nor to anything *für uns*. Instead, it is a truth that requires an event to emerge at all, for only an incident that shatters the coordinates of its own emergence can mark the place where truth ceases to be either simply objective in the sense of referring to the incarnated order of things out there, or simply subjective in the sense of deriving the constitution of reality from the inner set of concepts or cultural and language forms. In this reading, thus, the clash between two consciousnesses, ending in the asymmetry of the master and the slave, represents a *paradigm of an event* in philosophy, an occurrence which is not derivable from any previous principle or state of affairs but rather changes the game once it takes place. Its eventual character consists in forming a membrane between the outside and the inside world, and on this membrane both the “objectivist” claims of classical metaphysics and the “subjectivist” prerogatives of Kantianism cancel each other out and lose their hold.

*Keywords:* Hegel, master-slave dialectic, truth, struggle for recognition, risk of death, principle of sufficient reason, law of non-contradiction

## Dialectic's Laughing Matter

*Simon Hajdini*

Is laughter a reactionary or a revolutionary affect? The talk zeroes in on the key differences between Benjamin's and Adorno's respective theories of laughter. Contrary to the latter, who conceptualizes laughter as an instrument of mass dumbification, sadistic ridicule, and false happiness, Benjamin places laughter at the very point of inception of thought, associating it with the possibility of a revolutionary break, and the onset of a new collective subjectivity. For Benjamin, thought as borne of laughter is essentially dialectical. Accordingly, the focus of this talk is not on the dialectics of laughter, but rather on the laughter of dialectics. That is to say, the question at issue here is not how we might think laughter dialectically, but rather how laughter already thinks dialectically, and thus always already structures dialectics at its most fundamental—not merely logically and metaphysically, but also politically.

*Keywords:* Benjamin, Adorno, Brecht, Hegel, laughter, jokes, dialectics, capitalism, subjectivity, biography, trauma, digital dystopia

## Undoing the Master/s: Generic Ambiguity in Karoline von Günderrode's Ballad "Don Juan"

*Frauke Berndt*

In her ballad "Don Juan," the German Romantic author Karoline von Günderrode (1780–1806) is talking back to the Weimar masters, mainly to Friedrich Schiller. For that purpose, she exploits the figure of Don Juan, who is both the historical half-brother of King Philip II of Spain (John of Austria, 1547–1578) and, at the same time, the fictional prototype of masculinity and virility with a long intertextual and intermedial tradition. Günderrode identifies "Juan" as a whiny little boy and so reveals the master's potency as a regressive phantasy. In a psychoanalytical close reading, I would like to demonstrate how the master is made ambiguous in three steps. I begin with the history of the Don Juan motif and consider the theoretical readings of this figure (1). Then I analyze

the generic forms in G nderrode’s ballad (2) and demonstrate that their interplay produces the ambiguity of the master. With this ambiguity, the ballad “Don Juan” undertakes a frontal assault on the modern myth of the master before the concept had even begun its illustrious career under Hegel (3).

*Keywords:* Karoline von G nderrode, European Romanticism, Don Juan, ambiguity, genre theory, queer theory, iconography

## Master, Don’t You See That I Am Learning?

*Henrik J ker Bjerre*

The essential ingredient in research as well as teaching is, what I will call “knowing differently,” i.e. a change in the very structures of knowledge, which occurs at some, crucial moments. In both research and education, the accumulation of knowledge culminates in a qualitative shift. The research community at large “knows differently,” when such a shift occurs, and the individual learner “knows differently” on a more personal level, when they grasp, what Ray Land has defined as a “threshold concept.” Knowing differently involves a relation to the master signifier as the culmination or indeed simply the name of a shift, which has already taken place. However, contemporary academic bureaucracy carries with it a danger for the very capacity of knowing differently. Because of its meta-quantification and pseudocommodification of academic work, it risks starving the potential for scientific breakthroughs and leaving students helplessly locked in a state of liminality. Research and education are therefore in urgent need of defense and reimagination.

*Keywords:* knowledge, research, education, threshold concepts, university discourse, pseudo-commodification, master signifiers

## On Ridiculous Master

*Peter Klepec*

The article deals with the question of what distinguishes the “ridiculous masters” and what consequences this has for the figure of the master in general. It proceeds in three steps. First, it argues why the new masters who have recently appeared in the political sphere are “ridiculous masters.” Then follows a terminological excursus on the meaning of the words “master” and “ridiculous,” with consequences for the expression “ridiculous masters.” These are manifold and presented in the third step: Not only is there an ambivalence of the term “ridiculous”, there is also no normality of the master, as Žižek’s notion of “parallax” shows us. This means that the master is at the same time more precarious and stable than we can imagine: There will always be masters, but at the same time there are no more (true, real) masters today. The complaint about the loss of masters in the present (as put forward by Arendt) consists, in fact, in referring to other masters (past masters) and to naive believers (in the past) who really believed in masters. Thus, the master as such is always ridiculous in one way or another, but not all masters are “ridiculous masters.” We should beware of the novelty and specialness of the latter and take them seriously – even if they are ridiculous, they are still masters, which makes them even more dangerous.

*Keywords:* masters, politics, “ridiculous masters,” Hegel, Freud, Lacan

## Hysterical Authority

*Candela Potente*

The analytic setting is inaugurated by the institution of what Lacan calls the “subject supposed to know.” This presupposed mastery that the analyst has is eventually replaced by the analysand’s discovery that it was actually her who produced meaning all along. Through a consideration of Lacan’s theory of the four discourses and his understanding of the analyst’s utterances as enigmas along with Freud’s use of the figure of translation in his theory of dream interpretation, the question of authority in the analytic setting can be reconsidered from a new perspective.

The analysand's act of instituting the analyst as the subject supposed to know and the realization that analytic interpretation is primarily based on translation—which makes the analysand realize that it was from her that knowledge had always come—constitute what can be called the analysand's hysterical authority.

*Keywords:* Lacan, subject supposed to know, analyst, analysand

## Our Duty Towards Our Master: Hegel's Feelings on Feelings

*Goran Vranešević*

The article re-examines the relationship of power and subordination that Hegel brought to the fore in the figures of master and slave. Rather than following the standard practice of analyzing their struggle for recognition of self-consciousness, we will focus on the role of feelings in their face-to-face confrontation. At this moment their only recourse is their sense of self. They are immersed in the being of life, in self-feeling, which is why the feeling of fear for their lives shakes their self-consciousness to the core. However, one of them, who later becomes the master, vehemently disregards these feelings, while the other, the slave, is obliged to carry the burden for both of them. In this context, we will conceptualize the often neglected feelings as an essential part of Hegel's thought, but also contribute to the understanding of the contemporary master, who, in contrast to the traditional one, often wants to be recognized as having feelings.

*Keywords:* Hegel, feelings, affects, consciousness, master, desire, body, metaphysics

## Caught in the Web. Media and Authority, Between Old and New

*Ywval Kremnitzer*

In recent decades, a new style of authoritarian politics has taken hold throughout the liberal-democratic world. The new style of authority figures is characterized by obscene, transgressive, behavior, reminiscent of the “crowd” leader as theorized by Freud, only far less transient. It is rather obvious that the rise of this new authoritarianism has something to do with the rise of the new medium, the internet. But here most scholars bifurcate: political theorists and social scientists who study the new wave of populist authoritarianism tend to view technology as epiphenomenal to their topic, a mere means of communication, utilized for effective propaganda, whereas theorists of technology tend to view the transformation in technology as almost a sole factor, certainly the determining one. My interest in this article lies in the intersection between authority and technology. How can we think of the network as a social phenomenon, and, at the same time, consider the social as a network? What can social and political phenomena teach us about the nature of the new technology? How and to what extent does technology reshape the very fabric of social and political life? I pick up the connections, tensions, and intersections between network technology and related topics (systems, structure), and social and political theories of social, unwritten rules, which serve to support authority.

*Keywords:* Arendt, Lacan, Simondon, McLuhan, authority, technology, media

## Whose Servant Is a Master?

*Slavoj Žižek*

Friedrich the Great defined himself (the king) as “the first servant of State,” and this is how, from the early Enlightenment onwards, a master justifies his rule: he is in reality the greatest servant, the servant of all his subjects/servants. As expected, this false humility can justify the most

brutal terror—Stalin fully belongs to this space. But there are different modalities of this position of “serving the servants,” from technocracy and religious fundamentalism to obscene master-clowns, or even, as Mao Ze Dong can be characterized, to the “Lord of Misrule,” a master who periodically organizes rebellions against his own rule.

*Keywords:* Hegel, master, state, power, law

## Rage Against the Machine: Adorno, Hegel, and Absolute Mastery

*Jamila M. H. Mascot*

Contingencies can be taken as the litmus test of the speculative mastery of Hegel's Absolute and of his philosophy tout court. This paper engages with the modal category of contingency (*die Zufälligkeit / das Zufällige*) as it appears in the *Science of Logic*, as well as with the contingencies (*die Zufälligkeiten / das Zufall*) that occur in nature and in the realm of the spirit to revisit the painful endurance of the Hegelian concept, which Adorno took for a monster of cruelty and Gérard Lebrun considered a master of patience. If the contingent is the limit par excellence, the specter that haunts the Hegelian system and that which may endanger and sabotage the very speculative enterprise of the Absolute, what is the fate of contingencies in the dialectical economy of the concept? Does the calvary of the speculative consist in the dialectical torment of unceasingly and unsuccessfully attempting to overcome (*überwinden*) and eliminate (*entfernen*) the contingencies of the world? Is then the contingent the “speculative Good Friday” of Hegelian philosophy?

*Keywords:* Hegel, Adorno, contingency, concept, Absolute





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*Notes on Contributors*

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