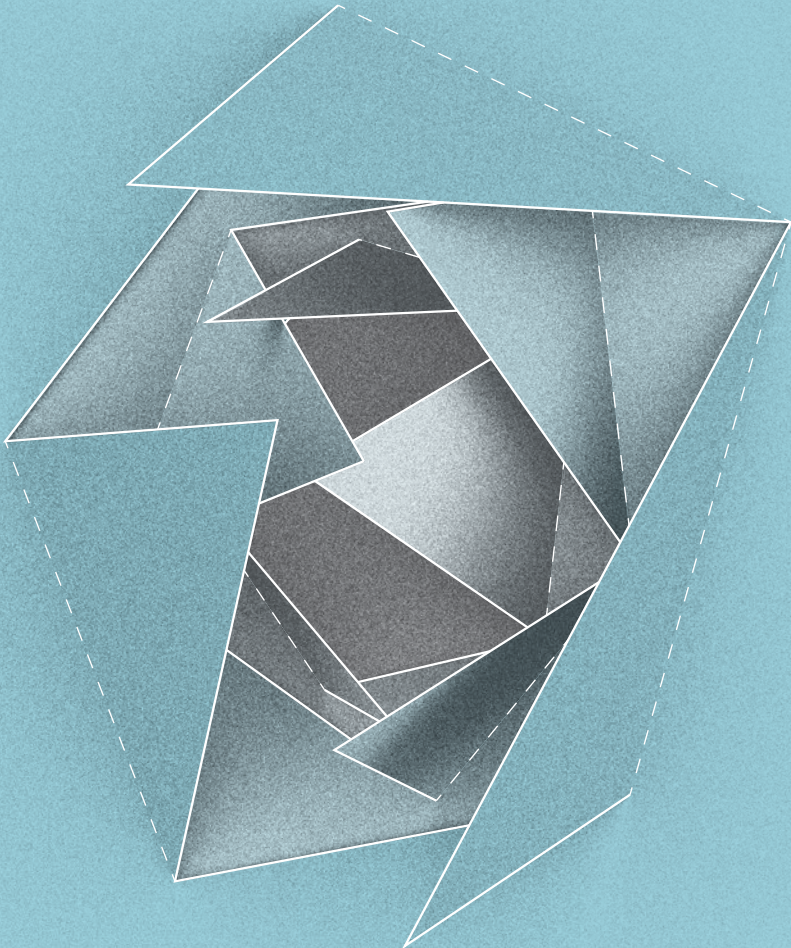


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# PROBLEMI

I N T E R N A T I O N A L







# Problemi International 8

Edited by Simon Hajdini, Lidija Šumah, and Alenka Zupančič

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SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

# Solidarity, Theology, and Materialism

Rowan Williams' *Solidarity*<sup>1</sup> is a breathtaking achievement, an obligatory reading for all of us who are desperately searching for a new revitalized Left. With implicit references to Lacanian psychoanalysis, Williams describes our basic predicament as that of being thrown into a situation in which the big Other doesn't exist: an I (subject) emerges out of the complex network of symbolic interactions where it comes second after others who surround it – it is spoken about before speaking. This complex network is inconsistent: others are impenetrable to me, and when they bombard me with contradictory messages and demands, I soon discover that they are also impenetrable to themselves. But since my own desires are mediated by the desires of others, such a situation makes me also impenetrable to myself – I don't know what I am for others, and since what I am for others constitutes my identity, this means that I also don't know who or what I am.

Issy Ronald reports on a strange incident that happened to the sea researcher Jared Towers. When he set up his cameras underwater to observe a pair of killer whales, he saw something strange. One of the orcas, a juvenile female, “approached a camera I had in the water to film her young-

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<sup>1</sup> Rowan Williams, *Solidarity* [forthcoming]. All quotes from Williams refer to the manuscript.

er brother and then opened her mouth and let out a dead seabird.”<sup>2</sup> She closed her mouth, paused, apparently watching for Towers’ reaction and hung in the water while the dead seabird floated up above her. Then, after a few seconds, she rolled around towards the camera and swallowed the bird again. Why did the orca do this? Perhaps the killer whales are curious and exploring how humans will react to a gift. Maybe they are playing, though this theory is largely discounted because whales of all ages, rather than just juveniles, provisioned food. Or perhaps it is something more sinister – killer whales have been known to use prey to attract other species and then kill them, but there is no record of orcas ever killing humans in the wild. Killer whales are one of the most intelligent animals; only humans have a larger brain relative to their body size, so it is reasonable to presume that there is an intention at work in this act of offering a gift, but an intention which is impenetrable to us, the receivers. Does this situation not render perfectly the most elementary encounter that constitutes our desire – the encounter of the *Other’s* desire which remains opaque?

Or, to put it the other way round, when I don’t know who I am, I presuppose that some figure of the big Other knows me better than myself; but then comes the painful insight that my own lack echoes a lack in the Other itself. The genius of Williams is that he doesn’t see this echoing of lacks as an obstacle to solidarity but as its very resort: at its most basic, solidarity is not a stance shared by those who are united under the same goal of helping suffering victims; it is rather that solidarity emerges as a link among those who share a loss of orientation in what their pain and suffering amount to. They suffer (or are humiliated or deprived of something vital), but they don’t know what makes others suffer and sometimes even dismiss others’ suffering as unimportant or deserved.

The key moment that gives birth to authentic solidarity resides in a double move: not only should I detect in the other (with whom I’ll enter into a relationship of solidarity) a specific form of pain, suffering and humiliation which cannot be reduced to mine, but this experience should also dislodge me from the contours of my own suffering and pain – with-

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<sup>2</sup> See Issy Ronald, “Orcas Are Bringing Humans Gifts of Food – But Why?”

out this dislodging, the limitation to my own suffering and pain can easily give birth to multiple forms of fake solidarity or sympathy. In a perspicuous, detailed analysis, Williams analyzes a whole series of forms of a false solidarity – say, a contemporary example, if I say just “We are all in Gaza!”, such an identification with the victim is a fake because it unquestionably assumes that I know how they suffer in Gaza, which precisely from my safe position in a Western country I don’t know. Authentic solidarity emerges only when I realize how solidarity is not a zero-sum game: my tolerance of the suffering in Gaza also deprives me of my own humanity, limits my own life fulfillment.

Another trap here is the false elevation of the “primitive” other into a group that enjoys a more modest but spiritually superior form of life – when the British colonized India the very same people who enforced brutal economic exploitation were as a rule full of admiration for the spiritual depth of “simple” Indians. One should mention also the disavowed *jouissance* in observing others’ suffering. Let’s take a case of the direct “critical” depiction of the oppressive atmosphere of an imagined conservative-fundamentalist rule. The new TV version of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* confronts us with the weird pleasure in fantasizing a world of brutal patriarchal domination – of course, nobody would openly admit the desire to live in such nightmarish world, but this assurance that we really don’t want it makes fantasizing about it, imagining all the details of this world, all the more pleasurable. Yes, we feel pain while experiencing this pleasure, but Lacan’s name for this pleasure-in-pain is *jouissance*. The obverse of this ambiguity is the fundamental blindness of Atwood’s tale of the limitations of our liberal-permissive universe: the entire story is an exercise in what Fredric Jameson called “nostalgia for the present,” it is permeated by the sentimental admiration for our liberal-permissive present ruined by the new Christian-fundamentalist rule, and it never even approaches the question of what is wrong in this present so that it gave birth to the nightmarish Republic of Gilead. “Nostalgia for the present” falls into the trap of ideology because it is blind to the fact that this present permissive Paradise is boring, and (exactly like the blessed souls in Paradise) it needs a look into the Hell of religious fundamentalism to sustain itself.

Williams correctly targets a self-enclosed identity of my own way of life as the main obstacle to authentic solidarity – the obvious example is how the majority in Israel totally ignores the plight of Palestinians in Gaza. In the same way as (according to Bonhoeffer) solidarity of the victims of Nazism during the Nazi rule is worthless without including Jews, today solidarity in the Middle East is worthless without including Palestinians. Similarly, Russia claims that Ukrainians are not an autonomous nation but part of Russia, and it nonetheless ruthlessly bombs them. Solidarity is solidarity with those who remain outside my self-enclosed identity, and to see this I must dislodge my identity. No big category is here outside suspicion, not even international working-class solidarity if it ignores specific forms of racial or women's suffering – just recall Steve Bannon's (white) workers' solidarity based on the exclusion of immigrants. That's why solidarity is an endless hard work of redefining my own position – no fixed result, every formula of solidarity is something that I, together with others, *imagine*, rather than simply establish.

However, in my view, the focus on opening ourselves to the other's view of the situation hides its own traps. Recall a definition of enemy in which utter fatuity is masquerading as a deep wisdom: "An enemy is someone whose story you have not heard."<sup>3</sup> There is no better literary example of this idea than Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. In it, Shelley does something that a conservative would never have done. In the central part of her book, she allows the monster to speak for himself, to tell the story from his own perspective. Her choice expresses the liberal attitude to freedom of speech at its most radical: everyone's point of view should be heard. In *Frankenstein*, the monster is not a Thing, a horrible object no one dares to confront; rather, he is fully *subjectivized*. Mary Shelley moves inside his mind and asks what it is like to be labelled, defined, oppressed, ex-communicated, even physically distorted by society. The ultimate criminal is thereby allowed to present himself as the ultimate victim; the monstrous murderer reveals himself to be a deeply hurt and desperate in-

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<sup>3</sup> Epigraph of "Living Room Dialogues on the Middle East," quoted in Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion*.

dividual, yearning for company and love. There is, however, a clear limit to this procedure: are we also ready to affirm that Hitler was only an enemy because his story was not heard? Or, on the contrary, is it the case that the more I know about and “understand” Hitler, the more Hitler is my enemy? The move from the externality of an act to its “inner meaning,” the narrative by means of which the agent interprets and justifies it, is a move towards a deceitful mask. The experience that we have of our lives from within, the story we tell ourselves about ourselves to account for what we are doing, is fundamentally a lie. Rather, the truth lies outside, in our actions, in what we do. So, at a certain moment we have to say: I don’t care about your own perspective, you just must be destroyed!

I also agree with Williams that the imperfect human solidarity has to be supplemented by collective rituals: “Solidarity, it seems, needs some kind of ceremonial and celebratory articulation, a public drama of ‘rebalancing’ in which we are urged to imagine ourselves afresh as standing on common ground with common needs; and we currently live in a culture where even religious ritual can be assimilated to something other than itself, becoming one or another kind of performance generated by professionals for spectators, rather than a work that is both shared and differentiated.” The need for rituals is grounded in our constitutive lack and disorientation: rituals fill in a lack of knowledge. Here is not the time to deal with the basic fact, noted already by Hegel, that rituals as blind acts (we perform rituals without fully knowing what they mean) bring enjoyment (Hegel directly mentions *Genuss*): contrary to the Enlightenment commonplace, we enjoy only ignorance, never knowledge.

Such a dislodging of my self-enclosed identity is not a joyful expansion: there is also a very painful element in this loss of what I considered my stable home – Williams is, of course, well aware of this: in the very last lines of his book, he writes that solidarity is “a ‘dislodging,’ a new imagining of what it is to be a self, to be *my* self, in that elusive relation we have been calling communion. The question is whether our understandable fear of this drastic rupture in the selfhood we take for granted is more or less rational than the fear we *ought* to feel at the erosion and shrinkage of the world that is promised by the refusal of communion.” He even goes a step

further and writes that “something *dies* in solidarity”: “The uncriticized, unchallenged claim of the solitary ego cannot survive in a deepening practice of communion and mutual recognition in common work for the fuller humanizing of our relations with one another and the world.” I think that much more dies – the very idea that we are originally rooted in a particular lifeworld must be left behind, we are compelled to admit that every particular lifeworld is an attempt to patch up some underlying discord.

Here we should also problematize Williams’ aversion to the Cartesian subject and to Protestantism: he perceives both as unduly privileging the individual “pure” subject who is in direct contact with God and only in a second step relates to others – but is this correct? In contrast to catholic confession, Protestants assert the community of believers (*Gemeinde*) as the form within which religious life takes place. As for Descartes, his “abstract” ego is a necessary step to undermine any fixed social identity. Remember that in the first chapters of his *Discourse on Method*, Descartes repeatedly varies the motif of how the customs of other ethnic groups may appear weird and “irrational” to us, but to others our own customs may also appear “irrational” – Descartes’ aim is, of course, to arrive at the absolutely certain universal knowledge independent of my particular situation, but we can also skip this aspect and reduce the Cartesian *cogito* just to an *operator of dislodging ourselves, of never being reducible to our particular situation*.

Williams’ Catholic bias surfaces in his sympathy for the idea of a harmonious social order in which each of us has a specific place we have to occupy, and he deplores the gradual disappearance of this idea with the advance of Protestant individualism: “the idea of an ‘appropriate’ position to occupy in the network of finite agencies has retreated almost to vanishing point. This attrition of the idea of a given order of proportion and interaction between agents, with its strong religious underpinning, is perennially at risk of slipping towards the abstraction that we have seen as a constant concern in recent discussion.” Williams, of course, admits that this “idea of a given order of proportion and interaction between agents” is as a rule reproducing in an idealized form the existing order of social hierarchies, which implies that every attempt of radical emancipation

thoroughly changes social hierarchy (say, noblemen lose their privileges, women acquire the same legal rights as men, etc.).

But I see two things still missing from his account. First, he ignores the full extent to which the need for solidarity arises from social antagonisms embedded in state power and in what Marxists call modes of production and exploitation, things which cannot be changed by extended openness towards the other's suffering and pain. Second, he seems not to analyze sufficiently the ambiguity of the reference to religion in dealing with social hierarchy. He is well aware that the religious grounding of social hierarchy is a deep obstacle to authentic solidarity – the solidarity than can arise within this frame is a Fascist type of solidarity where every organ of the social body is presumed to possess its own dignity *insofar as it acts according to its proper place*: workers are good workers, good capitalist managers with a sense of social solidarity, etc. On the other hand, the Holy Spirit undoubtedly evokes a full solidarity with the impoverished, suffering and excluded, a solidarity which cuts across every social hierarchy. So when Williams writes: “The roots of the language of right lie in a strong commitment to cosmological order, so that any affirmation or defense of a right is *ipso facto* a commitment to a good that is not just ours (remember Aquinas’ argument about why *iustitia* is first among the virtues because it is not only about the single agent’s moral standing).” It seems clear that such a right grounded in a cosmological order refers to a “good that is not just ours” but a good defined in the terms of a hierarchic social Whole. So, what happens when we abandon any notion of such a Whole? The ultimate inconsistency and contingency of our experience compel us to redefine the basic Christian stance along the lines of how Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes

the experience of accompanying someone in a “serious” situation like bereavement, where we may respond in “helpless solidarity” rather than by a confident declaration of the triumph of the resurrection or whatever. “Why is my mouth often closed when it should give voice to the ultimate, and why do I opt for a thoroughly penultimate human solidarity?” Perhaps, he suggests, this silent and inexplicit standing alongside may be a more faithful

witness to the “ultimate” in that it leaves God to “speak in God’s own time,” rather than insisting on my own capacity here and now to transmit the Word of God directly and unambiguously.<sup>4</sup>

Towards the end of *River Runs Through It*, Rev. Maclean gives a sermon about being unable to help loved ones who are destroying themselves and will not accept help: all that those who truly care for such a self-destructive person can do is to give unconditional love, even without understanding why.<sup>5</sup> This is the Christian stance at its purest: not the promise of salvation but just such unconditional love whose message is: “I know you are bent on destroying yourself, I know I cannot prevent it, but without understanding why I love you unconditionally, without any constraint.” Do these lines not evoke the enigmatic scene in Gethsemane where Jesus tells his disciples who lay tired around him: “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me”?<sup>6</sup> Liza Thompson pointed out that Jesus is here “asking for solidarity. Not followers or crowds to listen to his teachings but an act of togetherness. And it comes from a place of such radical vulnerability that it disrupts notions of Jesus as some kind of hierarchical leader.”<sup>7</sup> Jesus himself is here on the path to his self-destruction (knowing that he will die in terrible pain the next day), and the only thing he asks of his followers is to give him their unconditional love, even without understanding why. When we curse our fate in despair, when we courageously accept that no higher force will help us, Christ is here with us – and this is reconciliation at its most radical. My claim is thus that while we can and should get involved in multiple communal projects of solidarity to alleviate suffering, the ultimate form of solidarity is such a helpless standing alongside. Along these lines, I find problematic the way Williams introduces God – the creator of the entire universe – as the ultimate presupposition and guarantee of global solidarity:

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Rowan Williams, *Solidarity*.

<sup>5</sup> *A River Runs Through It* (film) – Wikipedia. Dir. Robert Redford, 1992.

<sup>6</sup> Mt 26: 36–38.

<sup>7</sup> Liza Thompson, personal communication.

if we are genuinely “displacing” ourselves for the sake of the other within the Body of Christ, we cannot make our displaced identification, our solidarity, dependent on being able to recognize in the other exactly the same commitment that (we hope) is in us. The failure to defend, to “represent,” the genuinely other – in this [Bonhoeffer’s] case, the Jew – is a failure in manifesting the solidarity that exists not only in our humanity as such but more deeply in the identity between all human creatures as those with whom God has chosen to be.

The reasoning that underlies this move is: we as finite human beings cannot fully dislodge ourselves in the sense that we fully cut links with our particular identity and act only as representatives or placeholders of the other’s suffering and pain, which means that our solidarity is never truly global. Only a divine person can do this: in his incarnation as Christ, God dislodged himself from his divinity and fully identified himself with human mortality. If “the universal value to be ascribed to human agents” is not to be a mere impotent ideal, it has to be grounded in the actual universality of the God who created all of us out of his love for us: humans “exist as a consequence of the gratuitous love of God in creation, and their exercise of love and intelligence, however expressed or embodied, reflects the initiative or creativity of divine life.” Only in this way, “every finite agent is a unique crystallization of the infinite self-diffusing good that is the source of all.” I don’t reject this line of reasoning, I would just add a materialist qualification: yes, “the central element in human right/s is *the right to be ‘imagined’* – the expectation that one’s perspective and desire and liberty to speak are taken with maximal seriousness by any responsible other”; but is not the ultimate act of imagination precisely the act of imagining the divine creation of humanity out of love as the foundation of our always biased and imperfect acts of solidarity?

I follow here Badiou who perspicuously turns around the theological premise that God created the world out of nothing: “in the theological discourse this is how God created the world: out of nothing. But I’d still say that the greatest example of creation *ex nihilo* is the creation of God. It was God, rather than the world, that was created out of nothing! Because if

God had existed, the creation of the world wouldn't have been a problem. God is, by definition, limitless. His power is infinite, so he could well have created something out of nothing. The problem lies rather with us: how could we, poor finite, mortal humans, create something out of nothing?"<sup>8</sup>

If what we experience as reality is to retain its consistency, it must be supplemented by a virtual "fiction" – this paradox, known already to Jeremy Bentham, was poignantly formulated by Chesterton: "Literature and fiction are two entirely different things. Literature is a luxury, fiction is a necessity."<sup>9</sup> However, it was also Bentham who saw it clearly that we can (and should) nonetheless clearly distinguish between reality and fiction – therein resides the paradox he tried to capture with his notion of fictions: although we can clearly distinguish between reality and fiction, we cannot simply drop fictions and retain only reality; if we drop fictions, reality itself disintegrates, loses its ontological consistency. The enigma Bentham is confronting here is a strange *ppur si muove* – even when an (ideological) fiction is clearly recognized as fiction, it still works. This is the paradox of which Marx was already aware when he pointed out that commodity fetishism persists even after we denounce it and render transparent its illusion.

Jean-Pierre Dupuy often mentions the ancient story of the twelfth camel: an Arab merchant dies and leaves to his three sons eleven camels, with the precise instructions on how to distribute them: the first son gets half of the camels, the second one fourth, and the third one sixth. So how to do it when 11 is not divisible by 2, 4 or 6? A wise judge proposes the solution: he will add to the sum a camel of his own, and now we have twelve camels – the first son gets six, the second three, and the third two, together eleven; the judge then takes back the camel he added, so that he is not at a loss. Niklas Luhmann has written an essay on this.<sup>10</sup> The key feature is here that, obviously, one can also merely *imagine* the twelfth camel – it needn't exist in reality. And is God not something like the twelfth camel,

<sup>8</sup> Alain Badiou, *In Praise of Philosophy*, quoted from the manuscript.

<sup>9</sup> G. K. Chesterton, "A Defence of Penny Dreadfuls," 77–78.

<sup>10</sup> Niklas Luhmann, "The Return of the Twelfth Camel: On the Meaning of the Sociological Analysis of Law."

i. e., is the twelfth camel not one of the names for God? It is a lie (a nonexisting entity) which creates a consistent order out of the inconsistent mess of factual reality. So, does God exist or not? It does not exist as a fact, but it in-exists counterfactually, which does not mean that it is simply an illusion: it is the paradox of an illusion which is immanent to reality itself, a counterfactual entity immanent to factials, to our symbolic universe.<sup>11</sup> I emphasized the term “imagine” because my conjecture is that it can and should be used in exactly the same sense in which Williams uses it: as a fundamental term in his elaboration of the theological dimension of the notion of solidarity.

In an ancient Sufi myth often referred to by Borges, the faraway king of all the birds, the Simurgh, lets fall a magnificent feather in the center of China: tired of their age-old anarchy, the birds resolve to go in search of him. They know that their king’s name means thirty birds; they know his palace is located on the Kaf, the circular mountain that surrounds the earth. They embark upon a nearly infinite adventure, many of them give up and others perish. Thirty, purified by their efforts, set foot on the mountain of the Simurgh where at last they gaze upon it: they perceive that they are the Simurgh and that the Simurgh is each one of them and all of them. In the Simurgh are the thirty birds and in each bird is the Simurgh. Is this reversal not the same as the one which defines the Holy Ghost in Christianity? There is no “second coming” in which Christ will again be reincarnated as a human being; the community of believers in search of God *already is what they are looking for*.

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<sup>11</sup> I’ve dealt with this topic in more detail in the chapter “Negative Theology” of Slavoj Žižek, *Disparities*.

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DAN NĀDĀṢAN

# Hegel and The Knots of the Understanding

## Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to examine Hegel's account on the "understanding" (*Verstand*). It is my intention to show that it is the central symptomatic knot of Hegel's philosophy, to the extent that it can play the role of the ultimate Rorschach test for determining the choice of neurosis for Hegel's readers: one's perspective on *Verstand* constitutes the decisive clue for what Hegelians think when they think of Hegel. Moreover, considering that, for Hegel, "*the understanding's identity* [is the principle] of metaphysics and of the Enlightenment" (EL§74) and the very vehicle "of our universal scientific culture" (EL5), we could even say that what one thinks of *Verstand* is indicative of one's perspective on philosophy, natural science and the political legacy of the Enlightenment as such.<sup>1</sup> This view about the importance of the understanding has been echoed in various

<sup>1</sup> In this paper I make use of the following abbreviations: EL followed by paragraph number for G. W. F. Hegel, *Encyclopaedia Logic: Part I of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences with the Zusätze*, with the letters R and A referring to Remarks and Additions, respectively; PhS followed by paragraph number for G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*; SL for G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*. For Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, I make use of the standard references to the A and B pagination from the Cambridge translation. In all instances where a citation does

ways in the literature on Hegel. Brady Bowman, for instance, considers that Hegel's project of thinking substance as subject is one with his critique of the "metaphysics of the understanding": "Taking a broad perspective, we may say that Hegel's project of thinking 'substance' as 'subject' is one with the critique of the metaphysics of the understanding ..."<sup>2</sup> In a similar vein, Slavoj Žižek goes as far as to say that "everything turns out on how we are to understand [the] identity-and-difference between Understanding and Reason."<sup>3</sup> However, despite this seeming centrality of the understanding in Hegel's philosophy, the topic of *Verstand* has only been addressed at length in Anglophone literature in a short series of papers by Burbidge (1990), Houlgate (1990), Baur (1991), and in latter essays by Morris (2006) and Limnatis (2006).<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, when the understanding does step into the limelight, it enjoys a rather "bad press amongst Hegelians,"<sup>5</sup> and this usually consists of two claims. First, the understanding is taken to be the manifestation of a reificatory way of thinking that designates a stance of "naïve objectivism"<sup>6</sup> or, as Fredric Jameson puts it, of "common-sense empiricism."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, for Jameson, *Verstand* is the standpoint of ideological thinking par excellence, it is the "conceptual lingua franca of our everyday life."<sup>8</sup> Second, the understanding is regarded as a preparatory stage for fully conceptual thought, akin to a skin that is shed off upon reaching the luminous and perfected heights of reason. This is a common motif amongst a wide range of interpretations: Marxist readers such as György Lukács mention

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not include the paragraph number (§), the number refers to the page instead of the paragraph.

- 2 Brady Bowman, *Hegel and the Metaphysics of Absolute Negativity*, 87.
- 3 Slavoj Žižek, "Intellectual Intuition and *Intellectus Archetypus*: Reflexivity from Kant to Hegel," in: *Subject Lessons: Hegel, Lacan, and the Future of Materialism*, 109.
- 4 For a useful (and short) bibliography about this topic in German, French and Russian scholarship, see Nectarios Limnatis, "Reason and Understanding in Hegelian Philosophy."
- 5 John Burbidge, "Where is the Place of Understanding?," in: *Essays on Hegel's Logic*, 171.
- 6 Michael Baur, "Hegel and the Overcoming of the Understanding."
- 7 Fredric Jameson, *The Hegel Variations: On the Phenomenology of Spirit*, 1.
- 8 Jameson, *The Hegel Variations*, 18.

the “elevation from understanding to reason,”<sup>9</sup> transcendentalists such as Robert Pippin refer to a “synthetic, dynamic, and comprehensive reason” which is the “culmination” of the understanding,<sup>10</sup> Stephen Houlgate, from a Spinozist-immanentist perspective, considers that, through its own activity, thought progresses beyond understanding and becomes “fully rational,”<sup>11</sup> Angelica Nuzzo suggests that understanding “consents to transform itself into reason,”<sup>12</sup> and finally, from the perspective of an Aristotelian reading of Hegel, G. R. G. Mure refers to the “absorption” of the understanding by reason.<sup>13</sup> There is however an exception to this interpretative tradition, namely Slavoj Žižek, who, in *Less Than Nothing*, adds a subchapter titled “In praise of Understanding” in order to challenge its bad reputation among interpreters of Hegel.<sup>14</sup> For Žižek, reason is not a perfected form of the understanding in which the errors of the latter are corrected and integrated into a coherent whole. Instead, according to him, “Reason is, in a way, not more but *less* than Understanding.”<sup>15</sup>

As we will see, there is certainly an argument to be made that this confusion regarding the understanding stems from a lack of clarity in Hegel’s texts as such, although, as I will suggest, this is not in any way indicative of a systematic inconsistency on Hegel’s part. In this direction, before concretely assessing Hegel’s account on the relation between understanding and reason in the last part of this paper, I will present a genetical account of the understanding in the triad sensibility-understanding-reason, with a particular focus on the chapter “Force and Understanding” from the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In my view, what is not properly emphasized by most interpreters of Hegel is the relationship of the understanding to *sensibility*, the ignorance of which, implicitly and necessarily, also then obscures the

<sup>9</sup> György Lukács, *The Ontology of Social Being. Hegel’s False and His Genuine Ontology*, 89.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Pippin, *Hegel’s Realm of Shadows: Logic as Metaphysics in the Science of Logic*, 27.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Houlgate, “A Reply to John Burbidge,” in: *Essays on Hegel’s Logic*, 183.

<sup>12</sup> Angelica Nuzzo, “Dialectic, Understanding, and Reason: How Does Hegel’s *Logic* Begin?”, in: *The Dimensions of Hegel’s Dialectic*, 16.

<sup>13</sup> Geoffrey Reginald Gilchrist Mure, *An Introduction to Hegel*, 75.

<sup>14</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, 269–80.

<sup>15</sup> Žižek, “Intellectual Intuition and *Intellectus Archetypus*,” 109.

relationship of the understanding to reason. To be more specific, I will argue that there is a repressed sensible moment which defines the constitution of the understanding's thought *qua* abstract thought.<sup>16</sup> This will come in contrast to the "ladder to reason" interpretation, in which the understanding is interpreted as subsuming sensibility under it, the implication being that the understanding is, in turn, taken as the sensible support or the presupposition on the basis of which reason perfects itself. However, before I properly unpack this dynamic, I will clarify what Hegel has in mind when he refers to the understanding as a technical term.

### Introducing the Understanding

It is first important to emphasize that Hegel takes himself to follow in Kant's footsteps in his technical use of the term understanding and, subsequently, in the critique of what he refers to as the "abstract metaphysics of the understanding" (EL§37A). In Hegel's view, Kant's great philosophical advance consisted in his restriction of the scope of the understanding to the sensible manifold, or, to the form of spatiotemporal experience. Without the givenness of the manifold, established by Kant in the transcendental aesthetic in the first *Critique*, there would be, at least from a genetical perspective, no sensible object to be unified in the synthesis of the manifold which Kant identifies as the very activity of the understanding *qua* synthetic unity of apperception.<sup>17</sup> Kant has therefore philosophically

<sup>16</sup> This dynamic has also been highlighted, although with different consequences than the ones proposed in this paper, in Mure, *An Introduction to Hegel*, 65–76.

<sup>17</sup> Properly developing this interpretation of the relation between the transcendental aesthetic and the transcendental deduction is beyond my purposes here, although it surely can seem contentious. There are many passages in the first *Critique* in which Kant indicates that sensibility has a greater significance than the pure concepts of the understanding, insofar as, without the former, the latter would have no object to "think" (A76–7/B102, B306). Indeed, in A89–91/B121–4, Kant mentions multiple times that sensibility can offer objects without the functions of the understanding, passages which have been disputed as constituting a merely hypothetical scenario proposed by Kant (see Anil Gomes, "Kant on Perception: Naive Realism, Nonconceptualism, and the B-Deduction," and Thomas Land, "Nonconceptualist

established the “finitude of thought” precisely by limiting the sphere of the understanding to a thinking of mere spatiotemporal appearances, *Erscheinungen*, this leap constituting, according to Hegel, a “very important result of the Kantian philosophy” (EL§45A). *Verstand* is then the quintessential manifestation of this finitude of thought, Hegel defining it precisely as the form of thought which thinks in terms of finite determinations: “[the] thinking that brings forth only *finite* determinations and moves within these alone is called *understanding* (in the more precise sense of the word)” (EL§25).

The philosophical implications of this Kantian move are, as we know, monumental. After the Kantian event, a whole philosophical tradition can be retroactively determined as a dogmatic or uncritical type of philosophizing insofar as this philosophy took itself to think the things themselves when, in truth, from the Kantian perspective, it unconsciously adhered to the standpoint of the understanding and thus thought over merely sensible appearances. So, when Hegel makes references to the “pre-Critical” metaphysics, the “metaphysics of the recent past” (EL§27) or to “dogmatic” metaphysics (EL§32), he is strictly referring to *Verstandesphilosophie* or to the metaphysics of the understanding, a tradition in which he includes “especially the Scholastics” (EL§36A), and thinkers as varied as Descartes, Spinoza and Malebranche in its “first” modern

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Readings of Kant and the Transcendental Deduction”). Transcendental logic thus has as its presupposition “that objects are given to us in intuition, to which it can be applied” (A62/B87). It is crucial to emphasize that Hegel *agrees* that the understanding is genetically preceded by sensibility and intuition. G. W. F. Hegel, *Introduction on the Lectures of the History of Philosophy*, 33–35; SL516–20. Nevertheless, the key implication in Hegel’s view is the following: just because they genetically precede the understanding, this does not entail that they are *truthful*. Indeed, the loss of the pure immediacy of the sensible object constitutes the proper content of thought, but the *semblance* of the sheer givenness of this object, its *Schein*, is constitutive for thought qua thought. Hence why the transcendental logic, as preceded by the transcendental aesthetic, and as a thought which dwells in this loss, is a “logic of truth” (A62/B87). This point is implicit in Kant and brought to full fruition by Hegel, but it is fatally overlooked if the immediate givenness of the object is fully subsumed under a self-establishing conceptual mediation, as the purpose of the Deduction is so often interpreted.

period and, in its “second” period, he includes Leibniz, Hobbes, Wolff, and Locke. As he puts it, this metaphysics proceeds “from the general determinations of the understanding.”<sup>18</sup>

Much more could be said about the dimensions of the understanding which prompted Hegel to refer to it as the very principle of finite thought and, secondly, as the philosophical vehicle which, without seeming to waste a breath, he identifies as the definitory characteristic of so many apparently divergent and different philosophers, ranging from the scholastics to rationalists such as Spinoza and empiricists such as Locke. My interest here has solely been to clarify how Hegel follows in Kant’s footsteps in his account of *Verstand*, so that we can now focus on delineating the conflicting dimensions of the understanding that *prima facie* permeate Hegel’s account, to the extent that it has led the editors of the English translation of the *Encyclopaedia Logic* to suggest that Hegel’s perspective in EL§80A, where he refers to the “fixity” of the understanding, “contrasts sharply” (EL323) with his account in the preface to the *Phenomenology*, where he refers to the understanding and “its activity of *division* [*Scheiden*]” as the “absolute power” (PhS§32).<sup>19</sup> There is, to be sure, a certain Manichean flavor to Hegel’s references to the understanding: if at some points he seems to identify a “good” understanding with the very power of the negative (PhS§32), at other points he refers to the “rigidity of being” (SL539) imposed on the content of thought by a “bad” understanding and its “fictions” (EL§126A).

In this rather knotty interpretative context, my purpose is twofold. Firstly, it is to show that Hegel’s views on the understanding are not “ambivalent,”<sup>20</sup> but entirely consistent. Secondly, it is to demonstrate, by

<sup>18</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy: The Lectures of 1825–1826*, Vol. 3, 131–70, 170–217, 203.

<sup>19</sup> The rest of the editors’ footnote is indicative of the scholarly confusion and lack of clarification *vis-à-vis* the place of the understanding in Hegel’s philosophy: “Hegel’s *dialectical* conception of the understanding, as itself a unity of opposite values, of fixation and separation, is not generally understood. Often, indeed, it is not even *remembered*. But its importance for Hegel is shown by the way he recurs to this positive evaluation of Understanding in his commentary on §81” (EL323).

<sup>20</sup> Burbidge, “Where is the Place of Understanding?”, 172.

providing a summary of the chapter “Force and Understanding” from the *Phenomenology*, that the key to grasping the proper place of the understanding in Hegel’s philosophy consists in unpacking its relation to the immediate object of sense-perception. My concrete claim is that there is a residual content from sense-perception which is not properly worked through by the understanding, but without which it would not *be* understanding. In other words, as Hegel puts it in the *Phenomenology*, the object of the understanding presents itself in a “sensory covering” [*sinnlicher Hülle*] (PhS§164) of which the understanding is constitutively unaware. The crucial implication is the following: the understanding immediately takes its thoughts *as things* which are “out there,” akin to external sensible beings, and in the same move it reifies the world as such, conceiving of it as a thing. If we follow here Brady Bowman in his affirmation that the “basic characteristic of metaphysics is its *reification* of ‘the true,’”<sup>21</sup> then examining this dynamic will help us demonstrate why understanding is *metaphysical thinking par excellence*. As Hegel himself indicates, it is the understanding which is responsible for the “view that things consist of independent stuffs” (EL§126A) or, in other words, it is the understanding which compulsively posits and fixes metaphysical *transcendence* as an instance of the real which thought, in its finitude, is infinitely separated from. My central purpose in what follows is to properly unpack this claim by showing that the metaphysical compulsion of the understanding consists in its “acting out” of an *unthought* sensible moment imprinted in the very genesis of its thought.

### The Crack of Thought

Before examining “Force and the Understanding,” I first turn to a passage from the *Encyclopaedia Logic*, which succinctly captures Hegel’s account of the relation between sensibility and the understanding: “The thoughtlessness [*Gedankenlosigkeit*] of sensibility, which takes everything limited

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<sup>21</sup> Bowman, *Hegel and the Metaphysics of Absolute Negativity*, 86.

and finite for something *that [simply] is*, passes over into the stubbornness of the understanding, which grasps it as [something] *identical-with-itself, that does not inwardly contradict itself*" (EL§113R; translation modified).

According to this passage, the relationship between sensibility and understanding is not one in which the former is simply "captured" by the latter, in a way in which the immediate singular concreteness of the sensible object is always-already synthesized by, or even *as*, the mediated universal abstraction of the concept of the understanding. Their relationship is far more subtle, in Hegel's view, in the sense that the finitude which characterizes sensibility becomes a constitutive moment in the understanding, however with an important qualitative twist. If the finitude of sensibility consists in an apprehension of objects which are "trivial, external and perishable" (EL§6R), thus referring to a perpetual vanishing that characterizes objecthood in the sphere of being, the finitude at the level of the understanding is one in which the object is *reflected*, i.e., taken as something "identical-with-itself," *als ein mit-sich-identisches*, as possessing an essence or constitutive "depth." In other words, just as vanishing is immediate for sensibility, so is abstract identity immediate for the understanding: for sensibility it is the object which is a vanishing (Ph§98), for the understanding it is the understanding *itself* which vanishes from its implication in the object. As an apprehension of a "something" which self-sufficiently *stands* against it, *Verstand* constitutively relates to its object as an externality, it does not take itself to be implicated in its relating to the object.<sup>22</sup> The consequence to be drawn here is that the understanding does not entirely *overcome* sensibility with its mediation. Rather, its *Aufhebung* of sensibility involves, in truth, a carrying over, a passing of an immediacy by which, for the understanding, its very act of mediation qua abstraction becomes immediate to it. Paragraph 80 in EL very succinctly captures the immediacy *and* the subsistence that this "limited abstraction" has for the understanding: "Thinking as *understanding* stops short at the fixed determinacy and its distinctness *vis-à-vis* other determinacies; such

<sup>22</sup> "Instead of entering into the immanent content of the Thing, the understanding always surveys the whole and stands above the singular Being-there [*Dasein*] of which it speaks, that is, it does not see it at all" (Ph§53).

a limited abstraction [*beschränktes Abstractes*] counts for the understanding as one that subsists and [simply] is [*bestehend und seyend*]” (translation modified).

The understanding is thus a thinking which is constitutively characterized by *eine Gedankenlosigkeit*, a thoughtlessness, an absence or gap in thought. This “cerebral crack in a vigorous body or the crevice of thought,” to quote Gilles Deleuze,<sup>23</sup> expresses the anaesthetic presence of sense in thought, which renders thought at once insensible and unreasonable, it numbs it *vis-à-vis* the thinking that it itself is. Or, the crack is the remainder which parasitizes abstraction and determines the *unthought* dimension of thought, an insensible immediacy in which thinking as such is thrown into the bin, consumed by the rift. This *Gedankenlosigkeit* of *Verstand*, as I will now show through a short exposition of “Force and Understanding,” corresponds, for Hegel, to the initial development of the understanding as “perceptual understanding” or *wahrnehmende Verstand* (PhS§131), a type of consciousness which, as its very name indicates, finds itself in a tension between perceiving and thinking, with this tension making its presence felt all throughout the dialectical movement between the understanding and its object – force.

## Force and Understanding

At the beginning of the chapter, Hegel explicitly mentions that, with the conclusion of the movement of perception, “consciousness has arrived at thoughts” (PhS§132). This arrival occurs due to the main contradiction of perception, which consists precisely in the fact that perception keeps contradiction and negativity away from the thing. The criterion of truth for perception resides in asserting the self-identity of its object: for it, the thing is, out there, externally, and any unessential moment pertaining to it, its *non-being*, is taken by perception as an error that pertains to itself. Perception is therefore caught in a compulsion of enunciating its “insofar”

<sup>23</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, 329.

in order to assert *either* the oneness of the thing *or* the manifoldness of the properties which specify the thing: insofar as it is many, the thing is not one, and insofar as it is one, the thing is not many. Similarly, with the emergence of *diverse* things, perception specifies that insofar as a thing is for itself, it is not for another, and insofar as it is for another, it is not for itself. As such, perception constitutively considers that error is always on its *side*, there is neither error nor movement in the thing itself. By contrast, the arrival at thought and at what Hegel refers to as the “unconditioned universal” implies a conception of objecthood in which the movement by which a thing turns out to be other than itself pertains to the thing itself. Or, thinking implies a tarrying with the dissolution of the self-identity of the thing, an apprehending that it is through its own “essential property that the thing goes to ruin” (PhS§125). This was already implicit in the “insofar” of perception: by specifying what the thing *is*, perception, to the contrary of its intentions, merely asserted what the thing is *not*.

Now, what I wish to highlight is that, throughout “Force and the Understanding,” this standpoint of perception, which keeps negation outside the thing, is not completely overcome by the understanding. Rather, the fixation on asserting the identity of the thing *insists*, although in a manner specific to the understanding, and with different, strictly metaphysical, consequences: if perception asserts the self-identical oneness of the thing, the understanding asserts the *self-identical wholeness of a world*, a world which transcends the understanding itself. Given the notorious density of this chapter, my reading is here restricted to one purpose, namely that of highlighting the passages in which Hegel explicitly mentions the insistence of a “moment” of sensory immediacy in the abstractions of the understanding, of the crack which renders it thoughtless. Indeed, even though Hegel announces that, at this point, consciousness “has arrived at thoughts,” throughout the chapter, “thought” or “thinking” are almost *nowhere to be seen*, except for three instances at §136 and §141. At these points, force is apprehended not as a sensible thing which is “out there,” but precisely *appears in its disappearance*, as a sheerly vanishing being in the play of forces, the thought of which implies a “loss of reality,” *Verlust der Realität*, for the understanding. The understanding is thus thoughtless

towards this loss that its very act of thought brings into being, and in this regard, it is indicative that the expression used in the above quoted passage of the *Encyclopaedia*, *Gedankenlosigkeit* and its variant *gedankenlose*, occurs twice in this chapter at §150 and §156.

That the understanding is more of a form of thoughtless representation, *gedankenlose Vorstellung*, rather than a form of thought, is announced by Hegel at the end of the chapter on perception, in a striking paragraph (PhS§131) where, as it progresses, the distinction between the “thing” of perception and the “thought” of the understanding becomes increasingly blurred, a fact indicated by the very emergence of “perceptual understanding,” *wahrnehmende Verstand*. Just as perception deprives the thing of negativity, contradiction and movement, so too does understanding relate to its thoughts as to external things between which it can switch and which can be, dualistically, kept apart between the true and the false, the essential and the unessential, the necessary and the unnecessary. The “insofar” of perception is, thus, Hegel specifies, carried over into the understanding: “Yet the understanding resists this with the support of the *Insofar* and of the diverse *respects*, or by taking upon itself the one thought in order to keep the other quarantined as the true thought” (PhS§131).<sup>24</sup>

The entrenchment of understanding in the external standpoint of sense-perception is not present only at this point of transition, but rather manifests itself in different forms all throughout the dialectical movement between the understanding and its object, force, and it is worthwhile to succinctly enumerate those moments: in §132, Hegel mentions that the “unconditioned universal” is “still as *object* of it [i. e., of consciousness],” consciousness does not include *itself* in the universal and thus “is still drawing back from what has emerged”; in §133, force is described as an object which presents itself to the understanding as an immediate object, “as something that simply is,” *als ein Seiendes sich darbietet*; in §136, the relation between understanding and force explicitly regresses to the level of “the perceiver and the perceived”; in §141–142, there is a

<sup>24</sup> Hegel's point is here in strict contrast to Robert Pippin's assertion that “[a]ll thinking is a spontaneity, an activity, not a perceiving or a grasping.” Pippin, *Hegel's Realm of Shadows*, 261.

tension between “sensorily objective force” and the *thought* of force in its negativity as a vanishing being, which implies a loss of its sensorily objective concreteness; in §143, the interior which appears in the vanishing of force stands as “an extreme over against it [i. e., consciousness]”; in §146, the emerging supersensible world presents itself to consciousness “in its immediacy” and will be later described, because of the tension between apprehending law as inhering in its diversification in the sensible world and as originating from somewhere beyond the same world, as “only the *immediate* elevation of the perceived world into the universal element” (PhS§157); finally, in §164, the movement of the understanding is on the whole described as being experienced by it as a mere “happening,” *ein Geschehen*, because its object “is, for the understanding, an object in a sensory covering [*in sinnlicher Hülle*]” which indeed grounds its fundamental dualistic instinct of fixing “two worlds” or “two substantial elements” as separate from each other.

As we can notice, the moment of immediacy repeats itself, each time with a different consequence for the standpoint and the object of consciousness, and the specific consequence for the understanding consists in a grand metaphysical gesture: it fixes a world in its substantiality as against another world, a world of the “beyond” and a world of the “this,” a world of the supersensible and a world of the sensible. This fixation, however, and Hegel does not tire to emphasize this aspect, is *itself* immediate for the understanding, it is the “unthought” moment of its abstraction in which it immediately abstracts from the abstraction that it itself is. The shirking away of the understanding from its inherent negativity is played out most importantly between the passages §143 and §147, which conclude with, perhaps, the Hegelian thesis par excellence: “The supersensible is the sensory and the perceived posited as it is in *truth*; but the *truth* of the *sensory* and the perceived is to be *appearance* [Erscheinung]. The supersensible is therefore *appearance* as *appearance*.” Throughout this whole movement, the understanding compulsively relates first to force, then to the interior and, finally, to the supersensible, as merely *positive* entities cut off from their emergence in the *vanishing* of the being of force – that is, indeed, why the understanding “loses its reality” at this crucial point

of the movement. Each time the understanding is faced with “the developed negative” (PhS§143), the understanding *perceives* mere objectivity and sensible givenness. The understanding therefore cannot face the fact that the supersensible is appearance as appearance, inasmuch as it is oblivious to the *disappearance*, the loss and the negativity which this appearance immanently entails. Instead, the understanding fixates on the beyond which, because of its inherent negativity, *appears as if it did not emerge from appearance*, as if it was already there, ready to be found by the understanding.<sup>25</sup> This constitutes the ultimate misunderstanding of the understanding: it thinks over a whole world from which it thoughtlessly extracts itself, or, it positivises a wholeness which is, in truth, enabled by an act of absolute negation and voiding.

Before we move on to the next section, it should be noted that the preservation of an immediate sensible residue is explicitly included by Hegel in the definition of *Aufhebung* as such: “Sublation [Das Aufheben] exhibits its veritable twofold significance which we have seen in the negative: it is at the same time a *negating* and a *preserving*; the Nothing, as *Nothing of the This*, preserves immediacy and is itself sensory, but a universal immediacy” (PhS§113). Immediacy is not expelled in sublation, but instead it passes over, as a nothingness, into mediation and universality as such, otherwise it would make no sense for Hegel to refer, at the end of the passage, to immediacy as *both* sensory and universal. Indeed, sensory universality is later defined by Hegel as “the *immediate* unity of Being and the negative” (PhS§115).<sup>26</sup> This should be kept in mind throughout the movement of

<sup>25</sup> I should note that that the central notion of *Erscheinung* bears, for Hegel, the meaning of a shining forth or apparition (as in Ezra Pound’s *In a Station of the Metro*, “The apparition of these faces in the crowd / Petals on a wet, black bough”), while the English word “appearance” can equally mean *Schein*, a seeming or semblance (as in the expression “keeping up appearances”), which risks dangerous confusions. I cannot properly expand on this here, but the dynamic in which the understanding fetishizes the “beyond” of the apparition which, by its very act of appearing, engenders the *semblance* that there is a wholly contained something that appears, is crucial.

<sup>26</sup> In more developed forms, sensory universality emerges as the “sensory objectivity” (PhS§346) in which the being of spirit is singularized in the dead bone or as the “unconscious universality” of the nether world and the departed spirit (PhS§474).

the *Phenomenology* as a whole, insofar as, because of this immediate nothingness or crack that insists in its standpoint, consciousness is structurally unaware, or indeed unconscious, *bewusstlos*, of what is *actually* implied in its own standpoint and relation to its object. The immanent reversal of consciousness due to its very obliviousness towards its immediate standpoint is at the heart of the dialectical movement in the *Phenomenology*, and is emphasized by Hegel at the end of “Force and the Understanding,” right after describing the vanishing of the “sensory covering” of its object in the transition to self-consciousness: “The exposition of the concept of infinity belongs to science; but consciousness, now that it has this concept *immediately*, comes on the scene again as a form of its own, or as a new shape of consciousness, which does not recognize its essence in what has gone before, but regards it as another thing altogether” (PhS§164).<sup>27</sup> In other words, *consciousness is most beyond itself precisely when it takes to understand itself*.

## Frozen Thoughts

The dynamic that we have unpacked so far between understanding and sensory immediacy is completely obscured if we follow Jameson in placing abstraction “behind and beyond [the initial] sensory experience”<sup>28</sup> or

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<sup>27</sup> This point is also emphasized by Žižek with reference to PhS§87, where Hegel describes how the “*origination* of the new object ... offers itself to consciousness without consciousness knowing how it comes by it.” Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, 485. This formal nothingness implicated in the immediate givenness of the object, or the immanent gap between the object for consciousness and the object for us or in-itself, is a most “succinct definition” of what Žižek describes as the “Hegelian unconscious,” in contrast to the “Freudian” one. Besides the very important §233, where Hegel refers to the “forgotten path of reason,” and §467, where he describes the “forgetfulness” of the Stygian water qua absolute substance, see also the following passages for the immanent differential repetition of a moment of immediacy in the standpoint of consciousness: §167, §186, §208, §300, §346, §355–356, §398, §441, §476, §492, §529, §558, §577, §599, §603, §622, §632, §647, §668, §683, §688, §692, §706, §737, §758, §762, §783, §799.

<sup>28</sup> Jameson, *The Hegel Variations*, 8.

Pippin in considering that every immediacy is always-already mediated by the concept of the understanding. Indeed, Pippin goes as far as to say that the “notion of a ‘mediated immediacy’ has a good claim to count as the single most important notion in Hegel.”<sup>29</sup> Such a reading misses the more subtle point that *thought as such is immediate to itself*, an immediacy which consists in the sensory manner that abstraction presents itself to the understanding, namely, “as something that *simply is*” (PhS§133). The anaesthetic field in which thinking dwells is thus constituted by an immediate abstraction which fundamentally obscures itself as the abstraction that it is, and that is precisely what *makes it* an abstraction. At the same time, in contrast to the vanishing finitude of sensibility, the abstract finitude of the understanding is far more fatal to its content: it consists in the *immediate* repetition of a mortifying gesture by which the understanding “houses what is dead” in its abstract crystallizations (PhS§706), yet it wants nothing to know about the death-dealing power that it inherently displays.<sup>30</sup> This is why Hegel suggests that the finitude of the object in sense-perception becomes, with the understanding, a most “infinite abyss” (EL32§A).

We now find ourselves in a better place to grasp why Hegel regards the “view that things consist of *independent stuffs*” (EL§126A) as specific to the understanding. For example, as the quantitative and scientific instrument par excellence, the understanding is the “worldly” thought of the one, the thought which thinks *everything all at once*: everything is evolution (evolutionary science), everything is data (computational ontology), everything is the brain (neuroscientific materialism), and so on. In this hypostatization, the understanding posits the *whole* sensible world

<sup>29</sup> Pippin, *Hegel's Realm of Shadows*, 261, n. 7.

<sup>30</sup> Žižek refers here to the understanding's “power to create fictions,” insofar as the understanding has the power to freeze or mortify an object away from its immediate context, which thus “obtains a separate existence of its own.” Slavoj Žižek, *Surplus-Enjoyment: A Guide for the Non-Perplexed*, 41–42. The fact that Hegel refers to the “fictions” of the understanding (EL§126A) and to the “dreams of its abstractions” (EL6R) brings to the fore this fundamental import of *Verstand* in establishing the frame of fantasy.

under the auspices of *one* thought.<sup>31</sup> The condition of possibility for this hypostatizing gesture stems from the thoughtless moment in which the understanding *immediately* relates to the world as to a given “thing,” when it does not realize that it is its own thought which mediates, in an act of abyssal negativity, its relating to a world that, in truth, has already been lost. The oft-invoked fixity and abstract identity imparted on its content by the understanding thus implies that the objects which are left mortified in the wake of abstractive thought become, as Hegel puts it, “unalterable” (SL538): it is not only a mere thing which is enclosed in a sealed box, but a world as such which gets stored in a hermetic crypt.

The dialectical implication of the ground covered so far is as follows: the understanding, as the negation of sensible content and the opening of thought as such, is *thoughtless* of the negation that it itself is and thus takes its thoughts as being simply *immediately* given things, these in turn being taken to designate a full, abstractly identical, unalterable and fixed wholeness. This frozen dynamic is what properly expresses the restless finitude of the understanding and makes it the vehicle of transcendence and of ideological reification par excellence: it takes itself as constitutive-ly separated from its content and therefore, in a perhaps comedic curse, it epitomizes the very agency of separation which cannot separate itself from the separation that it is. The understanding cannot engender or immanentize within itself its own negation, this in turn being the free activity of reason, which, as we will see, brings out the “positive” moment in the “negative” abstraction of the understanding (EL§182A). In and of

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<sup>31</sup> Hegel considers that the metaphysical culmination of the understanding is the “abstract spiritless identity” of the “*Identity-System, or Philosophy of Identity*” which proclaims, in a Spinozist gesture, “*All is One*” (EL§7). In this hypostatization of the world as a self-contained abstract one, Hegel regards *number* as being the most essential logical determination of the understanding: “By the name ‘Trinity,’ ‘tri-unity,’ nobody expected that one and number would be considered by the understanding as the *essential determinateness* of the content” (SL180). Number, for Hegel, is the conceptual determination in which “the senses are ... brought closest to thought” (SL178), a further indication that the immediate thought of the understanding, “clinging to the one and number as such” (SL180), is enmeshed in sense-perception.

itself, the understanding is stuck in bad infinity, also referred to by Hegel as “sensory infinity” (PhS§238), as the agency which obsessively shuffles its explanation whenever it encounters a contradiction between thought and reality. *Verstand* moves from 1 to 2 to 3 to  $n+1$ , always in search of the *one more*, considering each of these determinations as inherently separate from each other and attempting to puzzle them out in the search for the complete set.<sup>32</sup> In other words, the understanding is the power which concerns itself with puzzles only insofar *it does not let itself be puzzled*.

Before we move on, I must also point out that in this account of the influence of sensibility on the understanding, Hegel is not too far from Kant himself. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant states that *error* in thought arises “through the unnoticed influence of sensibility on understanding” (A294/B350), with reason too being “deceived often enough by sensibility” (A641/B669).<sup>33</sup> Kant further refers to this unnoticed influence of sensibility as a “force that meddles in [*der Kraft, die sich mit einmengt*]” with the “proper action of the understanding” (A294–5/B351). This is a significant mention by Kant, as it is the very influence of the play of forces which, in Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, turns out to undermine the understanding’s standpoint of external reflection. The jump from Kant to Hegel will, nevertheless, consist in conceiving force not only as something immediately outside understanding which both escapes and undermines its grasp, but rather in acknowledging that what escapes the understanding is precisely that *understanding itself is this force which undermines itself*. What is kept at distance by *Verstand* is that its immediate exteriority is precisely the beyond of its own interiority which is thus, in truth, no beyond but the constitutive formal nothingness of its own being. In Hegel’s words, the understanding is the “infinite force [*die unendliche Kraft*],” namely the “force which alone is at the same time the mighty power causing the

<sup>32</sup> “This uniform colouring of the schema and of its lifeless determinations, this absolute identity, and the transition from one to the other, are all alike dead understanding [*totter Verstand*] and all alike external cognition” (PhS§51).

<sup>33</sup> Kant describes this influence in terms of an unnoticed slip, a surprising and subtle movement from “the field of sensibility to the insecure territory of pure and even transcendental concepts” (A725/B753).

transition of the determinacies" (SL539). What Kant posited as a sensible transcendence that is "out there" and undermines the self-containment of thought, Hegel, in a Spinozist gesture, immanentizes as the self-splitting of thought from within itself, this diremption constituting the very negativity or loss of the substantial being of thought. Or: thought is a being which is *at home in the loss of being*, and thus as the thinking beings we are, as Hegel puts it, "with nothing under us and nothing over us, in solitude, alone by ourselves," and only so "we are purely at home with ourselves" (EL§31A).

### **Transcendence in *Verstandesphilosophie***

The picture presented so far about the connection between sense-perception and understanding will hopefully allow for a better grasp of the various characteristics that Hegel ascribes to the understanding, especially of his seemingly ambivalent oscillation between the "good" and the "bad" ones. In the latter respect, Hegel identifies the understanding with the manifestation of "abstract spiritless identity" (EL7), the binary standpoint of the logic of the either-or (EL§32A), or with the metaphysical commitment to an atomistic standpoint (EL§103A). As already noted, these "charges" are subsumed by Hegel under a systematic critique of the metaphysics of the understanding, which, in his account, remained too empirical vis-à-vis its thought determinations. According to Hegel, this metaphysics did not question "whether the form of judgment could be the form of truth" (EL§28R), and thus it related to the subject and the predicate of the judgment form as to sensible "things" which directly *encapsulate* what they refer to. Indeed, this constitutes the error in which one thinks "that by one word one thinks precisely this" (EL§33).

From a Hegelian perspective, therefore, the *metaphysics* of the understanding is a metaphysics of the *understanding* because it relates to the discursivity of thought in an *immediate* manner: "we should note that [the older metaphysics] did not go beyond the thinking of mere *understanding*. It took up the abstract determinations of thought immediately, and let

them count in their immediacy as predicates of what is true" (EL§28A). The perspective developed in this essay can help us render explicit how this metaphysical compulsion stems from the insistence of a repressed moment of sensibility in understanding, so that when this sensible finite moment is acted out by the abstractive "freeze-frame" of *Verstand*, the content at hand becomes altogether insensible and untouchable. The content appears as a transcendent, imperishable and unalterable infinite One and, for Hegel, it is of no surprise that *Verstandesphilosophie* culminated, in rational theology, in positing God as the "Supremely Real Essence" of a "mere beyond" (EL§36A), namely as the *fixed* entity deprived of all negation and movement, hovering over and beyond the totality of the sensible world.<sup>34</sup> Here we can grasp the full (anti)theological import of Hegel's point in the *Phenomenology* according to which "the first supersensible world was only the *immediate* elevation of the perceived world into the universal element" (PhS§157).<sup>35</sup>

Hegel's critique of *Verstandesphilosophie* is therefore grounded in his charge that it takes discursivity, the judgment form and, indeed, the very givenness of words themselves, as its ultimate presuppositions. This is precisely what makes it a dogmatic type of philosophizing, and the ulti-

<sup>34</sup> It is not only rational theology and monotheism which make themselves guilty of this fixation, but also, albeit in a different form, the pantheism of "the plant and the animal," as Hegel refers to it in terms which are evocative for the argument I present here: "It is of no use to have taken from the things of perception the *death of abstraction* [*den Tod der Abstraktion*] and to have elevated them to essences of spiritual perception; the ensouling of this realm of spirits has this death in it owing to the determinacy and the negativity which encroach on its innocent indifference" (PhS§689).

<sup>35</sup> This point is also made by Žižek when he characterizes the basic procedure of idealism as being that of fetishizing a moment of sensibility, the "sense-effect," into a self-generated entity: "Idealism ... denies that the sense-effect is an effect of bodily depth; it fetishizes the sense-effect into a self-generated entity; the price it pays for this denial is the *substantialization* of the sense-effect: idealism covertly qualifies sense-effect as a new Body (the immaterial body of Platonic forms, for example)." Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality*, 126. This idealism is in direct contrast to a Hegelian materialist logic of sense, in which "the revealed that has emerged entirely on the *surface* is precisely therein the *most profound*" (PhS§760).

mate metaphysical implication of *Verstandesphilosophie* is a system of transcendence, which consists in the hypostatization of the sensible relation that philosophy unconsciously holds to the very “stuff” of its business: the word. From a Hegelian perspective, Kant did not go to the end with his critique of this metaphysics, insofar as Kant too adhered to the reduction of thought to discursivity and to the form of judgement (A68/B93). For Kant, the instrument of philosophy consists in “discursive *a priori* concepts” (A725/B753), or, as he puts it in different terms, philosophy is “conducted by means of mere words (the object in thought)” (A735/B763). Hegel thus criticizes Kant for not fulfilling his critical aim of rendering the understanding finite because, to the extent that he takes the understanding *at its word*, he absolutizes its external standpoint and too hastily forbids philosophy to tarry with the negative movement of the speculative, namely, with the inherent self-transcendence of the discursive form (EL§60A1; EL§81R).<sup>36</sup> With this point, I arrive at the last part of the essay, in which I will evaluate the understanding as the “absolute power” (PhS§32) and its position *vis-à-vis* reason, a task which hopefully will be easier to delineate if we keep in mind the moment of sensibility repressed – thoughtlessly – by the understanding.

## Understanding and Reason

It is first important to pay attention to the context of the *Phenomenology* in which Hegel referred to the understanding as “the most astonishing and mightiest of powers” (PhS§32), while also keeping in mind that this is not the only place where he reminds us of the powers of the understanding (the passages at SL538–540 are also instructive). In the preceding paragraphs, Hegel describes how spiritual determinations are historical achievements which have become the *inorganic* nature in which the individual unconsciously dwells: “This past Being-there [*Dasein*] is already acquired property of the universal spirit that constitutes the substance

<sup>36</sup> In psychoanalysis, the name for the immanent de-substantialization of the discursive being of the understanding is, of course, *Einfall* or *free association*.

of the individual and so, in appearing externally to him, constitutes his inorganic nature" (PhS§30). The wording in this passage is indicative: Hegel suggests that the historical achievements of *thought* present themselves, to the individual, as external *substance*, as mere sensible being. In Hegel's words, these frozen determinations possess a form of "unconceptualized immediacy, of immobile indifference, as Being-there itself has" (PhS§30). They are thus determinations historically produced by spirit in its self-conscious and thinking activity, but which immediately display a "rigidity of being" (SL539). Such a rigidity is, of course, a semblance to spirit, but this semblance of transcendence and fixity constitutes the all-too-real materialization of the moment of imperishable abstraction which is imprinted by the understanding on its content. It is thus in this context that Hegel mentions, in PhS§32, that understanding is the activity which separates its content, namely, it separates it from the vanishing concreteness of sensible being and *fixes* it into determinations as *one*. As such, the understanding produces an infinity of such "one" determinations which, as uncomprehended, retroactively materialize the moment of sensible being that they contain, but which are in truth related by their inner negativity. The understanding must thus recognize its own work, its own labor of the negative, in the rigidity that faces it as the most damning exteriority, in order to actualize the negative that the determinations already are. Yet to be able do so, *it must dare to lose itself*, and it is at this point that reason steps into the picture.

For Hegel, dialectic implies that the understanding "must fall into the negative of itself" (EL§11R). What is incomprehensible to the understanding, as Žižek points out with the notion of "downward-synthesis," consists in the moment of immediacy that singularizes its abstract universality and confronts it with the danger of fall and loss: "while the Understanding can well grasp the universal mediation of a living totality, what it cannot grasp is that this totality, in order to actualize itself, has to acquire *actual* existence in the guise of an immediate *contingent* natural singularity."<sup>37</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism*, 26. In *Absolute Recoil*, Žižek's discussion of Robert Pippin and what he identifies as the "deflated Hegel," concludes with this passage (15–26), which further points

The understanding therefore wants, as Hegel puts it, to cling to “the immediacy [which is] outside thought” (SL76), even though thought itself has a moment of immediacy superseded within it, which is unconsciously materialized precisely in the abstract fixity which it imparts onto its determinations. The import of reason is, thus, to point out to the understanding the finitude that it inherently displays in its very being, this rendering explicit of the *finitude of the finite* constituting the very *infinite* movement of reason. For Hegel, the “speculative” moment of reason is the proper negative moment, precisely because it is that “which dissolves the determinations of the understanding into nothing” (SL10). In other words, reason is the shining forth of a terrifying freedom which stares the mortifying negation in its voided face and *recognizes* itself in it; it willfully and courageously admits it as its very own being.

Finally, there is a key passage in the introduction to the *Science of Logic* which clarifies the place of the understanding in the triad sensibility-understanding-reason. When it turns itself against reason, the understanding behaves “in the manner of *ordinary common sense*, giving credence to the latter’s view that truth rests on sensuous reality, that thoughts are *only* thoughts, that is, that only sense perception gives filling and reality to them” (SL25). Thus, *vis-à-vis* reason, the understanding is a more *stubborn* form of sense-perception, which relates to its thoughts as to things that it does not want to give up. By contrast, *vis-à-vis* sense-perception, the understanding is the absolute power, it subtracts the “true” notional determination and unveils the universal import of its content. The understanding is thus tormented by the instability between the violent rupture it enacts on its sensible content and the cowardly comfort of keeping its thoughts close to itself, with Hegel himself mentioning that the determinations of the understanding find themselves in a “necessary

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to the central symptomatic spot that the relationship between understanding and immediacy occupies in interpretations of Hegel. For Žižek’s elaboration of “downward-synthesis,” see also Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, 50–53, and Žižek, *Absolute Recoil*, 336–44. For his most recent restatement of this notion in terms of a quantum “collapse of superpositions,” see Slavoj Žižek, *Quantum History. A New Materialist Philosophy*, 363–65.

conflict" (SL26): they are at once both abstract (universal and mediated) and concrete (singular and immediate). The understanding therefore inherently finds itself in a contradiction and it shies away from it so as not to lose its very being. Reason shows to the understanding, however, that there is *nothing* to shy away from, there is no innocence to be kept, insofar as understanding is in its very being the loss of being. This releases the immediacy to which it unconsciously clings to and brings it *to its senses*, reconciling the understanding with the misunderstanding constitutive of its very being and returning to it a world in which there is nothing to return to and nothing to expect, except *the very abyss of freedom itself*.

## Conclusion

One of the implications of the argument developed in this paper is that it contributes to casting serious doubts on transcendentalist interpretations which hold that immediacy and sensibility constitute the arch nemeses of Hegel. We find this expressed in interpretations such as Fredric Jameson's, who holds that the "whole of Hegel's philosophical production is an elaborate refutation of all possible concepts of immediacy,"<sup>38</sup> or Robert Pippin's, who holds that Hegel wages war on "immediacy and givenness in all its forms."<sup>39</sup> It should be clear that, in fact, such interpretations revert to the standpoint of the metaphysics of the understanding, which presupposes mediation under its various guises (intelligibility, the judgment form, social totality, etc.) as self-establishing. I would even venture to say that such interpretations occur from within the standpoint of the understanding itself, insofar as they obscure, "in sensory covering" (PhS§164), the immediacy of mediacy itself or, following Žižek, they expel the stain which is constitutive of thought as such. Through this expelling, perhaps ironically, such interpretations unconsciously repeat the very founding gesture of the understanding, which is haunted by "the sensory

<sup>38</sup> Jameson, *The Hegel Variations*, 13.

<sup>39</sup> Pippin, *Hegel's Realm of Shadows*, 38.

representation of the consolidation of the differences in a distinct element of subsistence" (PhS§160), a sensuous remainder which, in a Fichtean regression, is acted out in the dualistic positing of an immediate, irrational, and frustrating obstacle which thought must at once both internalize and keep at a distance. What is thus self-consciously taken as mere fleeting empirical content is secretly, behind the back of consciousness, posited as immovable transcendent form. Or, by constituting themselves against sensibility, such interpretations take, in truth, "the sensory world as itself real actuality" (PhS§147): yet another confirmation of the Lacanian formula that repression is the return of the repressed.

Secondly, this essay contributes towards a reading of Hegel as a thinker of the unconscious. Such a reading is strictly related to the way in which we interpret the dialectical play between immediacy and mediacy, or between *transcendental aesthetics* and *transcendental logic*. Therefore, this interpretation does not place Hegel against Kant, nor takes him to be advocating for a return to pre-Kantian ontology but instead suggests that Hegel closely follows Kant's footsteps in formulating a systematic critique of the metaphysics of the understanding and, implicitly, of the compulsion towards *transcendence* in philosophy. In this precise sense, I regard Žižek's statement that "Hegel was literally 'more Kantian than Kant himself'" as fully justified.<sup>40</sup> Philosophizing after the transcendental turn requires a commitment to accounting for the generation of transcendence from within the immanent field of sense, or, in the terms of this paper, to interpreting the *constitutively repressed* moment of sensibility in the knotty and seemingly insensible abstractions of the understanding. My main intention in this essay is therefore neither to praise the understanding as the absolute power nor to admonish it as the ideological organ of thought, but rather to suggest that, in the end, it is not even clear that the understanding is understanding. As we have seen, the very idea that understanding is to be opposed to sensibility (which it purportedly sublates) or to reason (in which it is purportedly absorbed) is an idea which is posited from within the standpoint of the understanding itself, with this

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<sup>40</sup> Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 281.

positing itself acting out a dualistic sensory representation immanent to its abstract thought.

Finally, many of Hegel's formulations regarding the understanding and the "sensory covering" of its object (PhS§164) bring into serious doubt that abstraction as such is *beyond* sensibility. Instead, these indicate that there is a thoughtlessness, *eine Gedankenlosigkeit*, specific to sensibility, which passes over into and presents itself as the "stubbornness" of the understanding, with this stubbornness ultimately manifesting itself as the metaphysical compulsion of *Verstand* to hypostatizing the transcendence of the One. This fundamentally informs Hegel's diagnosis about modernity, in which, as he suggests, "the individual finds the abstract form ready-made" (PhS§33). The heart of the Kantian-Hegelian philosophical procedure of *transcendental genesis*, at work both in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, is thus the tireless transparentizing of the "unnoticed influence of sensibility on understanding" (A294/B350), which constitutes the condition of possibility for these fixed thoughts, the knots of the understanding, to weave the anaesthetic substance of modernity. Ultimately, the goal of this paper has been to turn our attention to how the greatest knot of the understanding, *its fundamental fantasy*, is nothing but the sensory representation that there is, in the close distance of eternity, a knot to be untied.

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JURE SIMONITI

## Why Are Truths Counterintuitive?

Why is it that in a universe as monotonous as ours, great truths so often unsettle the very ground we stand on? How is it that we are said to be drifting along the edge of an indifferent cosmos, and yet every concept, every regularity, every law, every formula we manage to wrest from it still appears to us as an object of a kind of beauty? If truth is conceived merely as the form of the correspondence of a statement to a state of affairs, or of the adequation between the intellect and the thing, then we are fully justified in asking: Why do the key insights into the nature of the world crystallize in epochal breaks, scientific revolutions, unexpected discursive events, and sharpened verbal creations? How is it that the founding event of modern science is held to be the Copernican turn, which replaces the everyday experience of the Sun rising and setting with the doctrine of the Earth's rotation around it? Is it not strange that a human being who stands on solid ground rather than in water should prefer to derive the history of knowledge from Thales' thesis that water is the origin of all things – and not, as Aristotle wondered, from the more natural assumption that everything originates from earth? And what does it mean that in the 20th century, with the theory of relativity and especially with quantum mechanics, we are said to have awakened into a universe we don't even recognize anymore?

## The Savanna Principle

Already in everyday life we can observe a certain disproportion between the silent horizon of the ordinary world of our lay existences and the simultaneous impulse to utter paradoxes and hyperboles for the sheer pleasure of expressibility. The more one day resembles the next, the more inclined we are, from time to time, to utter general declarations with the strongest possible negative charge, such as “Time opens ever new wounds,” or “Silence is silver.” But once we venture beyond these still relatively safe surroundings, a growing divergence becomes apparent: the duller, more inert and diffuse reality becomes, the more striking, condensed, and polished the sound of its truth. The disenchantment of the world goes hand in hand with the beauty of its laws, principles, and formulas, and it seems that reality loses its magic in precisely the measure that truth, in its symbolic completion, manages to steal it back. But what does this tell us about truth, and what about reality?

In a nutshell, there seems to exist a primordial irreconcilability between reality in its ineluctable facticity and truth as the form of its idealization. Moreover, the progress of the human spirit itself seems to anchor itself in this very rift and even to widen it, dislodging us from small, self-contained cosmic environments and casting us into an ever more boundless and nonhuman universe. Although the entire history of knowledge is but a long chain of turns and shifts that, step by step, deprive the human being of any self-indulgent support – a sequence of what Freud called the *narcissistic wounds of humanity* – the beginning of the twentieth century is said to have confronted us with an even more absolute caesura. Within the prevailing public narrative, a persistent myth holds that until the late nineteenth century we still inhabited a nature intuitively graspable by the human conceptual apparatus; and that only with Einstein’s theory of relativity, and above all with the quantum mechanics of Bohr and Heisenberg, did a world open up before us that we may still describe mathematically and perhaps even reflect upon philosophically, but which we can no longer accommodate within the horizons of our intuitive representations. We are thus said to have suddenly realized that we populate

a universe unfolding beyond the reach of our natural intuitions – one in which any hope of concord between mind and world, between microcosm and macrocosm, seems to have come to an end.

Of course, we may here speak of a genuine epistemological break in the sense of Bachelard's *rupture épistémologique*, according to which the growth of knowledge is not continuous; rather, the human mind, in the process of cognition, repeatedly collides with its own unconscious obstacles that it can overcome only in discrete events of cognitive discontinuity. As Bachelard claims, “we know *against* previous knowledge, when we destroy knowledge that was badly made and surmount all those obstacles to spiritualisation that lie in the mind itself.”<sup>1</sup> In this sense, our understanding of the world stands from the outset in an opposition to our own mind, and it is probably no coincidence that Bachelard developed his theory of unconscious obstacles, mental catharses, and the reform of the spirit precisely as an epistemology for the new age of relativity and quantum physics. Yet for the common view, which for Bachelard is both the lever and the first victim of knowledge, the transition between nineteenth- and twentieth-century mentalities is not merely another shift in the image of the world. Instead, the prevailing opinion wishes to see in it something more – perhaps a break in the very sequence of epistemological breaks. What seems to emerge here is a kind of cut beneath all cuts, a fissure that even Bachelard himself was likely not fully aware of or at least did not entirely articulate in his own theory. If his stated aim was to lay out the labor the mind must perform to cognize the world objectively, then with Einstein and Heisenberg we are said to have entered a reality to which the mind can no longer be adjusted – or readjusted – enough to ever again represent it adequately.

Of course, that the mind must undertake a labor upon itself is nothing new; the history of philosophy, from its earliest days on, has always advocated various forms of conceptual self-revision. But how far can such corrections reach? One of the most general philosophical operations is

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<sup>1</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Formation of the Scientific Mind: A Contribution to a Psychoanalysis of Objective Knowledge*, 24.

precisely the process by which, at a moment of “epistemological crisis” – itself merely a reflection of the difficulties of a given epoch, of social instabilities, advances in knowledge, shifting central concepts, cosmic uncertainties, and the like – the human intellect apprehends within itself certain eternal forms that then become the secure and immovable foundation of its understanding of the world, its practical engagement, and its place within creation. Thus, in Parmenides, the protagonist – perhaps unsettled by the developments in public thought that would soon usher in the age of the Sophists – follows the summons of the goddess who reveals to him the truth of Being and forbids him to think Non-Being; she places in his hands a timeless instrument that will allow him to distinguish false opinions from the single truth. Parmenides’ journey to the other world in order to better understand this one is perhaps a kind of prototype for the great philosophical gestures to come: the mind, in its attempt to secure firm ground beneath its feet amid the abyssal conditions of its time, withdraws from its immediate, illusion-laden environment into itself and finds there the hinge of a new revelation of reality. The most famous such “Archimedean point” in philosophy is, of course, Descartes’ *ego cogito*, which survives the method of doubt and becomes aware of its innate ideas – ideas that henceforth constitute the basis of its clear and distinct knowledge of the world. A similar gesture underlies Plato’s project. Facing the disintegration of the polis, the trauma of the Peloponnesian defeat, and the discursive hegemony of the Sophists, he searches for a new locus around which truth may constellate. The burden now falls on the singular human soul: through dialectical examinations of ethical concepts, Socrates strives to awaken in each interlocutor the anamnestic memory of the perfect Forms once contemplated in a prior existence. In a somewhat comparable vein, Kant – confronted with the danger of ontological chaos that loomed after the empiricist critique of the rationalist doctrine of innate ideas – searches for a new root of conceptual order in sensible experience and finds it in the subject’s timeless inner structure of the transcendental conditions of the possibility of cognition. By an analogy at this very specific level, in Fichte, every “you” addressed by the *Wissenschaftslehre* is solicited to apprehend within herself the original impulse of the “I,” whereas in Hegel natural

consciousness retraces the route to absolute knowing already completed by the standpoint “for us.” Thus, the temporal vagaries are always hinged upon a minimally extra-temporal reflex. Traces of this operation can be found everywhere in philosophy. When Heidegger’s *Dasein* loses itself in the modes of inauthenticity, it becomes seized by *Angst*, withdraws from the world, and only in this detachment does it finally confront its own death as the last post-metaphysical lever of authenticity capable of granting meaning to Being. It is precisely the fact that death is never present but perpetually deferred into an indeterminate moment that gives it sufficient atemporal force to undergird the entire temporality of human existence. Perhaps, then, in Plato’s *anamnesis* of the Ideas, in Descartes’ demonstration of innate notions, in Kant’s deduction of the transcendental forms, and in similar exemplifications of metaphysical *puncta firma* or *axes mundi*, we can discern a fundamental philosophical myth: whenever its accustomed world reveals itself as less than fully real, the human mind secures itself by anchoring in an *inner eternity* – a reservoir of universal concepts exempt from temporal flux – which then present themselves as guarantors of consistency for an otherwise wavering reality.

According to this “legend” of Western philosophy, the human spirit may well lose itself in the externalities of opinions, errors, and habits, yet it nonetheless remains capable of establishing within itself a certain commensurability between its inner forms and the concealed structure of being. And it is this bond – the last guarantee of the truth of cognition – that is said to have collapsed with the advent of twentieth-century physics. If until then it had sufficed merely to dispel the fog of everyday *doxa* and to polish away the accreted layers of illusion that had settled upon the original purity of the concepts within us, we are now supposed to have experimentally and mathematically uncovered a world to which no cognitive form in our interiority can even begin to correspond. Plato’s soul, Descartes’ *cogito*, or Kant’s transcendental subjectivity could still, by withdrawing a step deeper into themselves, discover there an eternal source of truth; yet in the face of relativistic and quantum phenomena we are compelled to sacrifice not this or that inherited prejudice or tacit judgment, but our very deepest, hardwired conceptual apparatus. It is precisely the

human being's seemingly innate ideas, the structural concepts of her brain, the forms of intuition, and the standards of rationality by which she constituted her reality and scientifically mastered it, that suddenly appear as the chief obstacle to understanding nature. Thus, Kant's philosophy purports to be a propaedeutic to the natural sciences; with its *a priori* forms of space and time and its categories of causality, which reveal a world without leaps, gaps, chance, or fate, it provides a kind of philosophical grounding of Newtonian physics. Physicists of the nineteenth century therefore understood themselves as Kantians. By contrast, the founders of the new physics of relativity, Mach and Einstein, were the first to state explicitly that they were going beyond Kant's understanding of space and time and often – though not always! – declared themselves physical anti-Kantians. “If Kant had known, what is known to us today of the natural order,” Einstein said in an interview with Chaim Tschernowitz for *The Sentinel*, “I am certain that he would have fundamentally revised his philosophical conclusions. Kant built his structure upon the foundations of the world outlook of Kepler and Newton. Now that the foundation has been undermined, the structure no longer stands.”<sup>2</sup> Worse still, Einstein once told his student Ilse Schneider: “Kant's much-praised view on Time reminds me of Andersen's tale of the emperor's new clothes, only that instead of the emperor's new clothes we have the form of intuition.”<sup>3</sup>

This creates, in effect, the appearance that we are witnessing a kind of “transcendental epistemological break,” one that even surpasses the scope of Copernicus' displacement of the human from the center to the margins of the universe, or Darwin's relegation of *Homo sapiens* to the primates. For it is no longer merely a matter of man being forced to accept the humiliation of his empirical existence while still being able to indulge in the prestige of grasping this very degradation. After all, only an Earth-dweller whose ground literally shifts beneath her feet can comprehend the structure of the solar system, and only that ape which lost the most to the theory of evolution could have formulated it. With

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<sup>2</sup> Alice Calaprice, ed., *The Ultimate Quotable Einstein*, 130.

<sup>3</sup> Calaprice, *The Ultimate Quotable Einstein*, 129.

twentieth-century physics we do not so much forfeit our creaturely place within a metaphysically guaranteed order of being as see our very mind break in the attempt to understand the new image of the world. Thus, quantum physicists, in particular, demand from us a continual mental effort, for phenomena at the level of elementary particles can be grasped only in defiance of intuition. The new world reveals itself only to those who are willing to be in perpetual war with the presuppositions of their own mind.

It is therefore no surprise that, in the twentieth century, Kant's formula for determining the conceptual conditions of possibility of every sensible experience begins to be replaced by an outright *anti-Kantian* gesture. Now we are supposed to become aware of our mental schemata and categorial forms only to determine what it is that we must bracket and set aside if the world is to appear to us at all in its objectivity. One such scientifically quite controversial, probably already outdated, not particularly important yet nonetheless symptomatic manifestation of this contemporary anti-Kantianism is, for instance, the "savanna principle" formulated by Satoshi Kanazawa.<sup>4</sup> This principle is a hypothesis in evolutionary psychology according to which the human brain developed primarily through adaptations to life on the African savanna and is therefore ill-equipped for the conditions of the modern world. Thereby, we are said to fear snakes and spiders instinctively – creatures that posed genuine danger in prehistory – yet to harbor fewer fears of electricity, automobiles, or cigarettes, which in the modern world are far more lethal. Likewise, the savanna human required energy in the form of sugar and simple fats, which now harm him in a society of abundance; his cognitive apparatus is programmed for life in small groups, and so in today's mass societies of millions of strangers, with their state forms and bureaucracies, it often functions in a disoriented manner; and so on.<sup>5</sup> More important for our purposes than these small

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<sup>4</sup> See Satoshi Kanazawa, "The Savanna Principle."

<sup>5</sup> The principle should not be confused with the "savanna hypothesis," developed by Orians and Heerwagen within environmental psychology and landscape ecology, which holds that humans exhibit an innate aesthetic preference for environments resembling the African savanna in which our ancestors evolved. According to this

shifts in evolutionary psychology is the almost “transcendental” reversal of mentality according to which the mind suddenly conceives itself no longer as the last anchoring point and safety net in the process of truth, but as the greatest obstacle to the knowledge of the world. We often hear contemporary quantum and relativity physicists say in one interview or another that the human mind evolved on the savanna and will therefore never truly be able to imagine the cosmic vastness or the world smaller than an atom. According to a not entirely verified anecdote circulating since the 1910s or 1920s, the English physicist Arthur Eddington, when asked whether it was true that only three people in the world understood the theory of relativity, replied: “And who is the third?” But with quantum physics things went even further. Feynman famously remarked in the 1960s: “I think I can safely say that nobody understands quantum mechanics,”<sup>6</sup> by which he no longer meant that we might one day unravel it, but that as an object of thought it is fundamentally unintelligible to the human brain.

With this, the boundary between the contingent and the necessary, the temporal and the eternal, the *a posteriori* and the *a priori* dimensions of our knowledge of the world has shifted to an entirely new front. Once, the heterogeneity of the external world stood opposed to the fixed categories of the, arguably human, mind – categories to which one gained access through recollection of former lives, through divine inspiration implanting innate ideas, or at least through becoming aware of some timeless structure within us. Now, however, these seemingly “universal” human concepts – ultimately the very Platonic Ideas of motion and rest, identity and difference; the Cartesian mathematical and logical truths or the concepts of substance, number, being, thought, and will; and the Kantian categories of one and many, cause and effect, and so on – have revealed themselves to be contingent products of biological evolution, no more

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hypothesis, humans universally favor landscapes with open grasslands, scattered trees, opportunities for prospect, nearby water, and available refuge – since such environments offered the greatest chances of survival in prehistoric times. See Gordon H. Orians and Judith H. Heerwagen, “Evolved Responses to Landscapes.”

<sup>6</sup> Richard Feynman, *The Character of Physical Law*, 163.

necessary than any phenomenon of the external sensible world or any inherited or assumed cultural prejudice. If, then, according to this “legend,” Kant could still appeal to transcendental forms to unlock the ostensibly natural world of Newtonian mechanics, we must now remain constantly aware of our own savanna-mindedness; through such self-critique alone can we hope to grasp, if only conceptually and mathematically, a world that exceeds the limits of our imagination. And thus, we are thought to have passed from the “intuitively” intelligible world of the nineteenth century into the “intuitively” unintelligible world of twentieth-century physics – from the everyday, perspicuous Galilean physics and classical Newtonian mechanics to the humanly obscure terrain of relativity theory and quantum mechanics.

### **The Everyday and Its Repressions**

And yet this widely accepted view – that only with Einstein and Heisenberg did we suddenly awaken into an incomprehensible universe – may nevertheless be a myth, a myth of the twentieth century. For one may argue, first, that Galilean and Newtonian physics and, with them, the entire succession of scientific revolutions were already profoundly counterintuitive; second, that truth, by its very nature, works against common sense and emerges only insofar as it destabilizes a settled conceptual framework; third, that already Plato with *anamnesis*, Descartes with innate ideas, and above all Kant with transcendentalism find themselves in continual struggle with their own mind – so that one may say, loosely and figuratively, that they are already moving, unwittingly, within a consciousness of something akin to the savanna principle; and finally, fourth, that the *a priori* counterintuitiveness of every truth eventually encounters the real of the world and reveals it in its objectivity. From this standpoint, the rupture represented by the twentieth century may appear greater than it in fact is.

To justify this thesis, we must first ask: What exactly is an “intuitively intelligible truth,” and what is a “counterintuitive” one? What, in the end,

distinguishes a world explained by common sense from one that defies it? What does it mean to dwell in a nature that is representable, and what does it mean to dwell in one that is unrepresentable?

At first glance – intuitively, so to speak – we would likely have to say that an intuitive picture of reality is simply one in which our inner sphere of representations and ideas is already in a kind of natural accord with the external space of things and facts. The true philosophical monument to this silent, taken-for-granted, “unobtrusive” horizon of the world’s meaningfulness, in which things appear as handy tools within the “totality of involvements” and “context of equipment” constituted by *Dasein*’s care, was erected by Heidegger in the first part of *Being and Time*. What is crucial for this disclosure of the world is precisely that, within the framework of “average everydayness,” a thing feels no need to be confronted with its own concept. The more its concept remains unspoken, the more meaningfully determined, contoured, properly situated, and in a sense protected in its very existence the thing becomes. “If it is to be possible for the ready-to-hand not to emerge from its inconspicuousness, the world *must not announce itself*.”<sup>7</sup> As the famous analysis of the broken tool shows, a thing is one with its world whenever its particular existence goes unnoticed and unnamed; only when it is missing from its place, when it breaks, or when it no longer quite fits its function does it step out of the mute background and “catch the eye.” At that point it may even deserve some explicitly spoken judgment – like Heidegger’s example of the assertion of “concernful circumspection”: “‘The hammer is too heavy,’ or rather just ‘Too heavy!’, ‘Hand me the other hammer!’”<sup>8</sup>

Similar emphases were developed by Wittgenstein in *On Certainty*, where he showed that any explicit contact between a thing and its concept – for instance when we say, “This is my hand!” – is already a deviant case of language use, situated within a much broader whole of implicit beliefs and convictions that we never articulate and never subject to direct conceptual analysis or argumentative scrutiny. “Must I not begin to trust

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 106.

<sup>8</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 200.

somewhere?”,<sup>9</sup> asks the philosopher – and this “somewhere” is the horizon of pre-reflective, unproblematic acceptance of a world. “At the foundation of well-founded belief lies belief that is not founded.”<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps it is no mere accident that the twentieth century yielded both the science of Einstein and Heisenberg, which thrust the human being into a wholly unintelligible universe, and the philosophies of Heidegger and Wittgenstein, which locate every process of truth in the silently assumed, unquestioned disclosedness of the everyday world. It is as if the sudden rise of scientific counterintuitiveness had all but demanded a philosophical response in the form of an originally intuitive revelation of being. And yet, with the advent of a new age, this tension between the two levels merely became explicit, though arguably it had always already been at work. As we aim to show, even before the epoch of relativity theory and quantum mechanics, truth was constitutively counterintuitive, and the intuitively disclosed world has never stood on its own feet; rather, the illusion of its primacy has always rested upon massive repressions – repressions that continually return through the back door precisely in the phenomenon of truth.

Thus, already in Heidegger, the consistency of reality is established by the “existential state of Dasein”<sup>11</sup> named *Bedeutsamkeit* or “significance,” which he himself defines as the “worldhood of the world.” Yet such implicit semantic normativity inscribed into *Bedeutsamkeit* seems to suggest that our immediate familiarity with the world is but a mute surface that is, behind it, upheld by concealed forms of some kind of ideal essences. Theories of “intuitively assumed worlds,” therefore, are by no means free of conceptual structures; their trick lies merely in shifting the “loud,” symbolically articulated ideal values into a “silent,” unspoken medium that, within this seemingly unified, integrated, smoothly functioning world, does not speak in its own voice. The effect of articulated truth, which is always at least faintly at odds with mute reality, perhaps already arises in Heidegger, and it does so precisely where he himself would be most reluctant to

<sup>9</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 150.

<sup>10</sup> Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 253.

<sup>11</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 121.

find it. In his theory of language use, he sought to recast the propositions of classical logic, which divide subject from predicate, as “procuring” assertions, so as to strip concrete particularities of the abstract and differential universal categories that saturate everyday life with the ideal weight of metaphysics. But in order for the world to continue functioning smoothly, these repressed universals always and inevitably re-emerge from their silent background and thus mark their existence in one or another exclamation or command. The logically basic yet pragmatically meaningless sentence “The hammer is heavy,” which serves no practical purpose, is translated by Heidegger into the more ordinary mode of assertion: “Too heavy, the other hammer!” However, this inversion of subject and predicate does not fully protect symbolic speech from the impulse towards predicative idealization. For one, the concrete piece of equipment here still receives the qualification of “too-heaviness,” which inadvertently tears it out of the habitual circuit of practical work; and, what is more, it is also named by the general concept “hammer,” which endows this or that thing with a wooden handle and iron head with an aura of abstractness, of portability from context to context, and of substitutability with other similar tools. To this unintended idealization there inevitably accrue all those additional semantic values and verbal expressibilities that *Dasein* is so averse to hearing. Therefore, even to such a thoroughgoing empiricist of the everyday as Heidegger is in the first part of *Being and Time*, it becomes evident that the world is from the outset interwoven with the discriminations of concepts, however adamant he may be in sweeping their articulation under the rug at every turn. That a “spontaneous metaphysics of language” lurks around the corner of every spoken word was sensed as well by Wittgenstein, whose “therapy” becomes the never-completed task of removing of plain nonsense and bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language.<sup>12</sup>

Both philosophers place the life of things, meanings, and words within some kind of prior framework of undisputed homeostasis of being. Admittedly, in both this primary totality of “average everydayness and

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<sup>12</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 48 [§119].

form of life already borders on the possibility of crisis or transcendence: in Heidegger, the phenomenon of anxiety nullifies the world itself;<sup>13</sup> in Wittgenstein, the insight into the mystical truth of being outweighs linguistically articulated philosophy. According to our “counterintuitive” thesis, however, the “intuitive image of the world” is unstable already in its first appearance, for it comes into being only at the price of repressing the semantic structure that henceforth subsists in its muteness behind the veil of reality, yet continually breaks through its membrane and emerges from the unobtrusive background into the foreground of sheer expressibility. For since the human being establishes the horizon of the ordinary world only through the labor of concepts and their ideal values, he cannot help but endow that world with meaning; and this constant yet concealed surplus of sense occasionally surfaces in verbal excesses that interrupt the smooth unrolling of days, serve no pragmatic purpose whatsoever, and unsettle our accustomed sensitivities.

Say we take a brief walk in the forest; the moment we see an animal or a tree that slightly deviates from our expectations of the established order of things, we already mutter: “Ah, a doe!” or “Look, the hazel is blooming!” And it is this compulsion to verbalize that shows how, in temporally and spatially relative things, we unwittingly always recognize atemporal and transcendent forms; in real entities we perceive ideal values; in tokens, types. When, for instance, a cat appears before us, we quite unconsciously treat this particular animal as the instantiation of a fixed and durable kind, “the cat,” to which we ascribe a certain semantic necessity. And even if, knowing evolutionary theory, we are well aware that the species *Felis catus* is the product of a contingent biological history in which no taxon is derived from a table of essential types, we are in fact incapable of perceiving a concrete feline without automatically incorporating it into a higher, ideal, and therefore logically binding conceptual structure. For with the abstraction of a single concept, we simultaneously initiate

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<sup>13</sup> For Heidegger, in anxiety, “all beings in their being dissipate into nothingness. The world is revealed as bereft of all meaning and homeliness. All the things lose themselves in the uncanny openness.” Janko M. Lozar, “Nietzsche and Heidegger,” 129–30.

the process of forming other concepts, of generalizing them, and of establishing their differential relations. Because of certain specifics of human domestication practices, then, we tend to semantically fixate and, in a way, finalize the concept “cat” only in opposition to the concept “dog.” As a consequence, the phrase “fighting like cats and dogs” arises, as well as the belief that we divide into “cat people” and “dog people.” And it is precisely this binary opposition that now confers on the concept “cat” an ideal necessity that no concrete animal could ever possess. Suddenly, when this or that cat appears before us, we instinctively feel as though we had in fact *deduced* its tiny singularity from the semantically *a priori* dichotomy “cat/dog.” And so, it finally feels as if even this insignificant, contingent encounter had been placed in front of us by some necessary, well-nigh metaphysical structure.

It is by virtue of such unwitting idealizations that the world discloses itself before our eyes only through the prism of ideal distinctions, oppositions, and hierarchies – showing that no intuitive horizon of seamless, self-sustaining reality can be established without being simultaneously undergirded by constant, if unwarranted, idealizations of the real. Some form of “involuntary metaphysics of meaning” is therefore the perpetual reflex of the world’s ostensibly most primary, inconspicuous, and straightforward givenness. One might almost say that the wager of human existence rests on our willingness to repress the knowledge of how strenuously words must labor in the background so that the world may remain effortlessly silent in the foreground. However, reality’s hushing of its own conditions has its reverse side. The apparent calm of our instinctive familiarity with the world sits upon a powder keg of incessant verbal excesses and discursive perturbations.

Here, perhaps, lies the answer to the question concerning the very origins of something like an “intuitive image of the world.” Why should reality don a mask of roundedness, stability, coherence, and closure at all? From where do the hyperbolic Heideggerian notions of *Bewandtnis-ganzheit* and *Zeugzusammenhang* arise? What underlies our impulse to round off being and clothe it in the idyllic surface of the everyday, the normalcy, the mere thereness? The first impulse of “world-making” may

well be the automatic idealization of concepts – concepts that, via idealization, always become too large for the concrete contexts in which they emerge. We therefore project them behind the veil of appearance, into the sphere of universals, archetypes, and essences, while at the front of experience the membrane of seeming ease and steadiness condenses. In this respect, “intuitiveness” is the effect of a fundamental repression that binds contingently arisen words to their illusory eternal meanings. And since it rests on borrowed assurance – “taken on credit,” as it were – counter-movements are inevitably unleashed: movements that unravel the coagulated sense stored in the unintended heavens beyond the manifest world.

For instance, we tend to see in this particular cat the embodiment of the general concept “cat,” a concept that even stands in opposition to the concept “dog.” Yet evolutionary theory overturns this order of things and shows that the supposed timeless generality of “cat” is merely the name of a biological species produced by contingent adaptive processes that depend entirely on the singular reproductions of this or that feline ancestor. Such a reversal ultimately entails that, in biological terms, “cat” forms no antithetical pair with “dog” at all; rather, the two are merely locally evolved species, largely indifferent to one another.

Similarly, a cultural prejudice inclines us to think of ourselves in a binary opposition to the concept of “animal.” And yet we cannot relinquish the supplementary verbal impulse that returns the human being to the kingdom *Animalia*, casts him as an ordinary ape, or even describes him by way of some marginal trait, so that in his animality he appears all the more contingent. In this vein, history has offered us a series of definitions of “the human” – *animal ridens*, *animal mendax*, *animal symbolicum*, *animal religiosum*, *animal amans*, *animal poeticum*. These definitions are perhaps not especially precise, experientially grounded, or experimentally verifiable; their capacity for generalization is, at best, limited. Rather, they attain the status of verbal creations which, in lieu of empirical confirmation, draw upon a surplus delight in mere utterance as their own mode of verification. And yet it is through these very definitions that they seize the lever by which the subject of the statement – “the human” – allows itself

to be semantically constituted in the first place. This is the “loud truth” within the apparent silence of the average world.

This arc, which swings from profane reality into the heavens of its false presuppositions and returns in the form of their discursive subversion, could perhaps count as a kind of “process of truth.” The human mind constructs its intuitive image of the world only as a reflex of unwarranted idealizations that arrange themselves into conceptual differences and oppositions – such as the contrast between “human” and “animal” – while relocating their origin to some absent place capable of sustaining the fiction that they are expressions of eternal, transcendent forms. But then a reaction follows, for the illusion created by this operation is ultimately shattered by the pleasure of turning language back on itself and reattach the spontaneous ideality of a concept to the point of contingency from which it arose. In a single movement, then, are condensed the establishment of the appearance of a consistent, “whole” reality, the repression of its semantic presuppositions, the delegation of these conceptual forms to a metaphysical instance, and finally the return of the repressed idealities to earth in the verbal delight of definitional disenchantment.

In other words, although the “intuitive image of the world” puts on the mask of an originary state of being – as if it were a kind of *perpetuum mobile* that sustains its motion without any auxiliary energy – behind it the displaced and sublimated meanings are “speaking” all the while, supplying the fuel for the chimera of its mere givenness. This is why even the most primary and ordinary reality does not in fact stand on its own, but must continually be fed by further articulations of meaning, which interrupt its silence and, in fleeting acts of utterance, represent all the reticent labor that must be performed ceaselessly so that the world may look as though it existed out of itself. And here the “primal repression” of a sort occurs, one that reverses the order of word and meaning. In order to help the world preserve its appearance of self-supporting coherence, we, in a concrete situation, quickly patch over the emerging gap with a spoken word, whose concept presents itself as though it were evoking a semantic content that has always already been there – as though its meaning were outside time, necessary, and metaphysically guaranteed. This reversal,

which places eternal meaning before the contingency of the word, could be called the “mother of all illusions.”<sup>14</sup> Wittgenstein defined it brilliantly,<sup>15</sup> and Heidegger implicitly as well in his critique of abstract logical propositions; yet both failed to notice that these very meanings, which shut their eyes to their earthly genesis, constitute the condition for establishing the consistent reality of our primary and average sense of being. At the same time, all this repressed labor of maintaining the composed surface of things exacts its price. The displaced concepts that silently secure the quiet of our world sometimes speak – and when they do, they at least slightly unsettle the ground beneath our feet. They surface in startling predicates, in phrases that overturn commonsense expectations, or in sentential definitions that corrode their semantic eternity and reveal them in their full semantic contingency. And only at this moment, when it comes to light that there exists no universal category, no ideal form, no essential type that was not born in entirely singular, contingent circumstances, does truth actually *make itself explicit as counterintuitive*.

This anti-metaphysical procedure of continually undermining the metaphysical ground of reality is not, in fact, something that the so-called “classical metaphysicians” – Plato, Descartes, and, for some, even Kant – were not already practicing, albeit unconsciously. The idealist and

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<sup>14</sup> The ideality of meaning arises only by the agency of the word as a wholly contingent discursive formation; meaning is simply the effect of the fact that a repeatable verbal form is produced. And yet each word – precisely because it is repeatable and does not exhaust itself from context to context but remains the same – instills in us a certain fallacious surplus of ideal necessity. Consequently, we always experience words through the medium of this “linguistic primal repression,” through which the word appears to emerge only *after* its meaning, as something secondary to it. The whole of Plato turns on this very hinge.

<sup>15</sup> As he argued, this is “one of the great sources of philosophical bewilderment: a substantive makes us look for a thing that corresponds to it.” Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books: Preliminary Studies for the “Philosophical Investigation,”* 9. What the human mind cannot bring itself to accept is the fact that every word is merely a contingently formed conventional sign behind which there is no solid, guaranteed meaning. It therefore seeks for the word some more substantial, more enduring support – some sort of “thing” that would fully embody it. And since no such thing exists anywhere in this world, we relocate its dwelling place to one or another kind of “other world.”

transcendental gesture of withdrawing into oneself and discerning the atemporal conditions for the constitution of temporal things contains the entire “counterintuitive” charge characteristic of the process of truth. On the one hand, Platonic idealism certainly reduces every concrete thing to a mere copy of a perfect Form, surrounding it with an aura of ideal meaning; on the other hand, and within the historical horizon of Plato’s own moves, it simultaneously frees the thing from its mythical embeddedness in the chain of beings and allows it to appear in its bare serial producibility and interchangeability. Descartes’ dualism indeed elevates the incorporeal mind into a spiritual realm of immediate access to divine ideas; yet this absolute separation of soul and body is, methodologically speaking, above all a way of purging material, extended substance of all the ideal values of Aristotelian qualitative forms, Scholastic essences, and Renaissance occult forces. Likewise, Kant’s noumenality generates, on the one hand, the “bad infinities” of transcendental ideas and ideals, but on the other accomplishes the task of disclosing a causally continuous Newtonian world no longer carved at the joints of rationalist conceptual forms – modes, simple substances, or monads. The central ontological concepts in Plato, Descartes, or Kant are always redefined so as to give a counterintuitive twist to a new grounding of reality.

For this reason, the “metaphysics of two worlds” – perhaps the first and most persistent ideology of philosophy, the object of its deepest internal critiques, yet one that reconstitutes itself at every new level – must be read on two levels at once. On the one hand, the ideal forms of Plato, Descartes, and Kant threaten to pose as quasi-religious guarantors of truth; on the other hand, in the very same gesture, they function as dislocated levers that liberate this world from entrenched and rigid semantic structures and, in moments of historical crisis, grant it a new, thoroughly this-worldly consistency.

All of this shows that the boundary between the intuitiveness of reality and the counterintuitiveness of truth is not fixed in stone but is continually redrawn according to the demands of the age – each of which sustains its own image of the average world, its own illusions of eternal meanings, and its own pleasure in subverting them.

To conclude, the “primal scene of being” that this essay seeks to advance is neither Heidegger’s unobtrusive average everydayness of concerned *Dasein* nor Plato’s vision of a celestial realm of eternal ideas, but rather an originary irreconcilability between reality and truth – between the silent world that continually restabilizes itself in a representationally acceptable image and the loud utterances that, through their subversive effects, both erode this world and set it upon new ground. And it is precisely through this configuration that “counterintuitiveness” crystallizes as the most authentic organ for the cognition of the world.

### **Truth Has Always Already Been Counterintuitive**

If the collapse of prevailing conceptual frameworks is a kind of primordial reflex of truth, then we must of course also be able to show that it was not the twentieth century alone that thrust us into the unnatural world of counterintuitive prospects, but that we have always lived between the temporarily stabilized membranes of intuitive worlds and the intermittent disturbances of new insights. Even everyday life, in its entirely ordinary, largely pragmatic functioning, continually produces both its own idealizations and their undoings – turns of phrase, jokes, *bons mots*. But the most famous examples of counterintuitiveness breaking into our world – next to art, though in a wholly different register – are offered by science, which has always operated as a kind of boundary condition of everydayness and at the same time as its antithesis. Indeed, one may even say that science has revealed reality only through reversals of our intuitive representations.

Let us consider a few examples. Today it is commonly, but mistakenly, believed that Newton’s framework of absolute space and time is natural and self-evident to us, and that our imagination breaks down only when confronted with Einstein’s wrinkled space and the relativity of time, which flows differently from each point of measurement. But this is the wrong antagonism, for Newton’s absolute space and time were themselves introduced *against* the prevailing mental models and habits of their

age. If, before Newton, we lived in an Aristotelian and Scholastic cosmos differentiated by meaning – a cosmos in which every thing had a name, expressed its eternal essence, and tended toward its natural place (which, retrospectively, would count as an intuitive representation of the world) – then Newtonian mechanics all but expelled us into an undifferentiated medium of empty, infinite space, in which objects lose every qualitative inner substance, become conceptually anonymous, and are reduced solely to the quantitative relations of massive bodies attracting one another.

Similarly, we generally assume that our intuitive picture of the world is deterministic: that everything has a reason, and that between cause and effect there holds a seamless bond of complete calculability and predictability. By contrast, the counterintuitive picture is taken to be that of quantum indeterminacy, where the link between cause and effect is broken and can be specified only within a range of probabilities. But again, this is to some extent a false alternative, for modern scientific determinism – the very view whose philosophical conditions Kant sought to derive – was itself formulated *against* intuition. It posited a strict continuity of causal chains, one that left no room for any ideal cause to intervene from outside: no sufficient reason, no divine intervention, and ultimately no free human act. Kant's world without leaps, gaps, chance, or fate is fundamentally unintelligible to common sense, which continually contours things according to the ideal values of concepts and thus experiences them as discrete, autonomous entities whose symbolic meaning withdraws them, however minimally, from the flux of the world.

Perhaps the most classical example of Western counterintuitiveness is the Copernican turn. Instinctively, we cannot imagine our earthly life otherwise than as standing on the solid ground of the Earth while the Sun rises and sets. And yet the opening gesture of modern science declared – quite flagrantly against common sense – that *we* are the ones in motion, whereas the Sun remains at rest at the center. Moreover, once we had reconciled ourselves to this reordering, we could at least cling to the idea that a celestial body as large as the Sun occupies a fixed, immobile position near the center of the solar system, while the planets move along regular, fixed orbits. This mental framework was first shaken by Kepler, who

shifted the Sun from the center to a focus and replaced circular planetary paths with ellipses; and then by Newton, for according to his law of gravitation it is not only the Earth that orbits the much heavier Sun, but the Earth's own mass causes the Sun to move as well, making it orbit the solar system's barycenter.

In much the same way, even in elementary-school physics Galilean inertia – echoed, in a slightly different form, in Newton's first law – and Newton's third law of action and reaction already struck us as a kind of rupture in our imagined world. Thus, upon learning with some astonishment that every force exerted by one body on another is accompanied by an equal and opposite force exerted by the second body on the first, we would slap a classmate during recess and reproachfully declare: "Your cheek just hit my hand!" Cognitive psychologists such as diSessa and McCloskey showed in the 1980s<sup>16</sup> that people naturally reason in an Aristotelian way and expect that bodies on which no force acts will come to rest; that a force "remains in the body" and is consumed during motion; and that motion as such already "tends" toward rest. The law stating that a body on which no force acts will continue in motion indefinitely therefore stands in direct conflict with what is known as "naive physics" or our "intuitive theory of motion."

But modern physics is not the only field that supplies us with these impulses of fundamental "counterintuitiveness"; breakthroughs in other sciences – from biology and economics to linguistics, psychology, anthropology, and sociology – likewise seem able to articulate their truths only at the very membrane where the ground of our imagined world begins to give way.

Thus, our mind instinctively "substantializes" every perceptible thing and unwittingly imbues it with an eternal essence; it may do so because its mental structures are from the outset linguistically mediated, or perhaps because this pre-discursive "nominal form" is inscribed in it biologically. In either case, it seems that in mere things we cannot help but see the embodiment of an eternal, immutable species occupying a discrete place

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<sup>16</sup> See Michael McCloskey, "Naive Physics: The Curvilinear Impetus Principle and Its Role in Interactions with Moving Objects," 146–56.

among other things. Say, when we encounter a lion on the savanna, we inadvertently get the feeling that its “lioness” could almost be deduced from a taxonomic system that assigns this big cat hierarchical superiority over zebras and gazelles, sets it in opposition to the tiger, and elevates it to the imagined rank of “king of the animals.” Whenever we observe a plant or an animal, we involuntarily assume that, if it did not exist, it would have to be invented – that its absence would leave a structural gap in nature’s supposedly consummate and tightly knit scale. Our conceptual schemas inevitably falter the moment we try to imagine that every biological species has arisen simply through a contingent branching event from another, equally contingent species; that taxonomic units never form closed, symmetrical, oppositional, or neatly differential systems; that they sometimes intrude into already crowded ecological niches, sometimes fill ones vacated by chance, and sometimes carve out new ones; and that every individual organism is merely a provisional representative of a transient species which is never settled or finished but always somewhere midway along its evolutionary path. Not only is the lion before us merely a bundle of sometimes more, sometimes less successful adaptations, co-options, and exaptations – products of a highly imperfect history without essential origins or developmental teleology; when it appears to us in its considerable beauty, it becomes all the harder to imagine that, a hundred thousand years from now, its species may well have gone extinct, fragmented into a multitude of new forms, lost its mane, shed its fur, or diminished drastically in size. Perhaps the descendants of today’s lions will have become so unlike them that one will no longer be tempted to set them in opposition to tigers or to place them on the throne of the animal kingdom. By the same token, whenever we look at the human being, we must actively and with some effort remind ourselves that it represents neither the pinnacle of evolution nor any particularly disastrous biological anomaly; that its genetic material contains traces of Neanderthal ancestry; and that, in all likelihood, it too will one day no longer exist.

To continue with the examples, the first operation of Marx’s economics – the complete translation of every use-value into exchange-value – is something the human mind can of course *think*, though it cannot

really *imagine*. In every price a commodity receives on the market, we still tend to look for a remnant of the “natural value” the thing supposedly carries within itself and that somehow, as we instinctively suppose, must squeeze through the narrow passage of its exchange. Yet Marx’s political economy stands or falls on the willingness to renounce the idea of “natural value,” a notion that, however stubbornly it clings to our intuitions, remains wholly absurd. Similarly, Saussure’s linguistics of differences preceding positive terms is a form of *thought* rather than of *representation*: one cannot use language without spontaneously believing in fixed, solid, guaranteed meanings of words. Freud’s unconscious, as “the general basis of psychic life,” is conceived precisely as a place (indeed as a *non-place*) that exceeds the representability of the conscious world. Lévi-Strauss’ structuralist anthropology explains the emergence of culture not through any positive ground – such as an original social nature of the human being or a fully formed social contract – but through a purely negative, and therefore conceptually non-intuitive, fact: the empty structural place preceding its elements, one generated within symbolic systems of kinship rules, myths, and language. The central aspiration of Luhmann’s systems is, likewise, to derive the entirety of social relations not from intuitive *Einheiten* – say, Weber’s individual actor, Tönnies’ *Gemeinschaft* as the organic unit of social life, Durkheim’s institutions, Marx’s classes, or the social contracts of Hobbes, Rousseau, and Locke – but from non-intuitive *Differenzbildungen*, the operations in which the distinction between system and environment is first constituted.

Finally, we might recall that Greek–European knowledge was very likely born as a counterintuitive truth in all its flagrant audacity.<sup>17</sup> If,

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<sup>17</sup> It would be fruitful to extend this focus on a specifically Western propensity to other traditions. What Greek philosophy inaugurates through audacious, counterintuitive theses is carried to its limit in Pyrrhonian skepticism. By turning against the intuitive image of the world, Pyrrhonism restricts the epistemic authority of conceptually structured cognition. Where early Greek philosophy shattered intuitive certainties by advancing bold theses, Pyrrhonism radicalizes this gesture by suspending the authority of theses as such. Suspension of judgment (*epoché*) thus follows “the overcoming of all dichotomies and the rejection of both positive and negative dogmatism, since whatever we take to be determinate knowledge is

at its beginning, there stands a single proposition – Thales’ “All things are water” – then we may reasonably surmise that this dictum was retrospectively elevated to the status of the first truth of the West not because it said anything contentful, meaningful, or verifiable about reality, but because it dared to postulate, and to release into the public space, an utterance that, under the given circumstances, most violently shook the ground beneath our feet.<sup>18</sup> A further case could be made that each subsequent position of the Presocratics, following one another almost in cadence, pursued the search for precisely that element – from Anaximander’s *apeiron* and Anaximenes’ air, through Heraclitus’ fire, Parmenides’ Being, and Empedocles’ Love and Strife, to Anaxagoras’ *nous*, Socrates’ identification of the good with knowledge, and Plato’s institution of the Ideas – whose sheer discursive thrust could pierce the barriers

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ultimately merely a convention, an arbitrary agreement that does not reflect the nature of things as they truly are.” Nina Petek and Franci Zore, “Buddha in Piron. Od praznine stališč do polnosti bivanja,” 26. Although articulated within a Greek context, Pyrrhonism was historically shaped by Pyrrho’s encounter with Buddhist and other Indian skeptical traditions, whose philosophically prior articulation of non-assertion and conceptual restraint informed his stance. In Buddhism, conceptual proliferation (*papañca*) generates the illusion of essence (*svabhāva*); its curtailment – together with the suspension of metaphysical questions (*avyākata*) – is directed precisely against the intuitive framework whose collapse is the very condition of truth. Discursive cognition remains pragmatically indispensable yet epistemically disqualified, opening a path “from the conceptual (*papañca*) toward genuine truth (*nippapañca*).” Petek and Zore, “Buddha in Piron. Od praznine stališč do polnosti bivanja,” 26. Within this Buddhist horizon, intuitiveness itself is the primary site of metaphysical illusion, and truth emerges only through the breakdown of the intuitive framework that posits essence – hence, as constitutively counterintuitive.

<sup>18</sup> This is, in fact, the thesis of my 2014 Slovenian volume *Svet in njegov predikat II. Preizkušanje meja izrekljivega* (*The World and Its Predicate II: Testing the Limits of the Utterable*). A faint allusion to this line of thought can already be found in Blumenberg, who in his *Shipwreck with Spectator* writes: “This protophilosopher [Thales] thereby builds the earliest bridge toward an understanding of the strange paradox from which I began: that human beings living on land nevertheless prefer, in their imagination, to represent their overall condition in the world in terms of a sea voyage.” Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence*, 8.

of our entrenched mental schemas and make us see the world anew in its unheard-of universality.<sup>19</sup>

These examples may, still only circumstantially, point toward the hypothesis that truth as such is counterintuitive – that it is, in fact, impossible to formulate a true proposition that does not speak against the expectations and valuations of common sense and thereby dissolve the self-evident world. Yet to advance the stronger claim that “counterintuitiveness” is a structural and necessary – indeed, an *a priori* – property of any truth insofar as it manifests and articulates itself within this world, a more compelling logical argument is required. What, then, is the logical nature of truth? Why is it that every genuine insight into the structure of being invariably collapses the frameworks of our imagination? Why should truth not present itself straightforwardly, without detours? What prevents it from being already fully embodied in things? And why is it not enough simply to open our eyes and prick up our ears?

### The Logical Conditions of Counterintuitive Truth

We have described the intuitive image of the world as hanging suspended between the foci of its apparent soundness and normality and the posited and unwarranted ideal values that silently sustain it from behind. Only within this interval can the everyday sense of reality uphold the illusion that the world as a whole somehow expresses an intrinsic meaning. This creates the impression that, for the intuitive *Befindlichkeit*, reality in its well-worn givenness already exudes a certain “truth-surplus.” And yet,

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<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, Heit, who argues: “Anaximenes certainly did not acquire his conception of air by observation and experience, but rather by a speculative elaboration of the theses of Thales and Anaximander.” He further writes: “Systematically speaking, criticizable [*kritisierbar*] theories are those that can be subjected to empirical verification and thus falsified. This is precisely what is not possible with the metaphysical speculations of the Ionians. So, while we have a critical social practice – Anaximander and Anaximenes do not feel obliged to reproduce their teachers faithfully – we do not have a set of criticizable theories.” Helmut Heit, *Frühgriechische Philosophie*, 40, 41.

because this ordinary and average feeling of existence rests on repressed presuppositions, it also functions as a screen that prevents us from ever fully grasping the essence of truth. This is perhaps most clearly visible in Heidegger. For him, the primary, everyday “world as world” already exudes a minimal ideal surplus, insofar as it is *bedeutsam*; nevertheless, our existence within it remains inauthentic. Only by breaking out of this familiar horizon do we become susceptible to the “meaning of Being.” Yet this ideal of sheer authenticity is itself structurally displaced and postponed, since it depends on the never-present moment of death.

The phenomenon of counterintuitive truth teaches us something further. At times we are overtaken by momentous insights which, in a single stroke, lift the veil from our eyes and allow the world to appear as it has never appeared before. The very pleasure we take in coining an apophthegmatic utterance, in the sudden illumination of a cosmic law, or in the writing of a formula seems to assure us, almost involuntarily, that no higher or purer truth could possibly lie elsewhere. The price, of course, is that such a truth, precisely because it leaves nothing to be desired, inevitably runs counter to our intuitions. We may therefore pose the question: What does this counterintuitive vision disclose about the nature of truth?

To account for, or to mitigate, the discrepancy between, say, the familiar affective texture of day-to-day existence and the unsettling propositions of science, we tend to fall back on two auxiliary hypotheses, though each, in its own way, is too hasty and risks missing the very gist of the event of truth. Put simply, the way of coping with the quandary that “big truths” do not flatter our instinctive, habituated outlook usually takes the form of supposing either that the world is strange in itself or that we human beings are somehow congenitally out of place.

On the one hand, from the apparent groundlessness of truths we might conclude that, by some accident, we simply inhabit a queer universe – one that is in itself contradictory, exotic, botched, or at the very least unfinished. Twentieth-century physics, we are told, has revealed to us a world that is not only epistemologically unmanageable for our savanna-bred brains, but is itself a kind of cosmic monstrosity, an ontological misfire. According to a well-known joke that Žižek likes to repeat, God simply did

not finish building reality at its smallest scales, since He never anticipated that we would one day invent devices capable of peering into the interior of the atom. And in some interpretations of quantum mechanics, one even gets the impression that the universe is astonished at its own incompleteness on the subatomic level and, in order to compensate for this fundamental porosity, collapses wave functions and normalizes the irrationality of quantum phenomena by giving them the face of middle-sized objects. Such a view assumes, however, that although we were unlucky enough to have been born into this unfinished creation, there could at least be – and perhaps somewhere there is – another cosmos that, by contrast, was completed to the end. There our natural image of the world would coincide with its fully realized inner structure, and intuitive truths would, in fact, be possible.

On the other hand, we might take all the blame upon ourselves and claim that there is an incipient human misalignment with being. According to this view, it is the human who is poorly constructed, whereas the world itself is, in principle, in order. Indeed, there exists a whole range of instant anthropologisms that defend such a primordial discordance between members of the species *Homo sapiens* and the environment in which they appeared, against all likelihood, at some contingent point in cosmic history. On the metaphysical level, human beings are thus built around an originary lack or rendered transcendently homeless in an oversized universe. On a more scientific level, we are at odds with the world either by the already mentioned savanna principle; or by the specific prematurity of human birth – productively exploited by Freud and, above all, by Lacan; or, finally, by theories claiming that the human brain is an evolutionary botch, a kind of pastiche of heterogeneous adaptive processes that never coalesce into a fully functioning whole.<sup>20</sup> Although these

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<sup>20</sup> It is through this kind of naturalism, for example, that Adrian Johnston has interpreted Žižek's philosophy. As he puts it: "The brain is a hodgepodge contraption slapped together by a plethora of blind, noncooperating evolutionary eras and pressures, resulting in, within the human organism, an intraorganic crystallization of the 'uneven development' (to borrow a Marxist phrase) of natural history." Adrian Johnston, *A New German Idealism: Hegel, Žižek, and Dialectical Materialism*, 215.

theories may well be correct in themselves, supported by observations, evidence, and experiments, and thus entirely legitimate within their own domains, the error arises the moment we attempt to find in them “empirical” reasons for why our path to truth is blocked “transcendentally.” For insofar as we claim that we are born into ill-conceived bodies, we simultaneously presuppose that, by some evolutionary accident, we might just as well have been made a little better, thereby innately more open to the world and endowed with intuitive representations more inclined to coincide with things themselves. If only we had not been born on the savanna but somewhere else, perhaps on another planet, we might, in the end, also understand the peculiar world of relativity theory and quantum mechanics. But this second answer still assumes that the world reveals its essences for free to anyone lucky enough to have been well born, and that it is therefore at least conceivable to wrest a full truth of things from the medium of immediate intuition and natural representation.

If we therefore conclude that the fault for truth running counter to our intuitions lies either on the side of reality or on our own, we are presupposing that a “frontal” cognition of the world is, in theory, possible, and that if the adequation between the two poles fails, it is only because either the object of knowledge or its subject is defective. And this implies that such auxiliary attempts to explain away counterintuitiveness still operate within the ambit of the *correspondence form of truth* – a form that tacitly underwrites any stance that regards the world as, in and of itself, representing and emanating a certain surplus of truth-value. The examples of counterintuitive truths, however, seem to belong to an entirely different register and to produce wholly distinct effects. What, then, changes in the very *form of truth* when we shift from an intuitive to a counterintuitive universe?

Let us, then, consider the conceptual structure of some of the major epistemic turns in the history of Western knowledge. What is it, precisely, that the interventions of, say, Newton, Darwin, Marx, or Saussure – restricting ourselves to a mere handful of examples – have brought to light? If pre-Newtonian physics conceived things as bearers of inner substances, the laws of classical mechanics reconceived the thing as a mass-bearing

body devoid of any intrinsic force independent of its relation to another body. In pre-evolutionary theories, biological species were understood as expressions of essential types forming a finite, numerically symmetrical, and, in their closure, almost deductive system; with evolutionary theory, species became ever-shifting products of adaptations to contingent environmental conditions. Classical political economy sought to establish an equilibrium between a commodity's "natural" and its "market" value, whereas for Marx a commodity has no intrinsic value whatsoever apart from what it acquires through exchange. Similarly, classical linguistics attempted to ground a commensurability between pre-given ideas in the human mind and their phonemic expressions, while Saussure shows that both the concept (the signified) and the sound-image (the signifier) arise only through their mutual articulation – that is, through the sign.<sup>21</sup>

On the one side, then, persists the belief in the substance of things manifesting a concept at least minimally exempt from time: the body that contains an inner force; the species that embodies its essential type; the commodity that carries an intrinsic value; the sign that adequately conveys an eternal meaning. On the other side, however, there emerges a world that possesses no inner reserves of ideal value but gives itself its lawful form only where the absence of any prior ideal structure becomes manifest. A body moves only by a force imparted to it by another body – "force," therefore, cannot be captured as a property corresponding to the substance of a thing but only as a relation between things. A commodity acquires value only because it has none by nature – "value," likewise, cannot be grasped "frontally" in any isolated good but only through exchange between two or more goods. Organisms constitute a species precisely because no taxonomic essence shelters them – "species" thus refers not to an ideal type but to the reproductive dynamics of its members. And signs are

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21 To this highly selective series of "scientific revolutions" many others could be added that are just as momentous and are omitted here only for reasons of space: Galileo, Freud, Einstein, Heisenberg, Lévi-Strauss, Luhmann, and so forth. For a more extensive overview, see the third chapter, "The Neglected Historical Origins of Contingent Universality: The Revolutions of Modern Science," in my forthcoming *The Contingent Universality: A New Ontology*, (Bloomsbury 2026).

never expressions of pre-given meanings – “meaning” arises only in the differences between signs.

If in this series of scientific ruptures one indeed discerns a sequence of transitions from an intuitive to a counterintuitive image of the world, then the difference between the two may be elucidated on the basis of a shift in the very form of truth. The intuitive outlook relies on the essential substances of things, to which its “truth” can then only hope to correspond. Counterintuitive truth, by contrast, takes an ideal concept of ordinary intuition, detaches its content from any firm essence behind appearances, and through this semantic collapse delineates the locus for a new revelation of the world – one in which ideal order emerges only from relations among appearing things.

Consider Newton’s appropriation of the traditional concept of “force.” Intuitively, force referred to an inner power or inherent tendency of a body; Newton, however, dislodges it from this framework and reconceives it as a relational quantity manifest only in the interaction between bodies. What once expressed the innate state of a thing now designates the measurable counteraction of bodies, formally captured by equal and opposite forces. Darwin performs a similar inversion with the concept of “species,” which formerly expressed the essence of a type; he reverses the causal order so that the type no longer determines the traits of organisms, but the reproductive success of organisms determines the ideal form of the type. Marx, drawing on the ideality of “value,” conventionally thought to reside as a natural property in a commodity, attaches it solely to the act of exchange. And Saussure, finally, makes “meaning,” previously regarded as an eternal mental idea, dependent upon the differential articulation of signifier and signified.

In each case, the very ideal surplus of “force,” “species,” “value,” “meaning,” and so forth, which in the intuitive image of the world still referred back to the heavy, opaque substance of things, is reassigned to an external, adventitious predicate. And this finally intimates that a world with no deep essence can no longer give its truth away in the form of correspondence. It seems, then, that what earned the great revolutionaries of science their decisive place in intellectual history is that they shattered

the entire framework of truth as conventional representation, exposed as illusory the idea that the world reveals itself in a medium of immediate, parallel adequation, and thereby opened a vista onto another, perhaps more objective, reality.

This transition from ambiguous homeliness to a certain fortunate homelessness may also explain why the intuitive concept of truth so often presents itself as a perpetual dissatisfaction, a sense of never quite reaching its object, whereas counterintuitive truth converts the very enjoyment of its groundlessness into a consummate disclosure of the world. As we have argued, intuitive familiarity with things seems to function as a compromise formation between the spontaneous production of universals – concepts such as human and animal, cat and dog, but also substance and accident, the one and the many, cause and effect – their projection onto the external world, the world's inability ever fully to embody them, and their withdrawal into the background realm of metaphysical conditions. In this way, the fragile membrane of representational self-evidence serves as a mask concealing from us the fact that the ideal elements of reality are of our own making, and that we seek to perceive and discern them “out there” in the form of correspondence only because we have already displaced the responsibility for our idealizations onto the world itself. Pseudo-truth that wishes to present itself as intuitive thus tends to assume the form of *deferred correspondence*: each thing appears to express some non-temporal essence, but insofar as we ourselves have unknowingly produced its ideal contours, we can, within the limits of this world, only approximate it and never truly grasp it.

By contrast, a “counterintuitive truth” is not some frivolous disclosure of the world's oddities, but the very process by which we bring our own conceptual forms – those we have illegitimately projected onto the world – to the point of collapse and thus confront our illusions. The verbal pleasure and declarative flash of a truth honed to a sharp edge arise precisely in the interval between the institution of a universal concept, which we have smuggled into the order of being, and the insight that this concept is an ideality lacking any real substance. In this sense, “counterintuitiveness” is at first a property of truth-production rather than of given reality; it is

an effect that emerges when a universal, which we once took to express the world's inner essence, is redefined in a manner that exposes its lack.

However, and this is as crucial as the negative labor of reduction, the exposure of such lacking essences designates the very site from which reality begins to acquire its lawful form. Although counterintuitive truth is reactive, since it takes shape only by subverting intuitive expectations, it is essential to recognize that its scope is not purely negative, as if it merely stripped being of the ideal forms we have grafted onto it. Were that all, truth would remain imprisoned within a structure of what could be called "negative correspondence": after its intervention, we would be left with nothing but the privative fact that nothing positive can be known about the world. Yet the reality disclosed by a counterintuitive truth is in no way diffuse, bland, gray, or chaotic. As the scientific revolutions abundantly show, it is precisely through its semantic collapses that truth acquires its formalizable, mathematical, and formulaic stringency. Thus, Newton's universe is not one without forces; Darwin's is not one without species; Marx's is not one without values; Saussure's is not one without meanings. Rather, the emptied idealities of "force," "species," "value," "meaning," and so forth function as non-representable elements that are no longer to be embodied directly, but instead designate the loci at which the idealizable structure of reality first emerges. The mathematically calculable "truth" of physics appears in the actual transmission of force according to the law of action and reaction; the evolutionarily reconstructible "truth" of biology manifests itself in the concrete reproductive events that maintain the consistency of a species; the computable "truth" of economics arises solely in the acts of exchange that endow commodities with value; and the systemically analyzable "truth" of linguistics emerges in the differential articulation of signifier and signified that produces meaning.

In short, counterintuitive truth collapses the very framework of reference, exceeds the form of adequation, interrupts any journey toward an ever-deferring essential truth, and – by assuming a place within the world – establishes a kind of coincidence between its own flash, articulated in an accomplished discursive form, and the full disclosure of a world unfolding from its immanent loci, without any residue to which one would

have to approximate. Instead of projecting its own idealities onto reality, “counterintuitivity” lays bare a world without first principle, noumenon, logos, or meaning, and thereby maps out the site at which the collapse of “anthropogenic” ideal values coincides with the world’s lack of any “meta-physical” grounding. Thus, the subject of modern astronomy can no longer look upon the solar system from some external vantage point, but must assume the position of the Earthbound observer whose own ground is in motion; the subject of Marxian economics can never establish the value of things in themselves, but must become the buyer or seller who produces value only in the concrete act of exchange; and so forth. By freeing itself from the yoke of endlessly approximating some essence thought to lie behind appearances, the ideal surplus of “truth” descends into the midst of things and catches the world at the very moment in which it constructs its intelligible, describable, and categorizable structure. The epistemology of creating, repressing, and redefining concepts, and the ontology of absent essences, of the compulsion to assume a place in the midst of things, and of sheer happening in the here and now, turn out to converge in the event of truth. Thus, the pleasure we take in uttering counterintuitive truths arises precisely at the junctures where our recognition that the ideal forms we had projected onto the world are of our own making encounters the world’s own admission that it contains nothing in itself beyond what it is now bringing to the surface.<sup>22</sup>

In other words, it would appear that counterintuitive insights do not convey “the truth about the given world,” but uncover the world in the very process of giving itself its truth. They disclose a world that would possess no truth – no lawful structure, no describable elements, no reconstructible events, no analyzable phenomena – were there not points within its midst from which its entire ideal order could unfold. And it is

<sup>22</sup> A specific temporality is at work here, as discussed by Bara Kolenc: “When we say that reality is constituted anew in every single moment, we thereby mean that it sprouts in the very incision between the existence and the non-existence that only actualizes temporality as some canvas on which a *moment* itself is established as an event of the human experience of time, and through which reality is always already temporal for the subject, and temporality is always already real.” Bara Kolenc, “Ne-vidni ‘alien’ interneta – kako je računalniški zaslon prevzel funkcijo ogleдалa,” 116.

in this sense, finally, that we may claim that there is no better or worse access to the truth of the world. The African grasslands may well not be the real source of our cognitive unease before the discoveries of modern science, whether relativity theory or quantum physics. Even had our brains evolved on another planet, or in interstellar space without savannas, gravity, or cyclical temporality, we would still have to provoke the world into revealing itself in the absence of any *a priori* ideal structure that might present its essences in a grid of direct correspondence. And for this “eliciting,” indeed, this “arousing” of being to yield its secrets, some form of counterintuitive truth would always be required, no matter where in the universe we were born. To put it starkly, truth is counterintuitive because it reveals a world that, in and by itself, happens only by continually being counterintuitive to itself.

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ALENKA ZUPANČIČ

## Politics on the Couch

What can psychoanalysis tell us about a new structure of authoritarian power that is gaining momentum across the world? On the basis of some of this power's prominent features and its structural configuration, I propose the name "paranoid power." However, since it also displays pronounced traits of perversion – particularly in the way it relates to its supporters and to other political powers – it may be more accurately captured by the term "perverse paranoia." The first part of this essay analyzes paranoia in its articulation with political power; the second examines the perverse inflection of this same configuration.

Since much of the analysis will focus on the example of Donald Trump and his current administration, it is important to stress that I do not perceive him or his personality as the root of the problem. A great deal had to happen in US society for someone like him to win the presidency once and then a second time. We should in no way become victims of a reversed Trumpian fantasy, cultivated by many Democrats, and simply believe that if Trump were removed, "America would be great again," and everything would be fine.

However, this is not to say that without Trump everything would be the same as it is now, since the problems that led to his election were systemic and largely independent of his persona: If there were no Trump, rising

authoritarian proto-fascism would likely have found another figure. Rather, we need to recognize that two levels are at work in this development, and keep both in view. We are sometimes so preoccupied with emphasizing systemic or structural causes that we miss a crucial conjunction: the point at which historical contingency does not merely fill a pre-existing structural place but actively shapes the systemic or structural itself.

In this sense, there exists what one might call a “fetishism of the systemic,” whereby the constant invocation of systemic reasons becomes a fetish that prevents us from seeing the actual points of weakness – of inconsistency, failure, or lack – within the system itself. This, in turn, leads to claims that nothing can be done unless we first change the system or remove its structural causes. And since there seems to be no way of changing the system *en bloc*, we remain stuck with the conclusion that “nothing can be done.” I believe psychoanalysis, beginning with Freud, teaches us a far more dialectical lesson.

In a paper published long ago in *Cahiers pour l'analyse*, and only recently translated to English,<sup>1</sup> Jaques Nassif develops a commentary of Freud's analysis of the fustigation fantasy (“A child is being beaten”). He takes up precisely this question of the relationship between the two levels (historical and structural) in the formation of fantasy. What is at stake, he argues, is neither simply a historical succession or development of fantasy through different “phases” or formulations (Freud identifies three), nor simply a disclosure of what in these phases is “structural” (atemporal). Rather, it is what Nassif calls *permutations*. The curious feature of these permutations is that they do not merely twist around some inflexible core structure, but seem to induce change in the structure and its relations themselves. The permutations can be said to take place at the level of historical development, but they are not reducible to it, since they also introduce something like a (trans)formation of the structural relations.

We should keep this lesson in mind when analyzing and envisioning social and political shifts as well. Trump's particular persona not only gave a very specific concrete form to pre-existing antagonisms and steered

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Nassif, “Fantasy in ‘A Child is Being Beaten.’”

them in a certain direction; it also contributed to their “becoming what they are,” so to speak. Even when a problem is “systemic,” the concrete form of its existence and further development is always shaped by some contingency – in this case, by Trump.

### Paranoid Power ...

Dire economic circumstances, wars, genocides, social uncertainty and instability, and other forms of crisis: we can indeed observe that these are precisely the conditions in which social paranoia thrives. But is this enough to propose a direct causal relation between the two, and thus explain the rising social forms of paranoia by pointing to hardship, real crises, threats, and traumas to which many people are exposed? I believe that would be a serious mistake. While real, empirical conditions of hardship and insecurity certainly play an important role, the causality is more complex. This is already apparent if we consider the fact that there is no direct correlation between the degree of real hardship one experiences and a tendency, for example, to believe in conspiracy theories, one of the predominant social forms taken by contemporary paranoia. The most ardent advocates of conspiracy theories are seldom those who are the most destitute.

The key element of causality takes place on the level at which empirical hardship or crisis is narratively framed. By this I do not simply mean the explanations (and eventual scapegoats) offered to clarify *why* we are where we are. That also plays an important role, but what I have in mind is something more fundamental: namely, the characterization of “*where* we are.” That is to say, the emphasis is on *what* exactly happened to us, or is happening to us, rather than *why* we got there. (The latter certainly exists as well but belongs to another level.)

In other words, what is at stake is a narrative rendering – a designation of harm, of the status of our “wounds” – which then opens up a whole new playground or “platform” on which our hurt exists socially (also when we do not experience it directly), in relation to others, and as a basis for

possible “explanations,” like the naming of scapegoats and recipes for recovery. Crucially, this framing is done not just by some deprived, paranoid individuals but from the place of power and in its name.

If we look at how the present problems affecting a growing number of people are being framed by the populist right leaders – most prominently, but certainly not exclusively, in the US – what do we see? That they are being framed through the overarching rhetoric of “castration”: *We are being castrated; everybody wants to castrate and emasculate us; they want us to lose our power, potency, vitality, and enjoyment*; and so on. For example, we can detect this in the way the far right has appropriated the notion of “freedom of speech” – not as a civil right to protect critical voices but simply as a *right to enjoy*: In this discourse, the “loss of free speech” refers to the inability to insult others freely and to say whatever one feels like saying. Requirements of polite and considerate language, as well as prohibitions concerning symbols and rhetoric associated with, for example, Nazism and fascism, are increasingly presented as impediments to freedom understood as the freedom of enjoyment. In this sense, they are presented as “castrating.” There are also constant complains about the “feminization” of society.

This particular narrative framing, however, is not simply one possible framing among others but a singular one. And it resonates strongly with the paranoid position and structure, which pushes “castration” out of its symbolic dimension, so that it returns and remains operative only in the registers of the *imaginary and the real*. Moreover, if you keep telling people that they are being “castrated” – and I will give some examples in a moment – this is obviously not very empowering for them. The message, rather, is: *you are rendered impotent, and I – the populist leader – am the one in whom you should invest in order to feel that you are participating in power again*. It is a message that leaves people angry, outraged, and at the same time powerless.

The battle cry is thus: *We are being emasculated, and we cannot allow this. I, your leader, will not allow this!* As suggested, this is particularly evident in the US and in the everyday rhetoric of Trump’s politics. Everyone is accused of “stealing” from America, “ripping it off,” “taking advantage

of it”; the country is said to be invaded by “rapists and criminals” (referring to immigrants); LGBTQ people are “coming after our children” and want to “chemically castrate them.” People who criticize Trump are labeled as victims of TDS, Trump Derangement Syndrome (allegedly making people lose their rationality when it comes to Trump),<sup>2</sup> which is one of the ways the paranoid presuppositions of the far right are projected onto the opposition.<sup>3</sup> Suggestively, as TDS is also the acronym for Testosterone Deficiency Syndrome, this naming performs a double function: accusing the other side of paranoia while simultaneously suggesting their “emasculatation.”

It is fascinating to observe to what extent the economy, the border, foreign policy, and domestic affairs all become highly *sexualized* in this worldview, and this sexualization revolves primarily around the crude opposition of “Powerful/Weak,” invoking and relying on fantasies of “castration.”

It is important to stress that I am not attempting to provide a deeper psychoanalytic reading of this rhetoric by pointing to some underlying fear or threat of castration. On the contrary, the rhetoric is quite explicit: the new authoritarian leaders *themselves* are the ones shouting “Castration!” and using this trope or “threat” to mobilize people. If anything, *they* act as amateur psychologists pressing the appropriate buttons in the population.

There is another peculiar trait at work in this instrumentalized “threat of castration”: the immediate threat is not presented as coming from some

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<sup>2</sup> Recently, Trump was reported to have used this TDS label – or, to quote his words, “mind-crippling disease” – to refer to Rob Reiner, shortly after Reiner and his wife were killed in their Hollywood home.

<sup>3</sup> This, of course, does not mean that in recent years – and especially in the period leading up to the US elections – the exclusive focus on Trump within the Democratic camp, at the expense of all other problems, was not a reality. Unfortunately, it very much was, and the “obsession with Trump” is not merely a projection. As Slavoj Žižek has pointed out in an interview, Trump effectively functioned as a fetish that allowed Democrats to disavow their own shortcomings when it came to addressing the economic and social problems faced by a growing number of people. A similar problem can be found in some other countries as well, where the “Left” fails to counter the rise of proto-fascist movements in any way other than by urging voters that, “obviously,” they must vote *against* this or that populist leader.

other, competing great Power, but rather from those who are *already seen* as “emasculated” and “weak” (immigrants, women, trans people, etc.). True, there is also the suggestion of some other power-agency – like a “deep state” or “Brussels” – orchestrating this emasculation from behind the scenes. However, the important point is that the weapon of this other agency is not power or force but the *spread of weakness*.

Being weak (“emasculated”) is seen as contagious; it immediately corrupts the nature of the strong and powerful. This is why, for example, a simple mention in schools and kindergartens of the existence of gay and trans people is deemed capable of immediately corrupting the eternal and innate *Nature* of children, turning them all into gay or trans people – that is, into “emasculated people.” (This is indeed an interesting paradox: They claim, at the same time, that sexuality is rooted in the deepest layers of our biological nature, yet they also believe that a mere glimpse of – or even knowledge about – gay sexuality would have the effect of turning all children gay. In this sense, they appear to be the most ardent believers in the “social construction of gender.”) Similarly, immigrants are persecuted precisely when they are already most vulnerable *because* of their precarious status, and not simply as representatives of some other, alternative potency. And, according to Freud, this view of castration as “contagious” is an important aspect of paranoia.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, authoritarian leaders feel good in each other’s company, that is, in the company of other “powerful men.” There is something in this logic that suggests power is just as contagious as weakness: it rubs off on you. If you are in the company of the powerful, power rubs off on you. If you are in the company of the weak, it is weakness (“emasculated”) that rubs off on you. In spite of the ideological differences, Trump obviously feels good in Putin’s company, and treats him with a respect that is completely missing from his dealing with his “weak” ally, Volodymyr Zelensky.

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<sup>4</sup> Freud pointed this out in his study of phobia (Sigmund Freud, “Analysis of phobia in a five-year-old boy [‘Little Hans’],” in: *The Pelican Freud Library, Case Histories I*, Vol. 8), as well as in his study of paranoia (Sigmund Freud, “Psychoanalytic notes on an autobiographical account of a case of paranoia (dementia paranoides) [Schreber],” in: *The Pelican Freud Library Case Histories II*, Vol. 9).

It should be stressed, however, that the truly detrimental aspect of this position is not simply the alliance of the “powerful” against the “weak,” but rather that this rhetoric and imagery of power obfuscate a very different reality: this “power” is fundamentally a paranoid power – a power of paranoia, which only makes it more, rather than less, dangerous.

For the point is not that since these leaders are themselves showing clear signs of paranoia, they are therefore in truth “weak” and scared, not really as powerful and confident as they pretend to be – as if such an exposure could somehow make them lose their harmful power. It simply doesn’t, and we can observe this practically every day. They won’t “deflate” if we expose them as “in fact” weak, because this specific paranoid weakness is precisely what brought them to power under current conditions – and it is what keeps them there. Put differently: They won’t collapse if we expose them, because their power is not symbolic power, at least not primarily. Of course, this is not to say that their power is harmless or incapable of hurting us – quite the contrary.

It is a power that exists only as an accumulated, *real*, and material force – military or police power, violence, direct pressure, and, of course, wealth (we are talking about some of the wealthiest individuals in the world). The flip side of this is the paranoid assumption that most people do not truly or sufficiently *respect* them. The old adage that respect cannot be bought or forced into existence still holds true, but in the case of paranoid power, this truth only leads to increased displays of force in search of the other’s breaking point.

Mladen Dolar concisely formulates Hannah Arendt’s reflections on authority: Symbolic authority essentially functions as a *postponed threat*, a *suspended force* or violence. It works as “authority” only for as long as it does not need to directly deploy force. The moment it does, “authority loses its authority.”<sup>5</sup> We could say that in relation to authority, *authoritarianism* starts at the opposite end: It begins as an already lost authority (it

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<sup>5</sup> Mladen Dolar, *Od kod prihaja oblast?*, 29. This, of course, does not mean that symbolic authority is simply non-violent, but rather that it exercises a different form of violence – symbolic violence. This difference, however, leads to two very different logics of power and order.

usually starts with force and the realization of threats) and tries to make its way back to the impossible point of the coincidence of symbolic authority with the real. In authoritarianism, authority is over-realized; authoritarianism is all about “realization” (“We do things, and we do them efficiently – not just talk about them”), yet at the same time this “realization” desperately tries to reach a point of *symbolic efficiency* (that is, the “efficiency of talk” itself), which remains inaccessible to it. This inaccessibility of “symbolic efficiency” is the driving force of the “surplus realization” and of its emphasis on the *executive* dimension: on the doing, the managing, the enforcing.

The flood of executive orders we are witnessing lately is not merely a strategy to overwhelm the opposition. It is also a *need* that drives this particular authoritarian order, which operates through a peculiar combination of paranoia and perversion.<sup>6</sup> Or should we say that, in the position of symbolic power, paranoia becomes a form of perversion?

The more passionately this kind of authoritarianism tries to reach the point of pure symbolic authority, the more violent it becomes, the more raw is the force that it deploys. From its perspective, it is not the signifier that forges reality; rather, force is applied to reality in order for it to (finally) produce and spit out its own signifier. And this is the point where it becomes perverse: the paranoid idea that signifiers are hiding in the real meets here the perverse logic of *forcing reality to itself produce what it is lacking*.

This is important if we are to understand the peculiar combination, in these authoritarian orders, of “naturalism” (biologism) and “symbolism.” The current obsession of the Trump administration with “biological sex” – which also accompanies the rise of the far right in many other countries – has everything to do with this. It is also no surprise that the focus is (again, as so often throughout history) on women.

Defining what a “woman” is thus – comically or sinisterly – became a number one priority of the state. *One of the first* executive orders signed

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<sup>6</sup> As suggested by Marie Bendtsen at the international conference “Reawakening Freud,” held at the Copenhagen University on January 17-18, 2025.

by President Trump after he took office (in the midst of major world crises and domestic social problems) was titled “Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government.”<sup>7</sup> The way the order goes about this goal is well illustrated in its article (b): “‘Women’ or ‘woman’ and ‘girls’ or ‘girl’ shall mean adult and juvenile human females, respectively.”

It is difficult not to see in this ouroboric definition a curious echo of the impossibility that Lacan pointed to in his famous dictum: “The Woman doesn’t exist.” That is to say, “Woman” does not exist as a complementary, signifying counterpart to “Man.” Which is something quite unacceptable for this world-view based on fantasies of complementarity and completeness. And it is a fact that the imperative to make the Woman exist on a signifying level as complementary counterpart to “men” has always played a role in the most brutal repression of women. Women have historically been repressed not by the erasure of their symbolic identity but by being assigned one – by being told what they are, and what that means.

We can also see in the executive order how and why policing “trans” and policing “women” are essentially part of the same agenda. “Trans” functions as the surplus object in which the *lack* of a signifier for the “other sex” appears as something positive, something visible and external. The underlying idea is that if you remove this surplus object, women will be “whole” again; they will function as the proper signifying counterpart to men, and this restored complementarity will resolve the sexual as well as social (non-)relation.

In other words, the Trumpian “real men” are not afraid of the Woman as a possible signifying counterpart to their own manhood; they are afraid of women as the other sex with whom they share the *same* signifier, despite their different sexualities. This is the Lacanian point: sexual

<sup>7</sup> It has been reported that in September 2025 a senior English instructor at Texas A&M was fired for stating that gender and biological sex were not equivalent. The statement offended a student in her class, who claimed that the instructor violated this same Executive order. Jo Yurcaba, “Texas A&M over gender identity lesson in literature course,” NBC, September 10, 2025, <https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-news/texas-m-fires-professor-gender-identity-lesson-literature-course-rna230337>.

difference functions across an irreducible “sameness” – the sexes share the same lack, represented by the phallic signifier. What these “real men” reject is precisely this phallic signifier – *phallus as signifier* – because it already presupposes “castration.” Their obsessive attachment to anything phallic or phallic-shaped is a direct correlate of this. It only works for them if *they* are full of it, or if *it* is full of them. They are like the Chief of Police in Jean Genet’s ingenious and prophetic play *The Balcony*.

To return to a previous point: “Real men” like Trump are “the most powerful,” “the greatest,” yet the symbolic dimension of this power is still lacking. The obverse of this absence is a compulsive need to fill the lack of symbolic power with the real – with the display of “real” power. This megalomaniac self-assurance goes hand-in-hand with an obsession to eliminate all traces that could contest this power, challenge it, or subject it to critique. What we used to call critical thinking is being hit by a tsunami of this obverse side of confident megalomania – which is the paranoid inability to perceive critical arguments as anything other than direct, physical threats to one’s integrity.

So yes, these “real men” remain “paranoid,” but they are no less dangerous because of it. In fact, this makes them all the more harmful. Which is why, when mockery – pointing out their “true weakness” – becomes our only response, the joke is on us. All the more so because, when combined with state power, this dynamic becomes truly explosive.

This “realization” of symbolic power – the attempt to fill symbolic power with empirical force – also echoes J.-A. Miller’s proposition that, in paranoia, *jouissance* is located in the Other itself (that is, in the symbolic frame, which is normally devoid of *jouissance*). It involves locating the *other* in the *Other*, or even substituting the *Other* with the *other*.<sup>8</sup> And this, again, underscores the perhaps unexpected proximity between authoritarianism and paranoia.

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<sup>8</sup> Jacques-Alain Miller, “Paranoia, Primary Relation to the Other,” 81, 85.

### ... With a Twist of Perversion

Let us now move to another aspect of this authoritarian power. We will continue with the example of Trump, because today “Trump” is no longer simply a person named “Donald Trump.” He has become what Gilles Deleuze would call a *conceptual persona* or *conceptual character* – or, in another register, a *brand name* for a certain kind of politics, a certain way of doing politics. This brand now extends far beyond the individual and is spreading rapidly in many countries.

It is not simply that other politicians and leaders *imitate* his style, his inconsistency, and his extravagance. Rather, something a bit more complex and interesting is taking place. (NATO chief Mark Rutte recently referring to him as “Daddy who sometimes has to use strong language” is an important exposure of this.) Not only does he have imitators and doubles (like Javier Milei in Argentina), Trump is also providing a roof, a backing, and a thrust for another kind of reactionary political agenda, one which is in effect not much different and no less catastrophic, albeit less extravagant and less blatantly ridiculous.

Perhaps we should extend the Freudian analysis of the mass formation and “group psychology” to cover not only the relation of a leader to his people (supporters), but also the relation of this particular leader to the global political class that governs us, that is to other leading politicians.

One conceptually interesting feature of Trump’s singular persona is that it seems to invent and propose something I am tempted to call a *fetishization of inconsistency*. Inconsistency certainly is an essential ingredient of Trump’s brand: Today it is this, tomorrow the opposite; he says one thing and does the opposite; and so on. Yet, this inconsistency is not simply a weakness to be exposed by the opponents of such politics. It is one of the central ingredients of its success. Indeed, this has been demonstrated hundreds of times: pointing out contradictions and absurdities, exposing falsehoods, or tracking radical shifts of position proves to be an utterly ineffective line of attack when it comes to Trump and his brand of politics. If anything, such critiques only reinforce its strength.

A perhaps crucial element in the geopolitical dynamic that we are witnessing is that Trump personally takes upon himself the contradiction deeply embedded in this brand of politics. He offers himself as a villain, and proposes a deal. He offers to embody the contradiction, or the dirty side of the present political and economic order; he carries it proudly, thereby allowing the rest of the political caste, as well as the rest of us, to disavow it. At work here is a very strong – and often sickening – complicity between Trump and what once passed for a moderate center-right.

A good place to analyze this complicity, and the way it functions, is in the speech he delivered at the Charlie Kirk commemoration rally. It is an almost textbook, laboratory case of Trump stepping in and offering to embody the most striking contradiction that emerged within that particular situation, all in order to consolidate his “followers” around his political agenda and to unleash a war on anything and anyone who fails to share this political agenda or dares to oppose it.

In the case of the discussed example, the basic contradiction has to do with Christianity and Christian values, which Kirk declared to embody, and his racist, misogynist, homophobic, anti-immigrant, and pro-guns views that he advocated for so loudly and, it seems, so effectively.

In any case, here we are, at the Kirk mass commemoration rally, organized and promoted as a celebration of his life as illustrious, even saintly, and as an enthronement and consolidation of everything he represented as a model Christian life, which – obviously, since he was shot – is portrayed as being in danger and under threat by extremely evil and powerful forces (“the radical left” – whatever this means, and we know it can cover just about anything that is not compatible with MAGA views).

In her speech, Kirk’s widow, Erika, emphasized forgiveness: like Jesus Christ, she said, Charlie would forgive the young man who shot him. Her speech was full of tears, love, and charitable sentiments.

Then Trump spoke. Here is a particularly interesting part of his speech:

He [Charlie] did not hate his opponents; he wanted the best for them. Here I disagreed with Charlie. *I hate* my opponent [strongly, passionately emphasizing the word “hate,” and continuing in this emphatic manner], and *I don’t*

want the best for them! I'm sorry, I'm sorry Erika, ... but I *can't stand* my opponents. [The crowds are cheering. And then he continues, pointing at the sky:] Charlie is angry. Look at that, he is angry at me now. He wasn't interested in demonizing anyone; he was interested in persuading everyone to the ideas and principles he believed were good, right, and true. Before each appearance he prayed these words: "God, use me for your will." Always said the same thing. "Use me for your will." And that is exactly what God did.<sup>9</sup>

(After that, Trump continued his speech by painting the "horrible violence" and methods of the left, and the threatening danger it presents, and which he is here to stop...)

Before going into the analysis of the first part of Trump's rhetoric, let us point out the properly *perverse*, indeed sadist, hue of the emphasis on Kirk being the (willing) *instrument of God's will*. Lacan pinned this down most succinctly: The pervert always presents himself as the Instrument of the Other, of the Other's will. The pervert is not the one who enjoys unrestrainedly and without scruples; he has a job to do; he works for the enjoyment of the Other; he is the instrument of the enjoyment of the Other.<sup>10</sup>

The quoted part of Trump's speech did of course get some attention among the critical public. The emphasis on hate was duly exposed as the fact that he spoke out the unspoken truth of this rally. But let us think about this speech and its function a bit further, for it was a true masterpiece of the performance of Trumpism, and it provides the key to both his populist success and to the way enjoyment circulates within it.

Trump has always been admired by his supporters for allegedly "speaking his mind" and "saying it as it is," for not pretending that he is or feels any different from what he says, even when this goes against the rules of politeness and even against common decency. He is perceived as *saying out loud what everybody thinks*. This is often taken as a form of courage in the midst of political and diplomatic "hypocrisy," and as a promising start for "getting things done."

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dymO80og57I>.

<sup>10</sup> See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book X. Anxiety*, 165.

But if we stop at this analysis – *he is saying out loud what everybody thinks* – we miss a crucial dimension of his rhetoric, one which is much more concrete and specific. What Trump says out loud, and what others do not dare to say even if they feel it, is always something *nasty*, charged with violent, illicit emotions and enjoyment, such as his emphatic declaration, “*I hate my opponent!*”

He gives voice both to the violence and the illicit enjoyment that form the hidden underside of the “good, right, and true” ideas presented here as Christian. He does not deny this underside, pretend it isn’t there, or ask us to ignore it and play the standard “hypocrisy” game. Instead, he proposes something else: to stage the contradiction, to blow it up to its full proportions (or even beyond all proportions), and to offer himself as the one who will take care of its dark side.

This is the key to the configuration staged and deployed at the Charlie Kirk rally. Kirk was cast as a man of Christian ideas and principles, a “missionary” (Trump’s word). But, as history shows, the spreading and establishment of Christian rule has also required crusades and crusaders to do the dirty work.

The message – or, more accurately, *the deal* – offered by Trump to the American people (and we know how much he likes a “good deal”) was this: “We are all Christians. But Christianity is under attack, so we have a problem. You go on being Christians; keep feeling good about your Christianity and your Christian values, and I will do the dirty work for you. You do the Christian thing, while I will hate for you, persecute immigrants and other Others for you, even kill them if necessary.”

It is in this sense that I spoke earlier of a fetishization of inconsistency or contradiction. Inconsistency and contradiction are not hidden, suppressed, or obfuscated; on the contrary, they are blatantly and shamelessly paraded by the leader-figure as a trademark. He even states it quite directly: *I’m a Christian, and I hate everyone who crosses my way!* If we simply rush to denounce this as a contradiction or inconsistency, we miss the point entirely. The contradiction must be exposed in order for this maneuver – this “deal” – to function. He is meant to embody, stage, and perform both terms at the same time.

Fetishization of contradiction thus means something quite precise here: The contradiction is, so to speak, *frozen* – taken out of circulation and out of history, where it might otherwise serve as a motor – and used instead as a fetish that prevents us from seeing the problem. There is nothing revelatory about it. On the contrary, insofar as the contradiction functions as a fetish, its very exposure serves its own obfuscation.

The effect of this maneuver on many other Western leaders, and particularly European leaders, is quite stunning. Apart from those who directly embrace his positions, and the few who remain fully critical (also in their actions), a great majority have a far more “intimate” and complex relationship with Trump: they buy into the deal he proposes, even as they roll their eyes whenever he speaks.

One of the clearest – and most disturbing – manifestations of this logic came when German Chancellor Friedrich Mertz remarked that Benjamin Netanyahu, backed by Trump – while killing tens of thousands of Palestinians – was doing the (necessary) “dirty job” for all of us, and we should be grateful for this. In this framing, we Europeans can go on living our lives and clinging to our precious, delicate “European values,” while the bullies do the dirty work for us – and a really dirty work at that. Many, many things would need to change in the global geopolitical configuration to dismantle this sinister complicity.

Those of us who are not particularly thrilled by fantasies of how the rise of the far right will “make the world great again” are numbed by the spectacle of everything sliding into disaster. We feel that we are living in imminent proximity to catastrophe. Except that for many, catastrophe is already their reality – and we can watch it play out live.

The belief that the present bullying politics can protect us from this destiny, from this same thing happening to us, if only we are willing to accept the price of such protection (the necessary “dirty job”), is profoundly mistaken. Not only for the obvious reasons but also because a *paranoid power* tends to turn very quickly against its own people and its own allies, as we can already see in the case of the United States. In the end, what such powers claim so desperately to protect us against may well prove rather benign compared with the *catastrophe of their protection*

*itself*. This catastrophe is very real, and we are already deeply involved in it.

In conclusion, let us take a step backwards and examine in some more detail what takes place in the “Trumpian gesture,” and how it affects and engages different positions on the political chessboard.

What happens in this maneuver of bringing the other, dirty side to the surface during some ecstatic, often crisis-induced moments also and less perceptibly involves something else: it defines and redefines what the dirty side is to begin with.

In other words, we should not simply say that such moments bring to the surface what has always already been there (only hidden), because they do something else. The passage to the surface *itself* creates what was there, and radically changes its status from something inadmissible to something that must be, *because of this very fact*, desirable and “true.” It involves a kind of primitive understanding of psychoanalysis, according to which the liberation of repressed desires equals their “realization,” and according to which what is repressed must, for this very reason, be something good, worthy of being “liberated.”

We could in fact compare this to what does, or does not, happen in analysis. When in analysis some things that were inadmissible to consciousness, and hence repressed, become conscious, this as a rule – or ideally – implies a reconfiguration of a whole set of relations as well as the disappearance of the symptoms that expressed the illicit thought in other, displaced ways. In other words, the pathological relations change. If the inadmissible thought was *I want to kill my sibling*, then bringing it to consciousness does not make it “acceptable” or okay to act upon this impulse. Instead, it invites us to work through the contradictory demands and impulses that exercise pressure on us, from the outside as well as from the inside.

The Trumpian maneuver, on the other hand, is not about the reconfiguration and change of the given situation; on the contrary, it is about its solidification (and consolidation), and about profiting from it. The profit comes from the fact that, with his “transgressive” move, he does not remove the repression (on the side of his people) and instead uses it to

his own advantage. It is precisely the maintenance of the repression that makes it possible for him to propose the “deal” that he proposes, namely to do the “dirty job” on behalf of the “society.”

Note also that Trump did not even speak of “enemies” but of “opponents”: *I hate my opponent! I can't stand my opponent!* The question we need to ask at this point is not how such an open avowal of one's dirty enjoyment is possible but rather: What is hidden in this “open avowal of one's dirty enjoyment,” and even more importantly, what does this avowal aim at?

What is at stake here is something which is also at the center of cases of exhibitionist flashing, i. e., showing his Thing to you: it aims at making an object (of enjoyment) emerge on your side and to produce a split (shame, disgust or fascination). In *exposing* himself as he likes to do (*I hate my opponent!*) Trump does not simply openly show, reveal his dirty enjoyment. For what is at stake in this configuration is actually not so much the *enjoyment* (that is) *exposed* as it is *the enjoyment of the effect this exposure produces in others, in the Other*. This is what the exhibitionist is after, what he makes emerge and brings about on the side of the other. Exhibitionism implies and involves much more than narcissistic bragging.

Here, a very interesting interplay develops between Trump, his adversaries, and his supporters. His exhibitionism always addresses two (kinds of) audiences. In many ways, his supporters are less fascinated by Trump himself and by what he does than they are joyfully rewarded by the effects his actions and words produce in his opponents (“the Democrats,” “the liberals”). It is the outrage and the screaming of the latter that give them real enjoyment: the spectacle of what Trump manages to provoke on the other political side. In this sense, they occupy the position of spectators of an exhibitionist scene, which they enjoy indirectly. They enjoy the effects that Trump's self-exposure produces in the Others.

I would further venture that this structure is not limited to Trump. Something similar can be observed, for example, in relation to Putin. There are people on the Western left who do not particularly like Putin *per se*, yet are drawn to the effects his actions produce on the Western Other. This is why one way of being “critical” of Western policies – if one lives in

the West – can take the form of enjoying the embarrassment and reactions of Western leaders provoked by Putin.

Properly speaking, this game is perverse, as is our participation in it – a participation stripped of desire but sustained by enjoyment.

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# From Turn to Affect to Return to Freud

## Turn! Turn! Turn!

Recent history of philosophy is marked by a series of so-called theoretical turns.<sup>1</sup> As such, contemporary philosophical thought can be understood as a history of turns or intellectual transitions that have reshaped not only philosophy but also its relationship with other disciplines. These shifts

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<sup>1</sup> It has been widely recognized and extensively documented that since the second half of the 20th century, we witness a significant rise in paradigm shifts, which have evolved into a kind of theoretical trend. This long trajectory spans from the initial linguistic turn to more recent and ongoing ones focusing on bodies, objects, and new materialism while often rejecting (purely) linguistic analyses. To name only a few turns that have and still are reshaping the humanities and social sciences: epistemological, ontological, historical, pragmatic, phenomenological, postmodern, social, affective, spatial, bodily, informational, posthuman, etc. See, for example, Robert Wess' thesis from his *Philosophical Turn: Epistemological, Linguistic, and Metaphysical*, 24, which he built on McKeon's idea that philosophical turns change which components (things, thoughts, language, action...) are prioritized in philosophy's subject matter: "Seeing beginnings entails seeing clearly the subject matter of philosophy, which in turn entails seeing that the subject matter of philosophy changes in 'philosophical turns.'" Also see Greig Henderson, "Review: Philosophical Turns: Epistemological, Linguistic, and Metaphysical by Robert V. Wess." Our subtitle is taken from Pete Seeger's 1959 piece *Turn! Turn! Turn! (To Everything There Is a Season)*.

not only function as heuristic frameworks, gradually developing a unique autonomy within the humanities, but they may also be emerging as a standalone discipline potentially indicating the emergence of turn studies as an autonomous field of inquiry. One could even argue that they are evolving into a distinct meta-discipline. This specific phenomenon suggests that theoretical turns are not merely isolated conceptual shifts but rather part of broader epistemic transformations. What was once a series of disciplinary realignments now appears to constitute a meta-discourse on how knowledge itself evolves – how intellectual inquiry is shaped by the periodic adoption of new frameworks. One such turn in the history of philosophy is the turn to affect, which will be the central subject matter of this article.

This general philosophical interest in and theoretical fascination with turns roughly begins with the linguistic turn in the 1960s. The notion itself was coined by Bergman (in his review of Peter Strawson's *Individuals*) but is generally attributed to Wittgenstein.<sup>2</sup> The term itself was then further popularized by Rorty in his anthology *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method* first published in 1967.<sup>3</sup> The linguistic turn, which rose to prominence just after the Second World War, signaled the increasing centrality of language as a foundational structure through which all human knowledge is mediated. Initially, the turn drew heavily from the work of Wittgenstein, whose later philosophy, instead of focusing on the rejection of the search for essentialist meanings, rather put emphasis on the pragmatic nature of linguistic use. In a broader sense, this philosophical event implied the birth of analytic philosophy, in turn spurring the analytic-continental divide. Though not tied to any specific philosophy, this focus on language is nonetheless evident in almost every major modern

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<sup>2</sup> Gustav Bergmann, "Strawson's Ontology"; Gustav Bergman, "Stenius on the Tractatus: A Special Review"; and P. M. S. Hacker, "The Linguistic Turn in Analytic Philosophy," in: *The Oxford Handbook of The History of Analytic Philosophy*. According to Bergmann, there are two different groups of linguistic philosophers: ordinary language philosophers (such as Strawson) and ideal language philosophers (such as Bergmann himself).

<sup>3</sup> Richard M. Rorty, "Ten Years After," in: *The Linguistic Turn*; and Richard M. Rorty, "Twenty-five Years After," in: *The Linguistic Turn*.

philosophical tradition. It is, for example, noticeable in Husserl's discourse ethics or discourse theory of morality and in Heidegger's and Habermas' approach to the concept of consciousness. It is further noticeable in critical theory, especially in Adorno and Horkheimer, in Russian formalism, and French structuralism and poststructuralism, along with the poststructuralist critiques espoused, among others, by Derrida and Foucault.

What these traditions have in common is that they all entertained the idea that philosophical inquiry should prioritize language as the main medium of the production of knowledge. All these traditions essentially understood language as the key to understanding human thought and experience. The advocates of the linguistic turn thus argued that transcending language is essentially an impossibility. They argued that thought itself is related to language in such a way that subject cannot think without already doing so within the structures of linguistic expression. Language shapes our understanding of our reality to such an extent that subjects have no other access to the world. As Derrida famously asserted: "*Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*," or in Spivak's translation: "*There is nothing outside the text*"; language thus precedes and conditions that which it seeks to mediate.<sup>4</sup> Or to paraphrase Foucault, whose approach differed from Derrida's in that it prioritized Merleau-Ponty's idea of the limits of language over a focus on textuality: language does not have to refer to anything in the world; it can speak only its own meaning.<sup>5</sup>

Following the linguistic turn, numerous other intellectual reorientations emerged, each reshaping philosophical inquiry within the humanities and social sciences. First, there was the pictorial turn of the 1980s, which emphasized the importance of visual communication. In the same period, we then note the emergence of the bodily turn, which introduced the paradigm of embodiment. In this context, themes that highlighted the problem of the mind and body unity were revived, and concepts such as sentient body and embodied mind gained central theoretical focus. Neuroscience, for instance, drew heavily on the conceptual tools that this

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<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 77.

<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*; Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*.

turn provided while feeding on the philosophy of Spinoza. Damasio, for example, following Spinoza and critically approaching Descartes, developed the theory of the feeling brain as a kind of critical response of neuroscience to Cartesian dualism.<sup>6</sup> More recently, in the mid-1990s, the affective and sensorial turns emerged as significant developments in contemporary thought. Both turns arose as direct consequences of the supposed insufficiency of previous turns, especially of the linguistic and bodily, and have greatly influenced the philosophy of the 21st century generally and contemporary philosophical theories of affectivity specifically.

Theorists of the sensory turn have shifted their attention to the senses as both an object of study and a conceptual tool of study itself. Or as David Howes, an anthropologist and one of the pioneers of the sensorial turn, put it, it is the idea of exploring the senses, but at the same time it is the use of the senses as means of exploration itself.<sup>7</sup> This latter methodological move redirects the structural rigor of anthropology to more lax methodological approaches based on the researcher's sensory experience of reality. Or as Howes put it: If I want to research drinking culture as an anthropologist, I have to go on a pub crawl.<sup>8</sup> This theoretical trend was at first most noticeable within visual anthropology, which uses techniques such as photography, film, and, more recently, blogs, podcasts, social platforms, etc. According to Howes, all previous turns are problematic, bearing specific weaknesses and shortcomings. For Howes, the problem of the linguistic turn was its verbalism, a desperate commitment to the word and hopeless search for meaning; the problem of the pictorial turn was its viscosity, its desperate focus on the image; while the main problem of the bodily turn is the idea of the body as a unity, especially in light of the traditional typology of the five physical senses. According to some research, a human being has as many as thirty-three senses, while their exact number is always culturally conditioned.<sup>9</sup> Some cultures, for

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<sup>6</sup> Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error. Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*.

<sup>7</sup> David Howes, "Afterword. The Sensory Revolution Comes of Age," 128-37.

<sup>8</sup> David Howes, private communication.

<sup>9</sup> David Howes, *Sensorium. Contextualizing the Senses and Cognition in History and Across Cultures*, 1ff.

instance, consider language as the sixth sense.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, the relationship between the body and the senses emerged as highly problematic because the senses bring a fractal dimension to the study of the body. For this reason the body itself effectively cannot be seen as a totality, but the focus must rather be shifted to the relationship between the senses themselves, which in turn again undermines the idea of bodily totality, exposing it to fractal dispersions.

### Turn to Affect

The affective turn, on the other hand, stemming from a critique of the dominance of discourse analyses and semiotics, seeks to highlight passions, emotions, and feelings as fundamental dimensions of subjectivity and social life.<sup>11</sup> The Stoics, Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, and Nietzsche have all offered different perspectives on the question of emotions and passions, from the Stoics' view of emotions as incorrect judgments to Nietzsche's affirmation of passion. In this sense, the turn to affect implies renewed scholarly interest in the concepts of corporeality and emotions as well as in the corresponding modern philosophies of Descartes, who associated passions with animal spirits, of Spinoza, for whom all human activity, including cognition, produces and is produced by affect, but also of Kant and Hume. More recent philosophers, such as Sartre, Irigaray, Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze, Guattari, and Foucault, have also influenced philosophies that explore topics of corporeality and emotions while recognizing the significance of the aesthetics dimension. In general, this theoretical reversal presupposes the idea that emotions are not simply mental states, but embodied experiences, which effectively means that emotions have intermingling bodily and mental resonances. At the same time, the

<sup>10</sup> Alexander Z. Çelik, *Kinaesthetic Knowing: Aesthetics, Epistemology, Modern Design*, 159.

<sup>11</sup> For a general overview, see Patricia Ticineto Clough and Jean Halley, *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*; and Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (eds.), *The Affect Theory Reader*.

affective turn presupposes the idea that affects come before thoughts and language, that they are preverbal and precognitive. As a method of study, affect theory questions what human bodies can do, what they think and how they are driven by non-linguistic and non-rational forces – a question that echoes Spinoza’s famous phrase from his *Ethics*: “We do not even know what a body can do.”<sup>12</sup> Prior to Spinoza, emotions were often conceived as secondary aspects of the human mind, as supplementary elements, or something that needed to be restrained or curbed.<sup>13</sup> Think, for example, of Plato’s idea of the tripartite soul and his allegory of the two winged horses from his *Republic* and *Phaedrus*. Affect theory further assumes that affects are not fixed emotional states, but rather a flowing quality that can be shaped by subject’s thoughts and her actions, as well as by the subject’s interactions with the world outside of her.

Affect theory’s roots lie in psychology,<sup>14</sup> with Tomkins as its foundational figure. He argued that human beings have innate, biologically driven affects, such as joy and fear, which serve as primary motivators of behavior.<sup>15</sup> His work emphasized that emotions are not just reactions but central forces shaping our experience. Building on this, Ekman, on the other hand, studied facial expressions, showing that affects are universal across cultures.<sup>16</sup> Around the same time, Benjamin – one of the founders of relational psychoanalysis and one of the first to introduce feminism and gender studies into psychoanalytic thought – applied affect theory to interpersonal relationships, highlighting how emotions influence power dynamics, recognition, and social bonds.<sup>17</sup> In late 20th century, affect

<sup>12</sup> Baruch de Spinoza, *Ethics*, II, prop. 13, scholium.

<sup>13</sup> See Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism Before Its Triumph*.

<sup>14</sup> For a more detailed account, see Adam Frank and Elizabeth A. Wilson, “Critical Response. Like-Minded.”

<sup>15</sup> Silvan Tomkins, *Affect Imagery Consciousness II*; Silvan Tomkins, *Affect Imagery Consciousness III*.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Ekman, *Emotion in the Human Face*; Paul Ekman, “An Argument for Basic Emotions”; Paul Ekman and V. Friesen Wallace, *Unmasking the Face: A Guide to Recognizing Emotions from Facial Clues*.

<sup>17</sup> Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination*; Jessica Benjamin, *Like Subjects, Love Objects: Essays on Recognition and*

theory expanded into cultural and literary studies. Kosofsky Sedgwick demonstrated how emotions shape identity and social norms, particularly within queer theory.<sup>18</sup> Theorists like Brian Massumi and Erin Manning conceived affect in terms of preconscious bodily responses, showing that feelings often occur before human beings consciously process them. Scholars such as Seigworth and Gregg consolidated these ideas, applying affect theory to media, politics, and society, making it a key interdisciplinary framework.<sup>19</sup> According to Leys, Massumi (in his seminal essay “The Autonomy of Affect”), and Sedgwick and Frank (in their “Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins”) have shaped two main approaches of affect theory.<sup>20</sup> For Leys, the first vector begins with Kosofsky Sedgwick and Frank, who derive from Tomkins’s theory of affect. According to Tomkins, the central characteristic of affects is affective resonance, which refers to the tendency of an individual to resonate and experience a certain affect in the same way as another person experiences it. This means that, for Tomkins, affect is contagious, that is, it can spread from one subject to another. Tomkins’ theory of the contagion of affect assumes that if we are in a group of people and one person starts laughing uncontrollably, this encourages the laughter of others, even though most of them do not even know what exactly – if anything at all – is funny. In terms of Spinoza’s *Ethics*, this corresponds to the concept of imitation of affects (*affectum imitatio*).<sup>21</sup> The second vector begins with Massumi and his “The Autonomy of Affect” (1985), *Parables for the Virtual* (2002), and *Thought in the*

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*Sexual Difference*; Jessica Benjamin, *Beyond Doer and Done To: Recognition Theory, Intersubjective Psychoanalysis, and the Third*.

<sup>18</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*.

<sup>19</sup> Gregg and Seigworth (eds.), *The Affect Theory Reader*.

<sup>20</sup> Namely: the Spinoza-Deleuze-Massumi vector and the psychological vector of Freud-Tomkins-Sedgwick. See Ruth Leys, “The Turn to Affect: A Critique”; Sedgwick and Frank, “Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins”; Brian Massumi, “The Autonomy of Affect”; and Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*.

<sup>21</sup> “Consequently, if we imagine someone like us to be affected with some affect, this imagination will express an affection of our body like this affect. And so, from the fact that we imagine a thing like us to be affected with an affect, we are affected with a like affect. But if we hate a thing like us, then (by P23) we shall be affected

Act (2014), which he co-wrote with Manning. This theory is essentially non-representational. Massumi understands affect as autonomous, i.e., as an embodied preconscious response and as an intensity that arises as a consequence of stimuli. This means that according to Massumi, affect is not conscious and accessible to direct experience. Building on Deleuze and Guattari, Massumi distinguishes affect from emotion. In "The Autonomy of Affect," he thus claims that affect is a pre-personal intensity that corresponds to the physical capacity to affect and be affected. Unlike emotions, which can be qualified and narrativized, affects are essentially unqualified, autonomous, unconscious, and cannot be adequately conveyed through language, in turn directly registering on the body as unstructured intensities.

This theoretical premise shows a striking similarity with Jameson's notion of postmodernism as it applies to late capitalism and with Lyotard's idea of the post-subjective condition, where affects are also no longer tied to modernist narrative, intention, or cognition, but are instead virtual (in the Deleuzian sense) and cannot be located in discourse or psychopathology, while nonetheless shaping the very conditions of possibility for subjectivity and agency.

According to Jameson, the postmodern break with modernism concerns breaking with the monad-like concept of the subject as a kind of vessel from which internal affective states are expressed through projection outwards, while introducing the conception of subjectivity that is freed from the psychopathologies of the bourgeois ego. Jameson thinks this transition in relation to the status and fate of affectivity in the postmodern era, which is marked by the disappearance or "waning of affect" in the sense of intimate, essentially internal states, and its transposition into the exterior of free-floating and impersonal affective states:

The end of the bourgeois ego, or monad, no doubt brings with it the end of the psychopathologies of that ego – what I have been calling the waning of

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with an affect contrary to its affect, not like it, q.e.d." Spinoza, *Ethics*, III, prop. 27, scholium.

affect. But it means the end of much more – the end, for example, of style, in the sense of the unique and the personal, the end of the distinctive individual brushstroke (as symbolized by the emergent primacy of mechanical reproduction). As for expression and feelings or emotions, the liberation, in contemporary society, from the older *anomie* of the centered subject may also mean not merely a liberation from anxiety but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling. This is not to say that the cultural products of the postmodern era are utterly devoid of feeling, but rather that such feelings – which it may be better and more accurate, following J.-F. Lyotard, to call “intensities” – are now free-floating and impersonal and tend to be dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria... We have often been told, however, that we now inhabit the synchronic rather than the diachronic, and I think it is at least empirically arguable that our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time, as in the preceding period of high modernism.<sup>22</sup>

In contrast to modernism, postmodernism involves a radical transformation of affectivity and subjectivity. In the postmodern era, the interior of the subject dissolves and affect is no longer understood as an intimate experience. Instead, emotions and feelings are displaced into the external world, which Jameson associates with a special kind of euphoria. These affects are not rooted in the subject’s inner life, but are experienced as part of an external space, i. e., as diffuse affective states that surround and permeate the subject without any explicit connection to her personal psychopathology. The anxiety and alienation that are characteristic of modernity are now replaced by a neutrality and dispersion of affect. The postmodern subject is thus no longer preoccupied with the depth of her own affective life, but experiences affect as something outside herself, as a characteristic of her social, cultural, and even physical environment. In the postmodern era, the interior of the subject dissolves, and affect is no longer understood as an introspective experience rooted in personal depth. Rather,

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<sup>22</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 15–16.

emotions and feelings are displaced into the external world – into what might be called the “affective atmosphere”<sup>23</sup> of late capitalist culture:

Atmosphere refers to a feeling, mood, or *Stimmung* that fundamentally exceeds an individual body and instead pertains primarily to the overall situation in which bodies are entrenched. The concept of an atmosphere thus challenges a notion of feelings as the private mental states of a cognizant subject and instead construes feelings as collectively embodied, spatially extended, material, and culturally inflected. In this sense “atmosphere” can be considered a mereological concept: While “affect” refers to the ways in which (emerging) bodies relate to each other, “atmosphere” describes the ways in which a multiplicity of bodies is part of, and entrenched in, a situation that encompasses it.<sup>24</sup>

Jameson associates this shift with the concept of intensity: an overstimulation that, while emotionally charged, lacks the psychological interiority or narrative cohesion typical of modernist expressions of alienation or despair. These postmodern affects are thus no longer anchored in the psychic life of an individual but instead manifest as “ambient intensities,” as sensations that circulate in the media and commodities, and other social and physical spaces that surround us.

For Jameson, affect is thus no longer the product of internal psychic processes, but something encountered and absorbed from the environment. It adheres to surfaces rather than depths, and it is encountered less as a felt emotion and more as a mood, atmosphere, or even a tone. The affective life of the subject thus becomes externalized, dispersed, and fundamentally impersonal. The anxiety and alienation characteristic of modernity – and presupposing a subject with depth and division – are, in this context, replaced by a curious neutrality, a flatness or dispersion of affect

<sup>23</sup> The concept of atmosphere was first introduced in 1969 by phenomenologist Schmitz, who understood emotions as atmospheres (*Gefühle als Atmosphären*). See H. Schmitz, *Der Gefühlsraum. System der Philosophie 3*; Anderson, “Affective atmospheres”; and Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*.

<sup>24</sup> Friedlind Riedel, “Atmosphere,” in: *Affective Societies*, 85.

that resists narrative integration. Postmodern subjects may feel stimulated, excited, or numbed, but they do not typically experience these conditions as symptoms of their internal conflict or existential crisis. Instead, affect becomes aestheticized, commodified, but above all experienced passively – as part of the sensory and symbolic overload of postmodern culture.

As a result, the postmodern subject is no longer preoccupied with the depth of her own affective life. Instead, she relates to affect not as something that a subject has or possess but rather as something that happens to the subject, that moves and composes the subject. This has led some theorists, such as Lyotard, to speak of a post-subjective condition, a mode of being in which the boundary between self and world, emotion and sensation, inside and outside, has become fundamentally unstable and perhaps even irrelevant.<sup>25</sup> In Lyotard's context, to feel something is not necessarily to express it or possess it; on the contrary, it is to be moved by impersonal forces whose sources and meanings remain diffuse and dispersed. Affect becomes ambient, but is never resolved or explicitly acknowledged.

These new affective conditions find their clearest expressions in Hollywood. Think, for example, of Sophia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* (2003), a movie often described as difficult to identify with in emotional or narrative terms because of its general moody tone. Coppola's main characters, Bob and Charlotte, are drifting through the city of Tokyo as if they were in a phantasmatic dream city, as if they are subjected to a perpetual jetlag, surrounded by a million neon lights and caught in a never-ending existential boredom. In this sense one can also understand the lack of sexual relationship between the two main characters. Apart from their goodbye kiss and Bob having a brief relationship with another woman, we never witness any sexual intercourse or any other explicit expressions of sexual attraction. The specific sexual tension is present only in a form of touching feet and the relationship never culminates into a proper sexual one. Nonetheless, one could argue that the (sexual) desire is not completely absent but rather "floats freely" between the two characters: (sexual) desire is not lacking but

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<sup>25</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*.

is somewhat suspended in such a way that it perpetually circulates between the protagonists. Or think of the hallucinatory landscape of affective overload, depicted in the TV-series *Euphoria* (Sam Levinson, 2019), where characters also seem to be suspended in neon and glitter like atmospheres and textures. Rue's depression is not presented as a narrative arc of her inner conflict but rather as a specific ambient texture. Affect surrounds Levinson's characters like a blend of vapor and haze, perfectly embodying the idea of free-floating affect detached from interiority. Or think of Munch's *The Scream*, one of the most famous emblems of modernism, where one has a feeling that anxiety is coming from within the subject, but like a silent force permeates and distorts the exterior. If *The Scream* were a work of post-modernism – which, of course, is debatable – the affect would come from the outside of the subject and permeate and distort the subject itself.

## Return to Freud

What all these examples suggest is that the classical Freudian subject of the unconscious, structured by repression and its classical symptoms, has been replaced by a subject exposed to too-muchness, too-fastness, with no symbolic buffer, and that we are – perhaps once again – witnessing an emergence of a new conception of subjectivity. Namely, affects seem to be aestheticized and commodified, which is especially visible in Jameson's account, and symptoms no longer emerge as expressions of classical psychoanalytical conflict, but as flat, ambient states of overstimulation and too-muchness. The psychoanalytic clinic today – as many practitioners have noted – is indeed increasingly marked by melancholia without mourning, trauma without event, desire without object... Today's patients no longer show classical Freudian symptoms such as those associated with neuroses but rather display an affective blunting and other unusual forms of numbness, affective flattening, and depersonalization. These are diffused and porous conditions which are not so much expressions of repressed desire or emotions as they are signs of subject's overstimulation which today is essentially shaped by digital media. Already in

Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, intensities acquire new ontological centrality: they are defined as basic units of the unconscious, linked not to representation but to production and flow. Consider the following, ostensibly anti-Freudian claim: "Desire does not lack anything; it does not lack its object. It is, rather, the subject, that is missing in desire, or desire that lacks a fixed subject."<sup>26</sup> Their formulation reframes the concept of desire as intensive, machinic, and impersonal – a conceptualization that also echoes in their later *A Thousand Plateaus*, where intensity is aligned with becoming and deterritorialization. To recapitulate: for Jameson, Deleuze, Guattari, and Lyotard, intensities do not represent, they affect, and as such they are free-floating, hanging in mid-air, not in the sense of lacking causal efficacy but in their refusal to be bound by representations.

In her critique of affect theory,<sup>27</sup> particularly of non-representational theories which portray the concept of affect as pre-cognitive, non-intentional, independent of meaning and conscious thoughts, Leys points out that this idea misrepresents the relationship between mind and body creating a pseudo-Freudian dualism.<sup>28</sup> Here, and in her later book *The Ascent of Affect: Genealogy and Critique* (which is based on her 2011 article),<sup>29</sup> Leys frames the turn to affect as emerging from a rise of non-intentionalist theory. According to Leys, such pre-cognitive models reduce the Freudian unconscious processes to automatic, non-intentional processes and bodily intensities severed from intentionality and significance. Leys further argues that this misrepresentation has broader theoretical and political consequences: by separating affect from meaning, affect theory risks reducing the subject's behavior and her social existence to manipulations of intensity rather than reasoned, meaningful engagements. Overall, Leys frames Massumi's contribution to affect theory as a non-Freud-

<sup>26</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 26.

<sup>27</sup> Ruth Leys, "The Turn to Affect: A Critique." For the critique of Leys' critique, see Donovan Schaefer, "Rationalist Nostalgia: A Critical Response to Ruth Leys' *The Ascent of Affect*"; Frank and Wilson, "Critical Response. Like-Minded"; and Charles Altieri, "Affect, Intentionality, and Cognition: A Response to Ruth Leys." For Leys' response, see Ruth Leys, "Facts and Moods: Reply to My Critics."

<sup>28</sup> Besides Spinoza, Freud is the second central reference for affect theory.

<sup>29</sup> Ruth Leys, *The Ascent of Affect: Genealogy and Critique*.

ian approach that oversimplifies the complexity of Freud's concept of the dynamic unconscious structured by repression. Affects, she argues, are necessarily intentional in the minimal philosophical sense that they are always about something. For Leys, fear, for example, cannot be understood as a raw bodily intensity independent of an interpretation of danger, since even rapid or automatic bodily responses presuppose prior learning, memory, and recognition. For Leys, the notion of a purely pre-meaningful affect mistakes a theoretical abstraction for an actual phenomenon. Leys essentially argues that affects cannot simply be representatives or represent the cultural or linguistic capture of an otherwise autonomous affective intensity. Rather, affective experience is already structured by meaning at the very moment it occurs. To claim that affect precedes interpretation is to ignore the ways in which bodily responses are conditioned by social and historical contexts. Importantly, here, Leys does not reject affect a such, for her critique does not imply a return to disembodied rationalism, but rather an attempt to reconceptualize it as both embodied and meaningful. From a philosophical perspective, Leys' main point of departure for criticizing Massumi is that his theory provides a problematic dualism between body and mind by creating and insisting on a false separation between affect and cognition, even as his theory claims to overcome representational thinking. Here, Leys even goes so far as to say that Massumi selectively interprets scientific findings to support a philosophical position that the evidence itself does not conclusively establish, misinterpreting science as such. And this is precisely why Leys sees Massumi's theory not just as part of the anti-hermeneutic turn in philosophy but also as part of a broader anti-psychoanalytic turn in affect theory.

In contrast to contemporary philosophy which we have depicted as a succession of conceptual turns, psychoanalysis resists such periodization.<sup>30</sup> If anything, psychoanalysis as such is a Turn, a turn compared by Freud himself to Copernicus' displacement of Earth from the center of the

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<sup>30</sup> This strictly Lacanian thesis is, however, debatable from the Kleinian perspective. Compare, for example, the shift from Freud's "patriarchal" model of psychoanalysis (based on the Oedipus complex traced to a mythical prehistoric murder of the father) to Klein's radical turn to the mother-infant relationship (Orestes complex).

cosmos. If psychoanalysis constitutes a turn at all, it is the radical decentering inaugurated by Freud's discovery of the unconscious, the insight Freud famously summarized with the claim that "the ego is not master in its own house":

But these two discoveries – that the life of our sexual instincts cannot be wholly tamed, and that mental processes are in themselves unconscious and only reach the ego and come under its control through incomplete and untrustworthy perceptions – these two discoveries amount to a statement that the ego is not master in its own house.<sup>31</sup>

Lacan's treatment of Freud's discovery did not take place under the banner of turn to psychoanalysis or turn to Freud, but under a *return* to Freud. For Lacan, turning to psychoanalysis does not yet advance our understanding if in our turning we do not turn back to Freud. Lacan understood this motto as a methodological principle and as a critical intervention against postwar ego psychology. Ego psychology – early Lacan would argue – reverses Freud; it does not even represent a turn towards Freud, but a turn away from Freud. In 1960 Lacan thus constructed the neologism *extimité* (extimacy) to denote a structure of subjectivity in which the most intimate, internal core of the subject is already external(ized).<sup>32</sup> He linked this paradox to Freud's discovery of the unconscious processes. For Lacan, extimacy emerges as a structural consequence of psychoanalytic position that the unconscious is neither inside nor outside the subject but lodged at its core as something irreducibly Other. Insisting on the radical alterity of the unconscious, Lacan famously stated that "the unconscious is the discourse of the Other."<sup>33</sup> In this sense, the notion of extimacy is not some

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With reference to Lacan's "Return to Freud" slogan, Klein turns away from (Freudian) psychoanalysis to turn to ego psychology.

31 Sigmund Freud, "A Difficulty in the Path of Psycho-Analysis," in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 17, 5.

32 For an overview see J.-A. Miller, "Extimité."

33 The phrase "the unconscious is the discourse of the Other" is one of Lacan's most famous formulations, it appears in multiple texts, but is most directly associated with: Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and*

idiosyncratic Lacanian invention but a conceptual abbreviation of Lacan's return to Freud and – at the same time – the answer to the dilemmas raised by affect theory. The notion preserves Freud's decentering of the subject while translating it into a structural and linguistic framework, demonstrating how the most intimate dimensions of psychic life – such as desire, enjoyment, fantasy and so forth – are organized around an exterior kernel that the subject can never fully appropriate. Žižek, for example, translated this structure into the domain of ideology: for Žižek, ideology does not merely impose itself from the outside but operates as an external kernel that structures the subject's innermost beliefs, desires, and fantasies. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, ideology functions as an unconscious fantasy-frame through which subjects feel reality to be meaningful. The ideological attachment is thus extimate: what appears as my most personal conviction is already the effect of an external symbolic order.<sup>34</sup>

To conclude. If affect is deployed as a critique of language's representational capacity – as is the case in Leys – this presupposes that linguistic signs function as representational units. Drawing on Saussure, however, Lacan showed that the linguistic sign does not operate as a simple representation: in contrast to the notion of a natural sign such as a cat's footprint, which points unambiguously to its object, namely the cat, the relation structuring the linguistic sign is essentially nonreciprocal. Consequently, the representational status of the sign is not self-evident but is in fact contingent on the theoretical framework adopted, that is: it hinges essentially on the theory of language we adopt. From the perspective of the linguistic theory that informs Lacan's notion of the symbolic, the sign

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*in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954–1955, 43–44. See also Bruce Fink, The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance; Dylan Evans, An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis; and Élisabeth Roudinesco, Jacques Lacan.*

<sup>34</sup> Already in his early *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989) and *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (1992), Žižek explores how desire, jouissance, and ideology reveal the intimate as irreducibly external. Also see Zupančič's treatment of the notion of drive: against pre-symbolic immediacy, drive is the non-representable, repetitive excess produced by representation itself – the point where meaning fails but enjoyment persists. Alenka Zupančič, "Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself?!"

cannot be assumed to represent in any straightforward way, undermining affect-based critiques predicated on representational assumptions. This further shows that critiques of language that rely on the assumption of its representational function are theoretically unstable. Saussure's distinction between signifier and signified reveals that linguistic signs are not inherently reciprocal or referential in the way natural signs are. Therefore, any turn to affect that seeks to supersede or critique language on representational grounds must reckon with the non-representational nature of the linguistic sign. Taking Lacan's theory of language as a reference, it becomes clear that the sign's function cannot be reduced to representation, suggesting that the interplay between affect and language requires a framework attentive to the structural and symbolic dimensions of the sign rather than its supposed representational transparency. In this sense, Lacan's theory of language and his introduction of the notion of extimacy (describing a topological zone of unconscious formations that disrupts the relationship between inside and outside) challenge not just Jameson's concept of free-floating affects, Lyotard's notion of intensity, Massumi's concepts of autonomous affect and onto-power, and Leys' critique of affect theory, but the very divide between modernism and postmodernism.

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ALEJANDRO CERDA-RUEDA

# On Anxiety and Other Tales of Truth

## Introduction: A Century Ago

In 1926, Sigmund Freud published *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, a text that would summarize his work on anxiety and its relation to the unconscious and sexuality. Like many works published by the late Freud – especially *après* the 1920 theoretical shift – it may seem that he had come up with a conclusive explanation of anxiety and other discomforts of the mind. It so happens that this shift not only reinterpreted many of the earlier Freudian discoveries – such as drive theory, the unconscious, sexuality, and anxiety – but it also created a sort of schism between psychoanalytic theories and practices, pushing things up to an irreconcilable limit where many psychoanalytical schools alleged that whatever Freud wrote before this period was neither effective nor relevant for the challenges set forth by contemporary sociocultural demands. In doing so, it seems as if everything that Freud had constructed in his earlier years of psychoanalytic work were only taken as freshman efforts at understanding different clinical ailments and their relation to anxiety. Although this is a slippery turn that many psychoanalysts did eventually perform, it goes without saying that it is Freud's own *faux pas* that needs to be taken into consideration here.

According to James Strachey, in his introduction to *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, this book stands out as a rather curious piece of work, being a somewhat Frankenstein's-Monster-esque text. While the chapters are not necessarily delineated in a straightforward matter, unlike other works written by Freud, they resemble a rambling conjunction of various ideas put together in an attempt to make a statement on anxiety and other themes. But, indeed, its delivery is not quite clear. Is Freud trying to recompose his earlier theory on anxiety into a new *tableau* of ideas or is he doing quite the opposite? Does anxiety have any other meaning apart from his earlier take as a "toxic" sexual excitation, or should there be more ground given to what exactly is at stake when we think about anxiety? Should anxiety be reduced to castration? Freud didn't make things any clearer, so rather than focusing on later developments, it is best to understand, first and foremost, what was Freud's theory of anxiety about precisely. In addition, throughout the construction of psychoanalysis, Freud's theory of anxiety held a faithful companion in the form of repression, which eventually experienced these imposing shifts along the road.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is three-fold: a) what is the outcome of Freud's thesis (or theses) on anxiety and its development in psychoanalytical theory afterwards; b) how can anxiety be related to topography; and c) what exactly can we understand as anxiety from a cultural perspective nowadays?

## Freud's Theory of Anxiety: A Tale of Two Topographies

If we look a bit closer into Jean Laplanche's and J.-B. Pontalis' *Vocabulaire de la psychoanalyse*, there is no solid place for the concept of *Angst*, other than three entries Freud introduced in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*: automatic anxiety (*automatische Angst*), realistic anxiety (*Realangst*), and signal anxiety (*Angstsignal*).<sup>1</sup> However, when turning our attention

<sup>1</sup> Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*, 28–9, 274–75. Although there is also the entry for "anxiety neurosis" (*Angstneurose*), it is only taken in contrast to other clinical formations such as hysteria or neurasthenia.

towards the German lexicon for Freudian concepts established by Luiz Alberto Hanns, there is more to be considered when speaking about anxiety, not only understood as a sentiment as simple as fear, but most importantly, in contrast to *Furcht* (dread), a term occasionally employed by Freud. The latter is quite effective for Freud especially when explaining children's fears or certain *Angstneurosen*, such as the Wolf Man's paralyzing anxiety. Therefore, according to Hanns, the concept of *Angst* is precisely one of the most controversial within the tradition of translators to Freud's works (in any language).<sup>2</sup>

Where to begin tracing this confusion? By mid-1894, Freud included a manuscript in his early exchange of letters with Wilhelm Fliess in which he poses an explanation to the problem of how anxiety originates. In the commonly known "Draft E" – subtitled "How Anxiety Originates" – Freud explains the following: "It quickly became clear to me that the anxiety of my neurotic patients had a great deal to do with sexuality."<sup>3</sup> After briefly elaborating on various clinical examples dealing with *coitus interruptus*, virginal people or abstinent ones, Freud comes to a preliminary conclusion: anxiety arises from a *transformation* of the accumulated sexual tension. Here the key word is "transformation" (*Verwandlung*) in the form of somatic tension perceived as the accretion of sexual appetite turned into an attempt at an elaborated, psychically bound affect. That which fails to complete the jump from physical tension to psychical representation is precisely what will be defined as anxiety, an excess of energy that is left unbound provoking fissures on a certain bodily threshold. As an embryonic theory of anxiety – as early as 1894 – Freud concludes: "Where there is an abundant development of physical sexual tension but this cannot be turned into affect by psychical working over... the sexual tension is transformed into anxiety."<sup>4</sup> In short, anxiety works accurately as a prelude to affect or a rather unelaborated form of psychical representation.

<sup>2</sup> Luiz Alberto Hanns, *Diccionario de términos alemanes de Freud*, 79.

<sup>3</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Draft E. —How Anxiety Originates," in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 1, 190.

<sup>4</sup> Freud, "Draft E. —How Anxiety Originates," 194.

Although Freud developed his initial steps of psychoanalytical theory addressing the problems arising from clinical evidence such as hysterical symptoms or phobias, there is an important linkage one needs to make to arrive at the early developments of his first topography: namely, the topography of dreams as wish fulfillments. This first topography displays not only a channel for dream-formation, but most importantly, it allows Freud to pave the way for a suitable place to allocate anxiety: the “Dream of the Burning Child” is an accurate example. Not only does the dream reveal a certain wish fulfillment (i. e., for the child to resuscitate), but it also exhibits anxiety at the core of the dream (i. e., the burnt candle, the child’s reproach towards the father’s negligence). Although dreams are accepted as a form of figurative representation, the emotional distress certain dreams provoke, such as nightmares, insist on the excess that punctures through the oneiric tarpaulin. But the question remains, is this excess sexual?

By 1920, Freudian repetition takes on the guise of an unresolved affect: an urge that signifies not only the death drive but also serves as a diversionary channel for psychological representation. With the introduction of his second topography (1923’s triadic effort), Freud places more emphasis on the locus of anxiety beyond the previous unconscious sexual push; rather than situating anxiety purely on the nervous extensions of the body, the “actual seat” of anxiety is now to be situated on the Freudian ego (*das Ich die eigentliche Angststätte ist*).<sup>5</sup> This is an important shift due to its move from the body (a physical domain) to the ego (a mental domain).

Yet, Freud is not willing to explain anxiety solely on the basis of a mental representation like the ego. Instead, he develops this idea in relation to his 1926 “new” theory of anxiety: *Hilflosigkeit*. While Freud is working profusely with the concept of castration anxiety – which unfortunately took on a dire pallor with the construction of the theory of the Oedipus complex – he comes to the position that the precise origin of anxiety is “helplessness” or “distress.” By taking the notion of human birth as a prototype of anxiety, diverging from Otto Rank’s unsatisfactory theory on the

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<sup>5</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Hemmung, Symptom und Angst,” in: *Studienausgabe*, Vol. 6, 238.

trauma of birth, Freud situates the problem of anxiety prior to any form of Freudian subject:

Anxiety is not newly created in repression; it is reproduced as an affective state in accordance with an already existing mnemonic image. . . . Affective states have become incorporated in the mind as precipitates of primaevial traumatic experiences, and when a similar situation occurs, they are revived like mnemonic symbols. . . . In man and the higher animals it would seem that the act of birth, as the individual's first experience of anxiety, has given the affect of anxiety certain characteristic forms of expression.<sup>6</sup>

Certainly, there are many adjustments to Freud's initial theory of anxiety. Not only has Freud shifted the place of anxiety from the body to the ego, but most importantly, the theory of repression has also been slightly modified. Rather than repression precipitating anxiety as a by-product of the accumulation of sexual tension (the first theory), the reverse is now the case: repression originates *from* anxiety, becoming itself a by-product of a human being's early immature state (this is the second theory). In addition, though at this point Freud installs the notion of castration anxiety in comparison to the *Hilflosigkeit* at the core of human existence, he later turns to a new figurative shape in the guise of separation anxiety. Such a leap from "castration" to "separation" can best be understood as part of Freud's drift from his first theory of anxiety, where sexuality is at the epicenter, drift into the second theory of anxiety. It is in the drift to the latter that Freud makes a substantial theoretical move from sexuality to love; now, the child's own helplessness is no longer a matter of survival but rather a demand for love.

To move beyond the pale of castration anxiety and its conceptual misusage, I believe it is promising to consider to what extent Freud's drift from sexuality to love explains how anxiety originates. However, the question remains: where has Freud placed (or misplaced) his first theory of anxiety, a theory in which the sexual calls out for corporeal urge?

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<sup>6</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Inhibition, Symptoms and Anxiety," in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 20, 93.

## From Psychoanalysis to Philosophy and Back

In further developments of the concept of anxiety, it was probably Melanie Klein who granted it a peculiar quality. In her 1948 paper, “On the Theory of Anxiety and Guilt,” while addressing the added feature that guilt plays upon anxiety due to sadistic impulses the child bears towards the (love) object, she quickly steers our attention towards the primary cause of anxiety insofar as it stems from the death drive (or “instinct” as she likes to name it): “The danger arising from the inner working of the death instinct is the first cause of anxiety.”<sup>7</sup> Evidently, this is an important component when the fear of death (or fear of castration) exposes the child’s *Hilflosigkeit* to their own frail existence in need of an (auxiliary) other for survival. Thus, the anxiety which Klein likes to underline is more akin to a loss of the object which provokes separation anxiety. If the child is left alone with their interiority, without external help from the adult-other, anxiety is there to aggravate sadistic impulses towards the self (persecutory anxiety) or the object (depressive anxiety). This psychoanalytical development, although greatly influenced by Karl Abraham’s work and disseminated by many post-Kleinian theoretical approaches, creates one subtle problem: What if anxiety does not arise from the absence of the object (separation anxiety) but is instead enabled by its perpetual, captivating presence?

Likewise, the problem of anxiety is not fully a question of negativity (absence). On the contrary, it is a question of an ever-present, positive imputation. Isn’t this our current contemporary inclination to completely alleviate anxious symptomatology in favor of reducing its distress? I’ll come back to this later.

Seen retroactively, Jacques Lacan’s seminar on anxiety stands as his final credo under IPA-affiliation rule. Knowingly or unknowingly, it is this tenth seminar which was his last before being excommunicated from the Société française de psychanalyse (SFP). Effectively dissolved in 1963, the SFP became the IPA-affiliated Association psychanalytique de France (APF) in May 1964; others joined with Lacan in the establishment of the École freudienne

<sup>7</sup> Melanie Klein, “On the Theory of Anxiety and Guilt,” in: *Envy and Gratitude & Other Works 1946–1963*, 29.

de Paris (EFP) one month later. Did Lacan suspect anything which could anticipate or prefigure his imminent expulsion in terms of anxiety? The question is left unresolved. But what is pivotal for the sake of our argument is the leitmotif of the seminar: Lacan's objective is not merely to explain anxiety but rather, I believe, to attempt to pose the problem of truth.

According to Lacan, the concept of anxiety entails a certain structure. In short, anxiety is not without an object or conceptualized as some disorganized form of pre-figurative "speech." In contrast to early Kleinian developments, where separation or loss of the object is that which ignites anxiety stemming from the death drive, for Lacan, anxiety is conceived differently: anxiety is a sign of desire. Rather than perceiving it exclusively as an obtrusive force of discomfort, anxiety is an affect which knows not how to deceive (it discloses truth), it is unrepressed or at least it is not mediated initially by repression, and it allows the subject to anchor its existence (originally based on a specular image) to desire. Given the word-play which Lacan employs with the French verb *jeter* (to throw) in relation to the French word for "I" (*je*), it is precisely this Freudian ego that gets "thrown" onto the net of signifiers where repression acts as a formidable mooring for anxiety. Furthermore, Lacan continues his seminar by introducing the figure of "the unary trait [which] precedes the subject."<sup>8</sup> This "proto-signifier" elicits a form of singularity, a pure difference, a necessary condition for the subject's identification process. In short, a Freudian ego is to be constituted.

Here is, then, what concerns us with the structure of anxiety: It brings forth the *Unheimlich* (another chilling form for truth-telling). Anxiety emerges when something appears in the place of – in Lacanian terminology – minus-phi ( $-\phi$ ):

The *Unheimlich* is what appears at the place where the minus-*phi* should be. Indeed, everything starts with imaginary castration, because there is no image of lack, and with good reason. When something does appear there, it is, therefore, if I may put it this way, because *lack happens to be lacking*. . . .

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book X. Anxiety*, 21.

But should all the norms, that is, that which makes for anomaly just as much as that which makes for lack, happen all of the sudden not to be lacking, that's when the anxiety starts.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, if the Freudian ego reclines on its own image, an enthronement not only situated by narcissism but also in the supposed full knowledge of oneself, then the question of anxiety must be turned towards the grounds of truth. Isn't anxiety that which deceives not? The function of anxiety is to remind the (Freudian) ego of its own truth, its vulnerability, and its fragile existence in the world beyond its imaginary lifeline, its "non-existence." The ego is "thrown" onto the void of existence and only captured by the repressed signifiers. Thus, anything that unmoors the net of signifiers must be a sign of the ego's underlying *Hilflosigkeit*. For example, whenever a disaster strikes in the public sphere – from high-intensity earthquakes to wildfires that run ablaze, from 9/11 to the Covid pandemic, or even from the Holocaust or Hiroshima up to the more recent atrocities in Palestine – both the individual body and social body are jolted back to the reality of their own vulnerability. Anxiety harbors precisely around the edges where desire appears as a bedding for the ego beyond castration. However, the question lingers: How does this psychoanalytical approach differ from pure metaphysics?

To differentiate the philosophical and psychoanalytical conceptions of anxiety, Lacan resorts, specifically, to three philosophers: Søren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Martin Heidegger.

In Kierkegaard's philosophy, especially in *The Concept of Anxiety*, this term is fundamentally related to hereditary sin and freedom as figures of existence.<sup>10</sup> Yes, Kierkegaard cannot shy away from Christianity, but it is only to demand that this sort of anxiety constitutes an original condition for existential spirituality. Not only is salvation from anxiety a path taken through faith, but it is also a condition to be transversed by anxiety itself. Thus, for Kierkegaard, anxiety should best be understood as "the awareness of the freedom to choose," or as he likes to playfully express, "the dizziness

<sup>9</sup> Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book X. Anxiety*, 42; my emphasis.

<sup>10</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, "The Concept of Anxiety," in: *Kierkegaard's Writings*.

of freedom.”<sup>11</sup> This latter effect is, in fact, related to the boundlessness of one’s own possibilities. Henceforth, anxiety is there to caution against such possibilities. (In today’s free market economy, it is precisely the imposition of choice that enables anxiety to circulate continuously not in terms of offering a solution but rather in complicity to its perpetuation). Later, Lacan turns to Sartre in a rather derisive matter, basically offering a repudiation of the existentialist conception of anxiety. Lastly, Lacan broaches Heideggerian phenomenology. While quoting “being-unto-death,” a being “thrown” onto the world and able to acknowledge its own finitude (death is not just an event but a fundamental part of existence), Lacan is clear to point out that this experience doesn’t really go via anxiety.”<sup>12</sup>

Unlike Kierkegaardian or Sartrean existencialisms as well as Heideggerian phenomenology, psychoanalysis manages to push for a different response when exploring anxiety. Instead of diverting anxiety into a sort of metaphysical sphere or spiritual quarry, Lacan is clear not to “immediately [shut] it away in a cupboard,” but rather to speak as one could only speak of it: through the transmission of analytical experience, that is, through the effects it has on the body. Analytical experience on the couch testifies to this as the kernel of the unconscious through the body in which truth is disclosed. There is fundamentally a body in place – beyond the ego and other mental representations – to push thinking as a result to the structure of anxiety.

Topographically speaking, how is this, then, accomplished?

### **Laplanche’s First *Problématiques*: On Neurosis, Topography, and Morality**

Laplanche’s *Problématique I* – the first of a series of lectures given at the Sorbonne from 1970 to 1990 – a composite seminar attributed to his “debt” to Freud, is posed as a matter to interpret (with) Freud, and it deals,

<sup>11</sup> Kierkegaard, “The Concept of Anxiety,” 61.

<sup>12</sup> Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book X. Anxiety*, 8.

strikingly, with the concept of anxiety.<sup>13</sup> This particular *Problématique* stands out not only as the inaugural cornerstone to his teaching, but it is crucial to remember that Laplanche's analysis with Lacan was hastily interrupted in 1963 (after fifteen years), due to the institutional struggles that led to the dissolution of the SFP.<sup>14</sup> We cannot overlook that his final seminar with Lacan was precisely the one on anxiety. As already mentioned, there is no formal entry for "anxiety" or *Angst* in the *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse* (published in 1967). So, can we speculate that Laplanche's own inaugural seminar on psychoanalytic theory represents an attempt to overcome the fall of the master after seven years? What sort of anxiety does this produce in the analytical experience? Again, however, we will have to leave this question to the side.

In *Problématiques I*, Laplanche conducts, over a three-year period, a committed and profound study of anxiety, advancing from three distinct fronts: neurosis, topography, and morality. It is the second year that demands our fullest attention here. In an attempt at illustrating anxiety from a Freudian perspective, Laplanche walks us through a careful assessment of Freud's first and second topographies. In the course of this walkthrough, he pauses to examine the metaphor of the "undifferentiated vesicle."<sup>15</sup> According to Freud, this vesicle is a living organism in its simplest form and susceptible to both internal and external stimulation. For the sake of surviving amidst the contentious external forces that run adrift, the vesicle is compelled to flee from overt stimuli or raise "efficient" defenses to counteract them, a protective shield against stimuli (*Reizschutz*). However, how does it protect itself from internal demands such as sexual excitation or grief? This vesicle is then driven to cause what Laplanche names as an "inner periphery" – an innermost edge or boundary that allows for certain stimulation to pass – to be canceled or simply

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<sup>13</sup> Jean Laplanche, *La angustia. Problemáticas I*.

<sup>14</sup> By 1964, Laplanche would take on a key role in the newly founded Association Psychanalytique de France (APF) and later be instituted as president from 1970–1971.

<sup>15</sup> See Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 18, 26.

diverted. This “inner periphery,” closed to the outer world, remains indistinctly open to the body. Therefore, according to Laplanche, “anxiety represents the last line of defense of the protective shield against stimuli (*Reizschutz*).”<sup>16</sup> Characterized as a metaphor for the ensuing development of the Freudian ego, the “vesicle” is then abandoned in favor of a continuity between body and mind.

What concerns our analysis here is the problem of anxiety and topography. I believe that, for Laplanche, anxiety works rather as a hinge-concept on the margins between the ego and the body. This is exemplified, firstly, by his diagram where that which touches briefly between the interaction of the other (with enigmatic messages) and unconscious sexuality (from a child’s perspective) is precisely the position of the body. By placing anxiety at the periphery between body and ego, Laplanche not only extends the definition of anxiety as a limit but also as a herald of familiar warnings.<sup>17</sup> Anxiety, therefore, replaces the material limit in exchange for a signal of succor. One cannot help but recall the infamous 1893 painting by Norwegian artist, Edvard Munch, *The Scream*. Rather than focusing on the universal angst portrayed by the central figure’s rostrum or the obscure couple standing at the end of the bridge, it is perhaps noticeable to think about the red skies that hover over a placid lake, where nothing seems to happen on an ordinary day other than a contentious scream. The real angst is not the pictorial outcry but that quotidian life goes on in spite of it. Apparently, an overflow experienced by the ego as anxiety is, after all, a sign of life.

Lastly, there is an additional development to which Laplanche arrives concerning Freud’s first theory of anxiety. If we look back to “Draft E,” there the source of anxiety is not to be located within the psychological sphere

<sup>16</sup> Laplanche, *La angustia. Problemáticas I*, 199.

<sup>17</sup> “Anxiety is this cut—this clean cut without which the presence of the signifier, its functioning, its furrow in the real, is unthinkable—it’s the cut that opens up, affording a view of what now you can hear better, the unexpected, the visit, the piece of news, that which is so well expressed in the term *presentiment*, which isn’t simply to be heard as the premonition of something, but also as the pre-feeling, the *présentiment*, that which stand prior to the first appearance of a feeling.” Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book X. Anxiety*, 76.

but is rather triggered by a physical factor (usually something in sexual life): “the physical tension, not being psychically bound, is transformed into—anxiety.”<sup>18</sup> Therefore, according to Laplanche, anxiety remains fundamentally a psychically unbound affect without any mental representation or elaboration, unsymbolized, but solely occurring within the boundaries of the somatic. Isn’t this – in metapsychological terminology – a variation of what Lacan declared in saying that “truth can only be half-told” (*la vérité ne peut que se mi-dire*)? However, this instinctive (sexual) pressure is not precisely what is traumatic; it depends on an additional factor: “It is not the mechanical shock itself that is traumatic: it needs a trigger, which is sexual excitement, and it is this *influx* of sexual excitement that is traumatizing for the psychic apparatus.”<sup>19</sup> What Laplanche implies by the “influx” of sexual excitement is that sexuality (the physical factor that produces anxiety) is only to be considered traumatic because it is strictly harnessed to fantasy (unconscious sexuality) and not because it is linked to an accretion, to an object, or to the loss of an object. In other words, anxiety – in its abbreviated form – is just a translation in search of an interpreter.

If the ego’s tendency for self-preservation is to limit anxiety generated by sexual tension to a bare minimum, even to a point-zero, thereby threatening to cancel any attempt of psychic energy or pressure imposed by the sexed body, it is the place of sexuality, in its infantile form, that is simultaneously exciting and threatening, reshaping the boundaries of the child’s *Hilflosigkeit*. If these Freudian theories of anxiety share any feature, it is precisely the linking of sexuality to unconscious truth.

### **Anxiety and Sex: A Match Made in the Unconscious**

Why is sexuality continuously a headache for society, let alone culture, agitating all sorts of responses, especially in the form of anxiety?

<sup>18</sup> Freud, “Draft E.—How Anxiety Originates,” 193.

<sup>19</sup> Laplanche, *La angustia. Problemáticas I*, 213; my emphasis.

In his seminar given at the Collège international de philosophie on the 5<sup>th</sup> of May of 1999, Alain Badiou examines the problem of “sex in crisis.” As Badiou analyzes – in line with Freud – sexuality became inserted into society by a sort of cultural sublimation enacted from within mythology or religion, a sexuality constricted to sense (the “hermeneutic ploy”).<sup>20</sup> However, immediately he denounces such an appropriation as a form of resistance to the proper Freudian discovery. Precisely, it is Freud’s own *Unbehagen* with *Kultur* that boosts him back to the real of sex and the lack of meaning in his breakthrough. In a clear swing at religious institutions and their supposed “knowledge” of sex, it isn’t that the perversity of sex alarmed the Fathers of the Church, but, Badiou insists, “what frightened them is the fact that sex can command a conception of truth separate from meaning. The terrifying thing is that sex may repel any donation of meaning, whereas the very existence of religion depends on its capacity to spiritualize the sexual relation, thereby forcing it to signify.”<sup>21</sup> In short, the power of the Freudian discovery of infantile sexuality lies in the fact that it is not linked to any signification or *telos*. Basically, it is there for itself and does not originate with or serve a reproductive purpose whatsoever.

Let us briefly think about why, after many decades of feminist struggles, sexual liberation, and transformative years of courageous combats in favor of transgender rights, does sexuality incite anxious responses (sometimes as plain violence) from the public? Regardless of how ineluctably anxiety is tied to subjectivity – and thus forms a constitutive part of the subject – the more pressing question concerns the kinds of advertisements being endorsed today, as more objects of desire tend to fade and disappear, making way for broader and newer objects of anxiety.

In her book *On Anxiety*, Renata Salecl gives us a contemporary panorama of anxiety.<sup>22</sup> Rather than delving into each example, it is remarkable how anxiety, as a social construct, has changed throughout the years. Firstly, during the Cold War era, the dangers that provoked anxiety were usually projected onto a foreign figure: a Martian, a communist, or a spy

<sup>20</sup> Alain Badiou, *The Century*, 78.

<sup>21</sup> Badiou, *The Century*, 79.

<sup>22</sup> Renata Salecl, *On Anxiety*.

that usually came from abroad. Afterwards, this “foreign” enemy turned into its opposite and the source of danger was now considered to be internal, domestic. Therefore, after 9/11, a new figure of anxiety appeared in the form of the terrorist – be it alien or – the threat took on an amorphous shape: Who could be a terrorist? Basically, anyone. Consequently, Salecl’s thesis focuses on how such threats or anxiety-producing events don’t generate as much stress in comparison to the high levels of anxiety individuals feel nowadays concerning their own self. That is, fear of rejection, impostor syndrome, social media, living a meaningful life or building a career at a socially responsible job, or balancing between finding “true” love and living an autonomous and independent life, take on the shape of anxiety, becoming new forms of the phenomenon. In each of these cases, while what is at issue might be viewed as objects of desire, the contemporary demands of neoliberal plights and post-capitalist imperatives have rendered them objects of anxiety. Sex, evidently, is no stranger to this predicament.

If we turn towards contemporary philosophical and psychoanalytical theses on Freudian theory, the seemingly simple question of sex – understood as the “stumbling block of sense,” an “empty entity,”<sup>23</sup> or that which binds/unbinds ontology (being) and epistemology (knowledge)<sup>24</sup> – implies a fortunate deadlock.<sup>25</sup> According to Laplanche, (unconscious) sexuality is always already there in the form of a generalized seduction, that is, the primary parental caregiving which works as an intruder or foreign body through enigmatic messages that find a way to the child’s unfiltered mind. This would be the beginning stages of infantile sexuality (breastfeeding was Freud’s prototypical example), a complex assemblage of multiple sources of satisfaction to keep the drive(s) circulating. As infantile sexuality evolves, it becomes traumatic not because it is linked to a specific object or experience but instead because it is associated with fantasy. The drift from biological aims of human sexuality to the realm of fantasy is precisely that which remains as irreducible to a definite meaning, in which the

<sup>23</sup> Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 201–36.

<sup>24</sup> Alenka Zupančič, *What Is Sex?*, 141.

<sup>25</sup> See Jamieson Webster, *Disorganisation & Sex*, and Darian Leader, *Is It Ever Just Sex?*

drive “perverts” the instinct from its function. However, there is still the subject’s *Hilflosigkeit* to keep in mind while examining the problem of anxiety and the sexual. In short, sex and anxiety are linked to the unconscious not because of the “dirty” nature of the former and its obligation to repress it, but precisely because of sexuality’s polymorphous qualities and its constant deviations towards any given pleasure. Sex itself may be something of an anti-philosophy.

A brief clinical anecdote: I recall an analysand’s initial demand and what he expected from his psychoanalytic treatment. When asked about what brought him here, sufficiently enough, it was his anxiety and the overpowering dominance it had over him. But when asked what he expected from his treatment, he clearly exclaimed: “To get rid of anxiety!” The source of anxiety? A recent amorous breakup, and constant self-referential guilt where the individual protested: “Why me? How could she do this to me?” The simple answer: Why not? What qualities or elements of anybody’s lives exempt us from experiencing such pain, especially when it comes to love? Michel Gondry’s 2004 film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is quite illustrative of this point: Joel Barish (played by Jim Carrey) is demanding to erase the memories he still has of his former lover Clementine Kruczynski (played by Kate Winslet) due to a sour breakup and an unforgiveable grief. Joel seems so desperate to eradicate the pain that he ends up canceling out various parts of his own life. It is only once he tries to “hide” within his earliest memories of his mother and other first-loves that he becomes unwilling to undergo the “effacing surgery” any further. What do we find in these primal series of events? In short: infantile sexuality as the anchor of subjectivity.

Lastly, in a post-truth era arranged by social media algorithms where it becomes increasingly difficult to differentiate between truth and falsehood, perhaps the concept of anxiety still has more to offer other than simple discomfort. If, according to Lacan, the reality of the unconscious is sexual, and if, in order to arrive at the so-called “genital stage,” one must transverse anxiety, perhaps it would be entertaining to think of anxiety as another form of thinking, but moreover, as a possible fifth vicissitude of the drive: a destiny that oscillates between *turning round upon the subject’s*

own self and repression. Anxiety is not only an aperture to thinking; it is also a tool to carve out that which lies at the heart of sexuality: unconscious truth.

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SIMON HAJDINI

# Psychoanalysis and Fate

“She knows there’s no success like failure,  
and that failure’s no success at all.”

Bob Dylan, *Love Minus Zero/No Limit* (1965)

## The Compulsion of Destiny

At the conclusion of the third section of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud introduces the term *Schicksalszwang*, compulsion of destiny. This concept later evolved into the notion of fate neurosis and, by extension, failure neurosis, a term coined by René Laforgue in his 1941 *Psychopathologie de l'échec* (*Psychopathology of Failure*). The pair of compulsion and failure perhaps offers the most succinct introduction to the topic of psychoanalysis and fate. Freud writes of the compulsion of destiny:

What psycho-analysis reveals in the transference phenomena of neurotics can also be observed in the lives of some normal people. The impression they give is of being pursued by a malignant fate or possessed by some “daemonic” power ... The compulsion which is here in evidence, differs in no way from the compulsion to repeat which we have found in neurotics, even though the people we are now considering have never shown any signs

of dealing with a neurotic conflict by producing symptoms. Thus we have come across people all of whose human relationships have the same outcome: such as the benefactor who is abandoned in anger after a time by each of his *protégés*, however much they may otherwise differ from one another, and who thus seems doomed to taste all the bitterness of ingratitude; or the man whose friendships all end in betrayal by his friend; or the man who time after time in the course of his life raises someone else into a position of great private or public authority and then, after a certain interval, himself upsets that authority and replaces him by a new one; or, again, the lover each of whose love affairs with a woman passes through the same phases and reaches the same conclusion. This “perpetual recurrence of the same thing” causes us no astonishment when it relates to *active* behaviour on the part of the person concerned and when we can discern in him an essential character-trait which always remains the same and which is compelled to find expression in a repetition of the same experiences. We are much more impressed by cases where the subject appears to have a *passive* experience, over which he has no influence, but in which he meets with a repetition of the same fatality. There is the case, for instance, of the woman who married three successive husbands each of whom fell ill soon afterwards and had to be nursed by her on their death-beds.<sup>1</sup>

Compulsion and failure as the two sides of fate come together in the concept of repetition. Seemingly passively and contrary to its conscious intention, the subject falls prey to the automatism of the eternal recurrence of the same failure.<sup>2</sup> In *Seminar XI*, Lacan emphatically grants repetition the status of one of the four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis by taking his cue from this precise duality of compulsion and failure, boldly relating it to the Aristotelian couple of *automaton* (spontaneity) and *tyche* (chance), which resist integral inclusion in the famous doctrine

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<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 18, 21–22.

<sup>2</sup> Freud will give to these terms entirely new meanings by radically questioning the traditional oppositional pairs of intentional and unintentional, active and passive, conscious and unconscious, etc.

of the four causes.<sup>3</sup> The two terms subvert the idea of causal determinism, in turn signaling an entirely different conception of (unconscious) causality.<sup>4</sup>

Lacan reinterprets Aristotle's duality by relating it to his key distinction between the Symbolic and the Real, linking *automaton* to the symbolic persistence of the signifier, to its autonomy in relation to the spoken (as opposed to the speaking) being. The spoken being of the subject is not the embodiment of speech, its incarnation, but rather results from an excarnation of being reduced to the bones of the signifier in its essential iterability. In apparent dramatic opposition to *automaton*, Lacan defines *tyche* as an "encounter with the Real"<sup>5</sup> beyond the symbolic order, that is, beyond the instance of signifiers and their repeatability, and thus also beyond the pleasure principle that guides the subject along the paths of the signifier, perpetually leading it back to its place of satisfaction.

However, the relation between these two terms is not simply one of opposition.<sup>6</sup> For Lacan, the two belong together in joining the *impossibility* inherent in language with the emergence of *contingency*. Lacan derives said impossibility from the very nature of the linguistic structure as conceived of by Saussure, who defines language as a system of signs whose value is given only in relation to other signs, such that in language "there are only differences, *without positive terms*."<sup>7</sup> At the core of the linguistic structure lies the relation of distinctive opposition: for an element of language to be distinctive, it suffices that it differs from all other elements,

<sup>3</sup> For the discussion of the material, formal, efficient, and final cause, see Aristotle, "Metaphysics," in: *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, V 2.

<sup>4</sup> See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 53–64. The fact that Aristotle analyses *tyche* as part of his discussion of causes testifies to the conceptual horizon of ancient Greek reflections on fate, which, at least since the Stoics, has been considered part of the doctrine of causes and thus the analysis of causal determinism. For a more detailed analysis of the causality of the unconscious, see Simon Hajdini, "Zakaj nezavedno ne pozna časa? Pogled s (Kantove) strani."

<sup>5</sup> Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*, 52.

<sup>6</sup> This is the case already in Aristotle, who considers *tyche* as a species of the genus *automaton*.

<sup>7</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 120.

so that its entire linguistic value lies solely in this oppositional relation to others, rather than in any substantial quality of each of its elements – for language is “a form, not a substance.”<sup>8</sup> However, Lacan adds a key corollary to this conception of structure by – surprisingly and counterintuitively – attributing the property of reflexivity to the relation of distinctive opposition. This centrality of reflexivity to the linguistic relation of opposition was articulated by Jean-Claude Milner in *Le périple structural* as the basic tenet of what he terms Lacan’s “hyperstructuralism.” Milner pinpoints the scandalous reasoning behind it:

In classical ontology, the fundamental relation of equivalence is that of identity. Reflexivity, in other words: identity-with-itself,  $A = A$ , here is the decisive point. In Saussurean ontology, founding the structural procedures, the function which was based on the principle of identity is replaced by the principle of opposition; we can no longer say  $A = A$ , but rather:  $A$  is in distinctive opposition to  $A$ , or, formulated in the traditional language of identity:  $A$  exists in the structure only to the strict extent that  $A$  is not identical to  $A$ . A strange supposition, and we understand why it was impossible to proclaim it without restraint, for nothing could be more alien to the philosophical tradition, even to thought itself.<sup>9</sup>

An element of structure is not only in relation of distinctive opposition to each and all of the other elements, but is in opposition to itself, whereby the subject, as conceived by Lacanian psychoanalysis, is nothing but the name for this reflexive oppositionity of structure, that is, for the structure’s punctual, but repeatable and recurring, non-identity with itself.

When Freud defines the compulsion to repeat with recourse to Nietzsche’s notion of the eternal recurrence of the same, the “same” at issue here is not a mere faithful reproduction of a situation in which – as if guided by a demonic force of destiny – the subject perpetually finds itself and which could be said to be identical each time. The “same” that is

<sup>8</sup> Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 113.

<sup>9</sup> Jean-Claude Milner, *Le périple structural: figures et paradigme*, 164–65.

at stake here and to which the subject returns as if to its fate cannot be reduced to the identity of the situation. The same is not the same as the identical; on the contrary, the same is only that which cannot be identical with itself and which therefore resists affirmative repetition in the sense of reproduction. And while the relation of identity(-with-itself) is characterized by the possibility of an element being replaced by itself ( $A = A$ ), the same is defined by the fact that it cannot be replaced by itself because it is not self-identical but rather self-differing.

Lacan makes the same point in yet another way, deriving it from Kierkegaard's concept of repetition: only that which cannot be repeated repeats itself, thus forming the point of impossibility of iterability of signification. Consequently, the eternal recurrence of the same is not the return of the self-identical, but of the self-different subject, which lacks identity and cannot be represented by any signifier since the subject is precisely the self-difference of the signifier, i. e., the point of impossibility of replacing the signifier *with itself*. As such, the subject is the unconscious (of) structure, only ever represented by a signifier for another, repressed and inaccessible signifier, which, as if by a demonic automatism alien to the subject, weaves its destiny.

If Lacan further links the contingent emergence of the Real with *tyche*, which in ancient Greek texts denotes the punctual effect of fate on man (the Latin equivalent is *fortuna*, good or bad luck that befalls us suddenly and without a demonstrable causal connection to the past), then we can relate *automaton*, or the signifying automatism, with another ancient Greek concept of fate, namely with *Moirai*. And just as ancient Greek texts associate *Moirai* with *logos*, reason, and necessity, which remain impenetrable to us, so too can the aspect of repetition represented by *automaton* be linked to the symbolic order and, by extension, to the process of psychoanalytic interpretation, insofar as it is based entirely on the analysis of the paths and mechanisms of the signifier. This signifying game secretly weaves the threads of the subject's destiny and, as Freud's examples show, directs it toward an absolutely fixed point in the future.

Dieter Bremer classifies ancient Greek tragedies according to the distinction between these two concepts of fate and reads *Oedipus Rex* as a

tragedy of *tyche*, of the contingent-inaccessible as opposed to the absolutely – and thus continuously – inaccessible, which defines Moira:

The Greek concept of Fate and its historical transformation is essentially linked to Necessity (Ananke). From Homer to Aeschylus, Moira has the character of Ananke. The archaic connection between Fate and Necessity is later replaced by a conceptual connection between chance and Necessity ... The history of the Greek concept of fate extends between these two poles: as the history of the progressive empowerment of *tyche*.<sup>10</sup>

The psychoanalytic concept of the Oedipus complex highlights the tension between the two and thus links the contingent emergence of chance with the signifying mechanisms of the unconscious, whereby Moira and *tyche* become two sides of the same fatal framework. Here we can only mention in passing that Freud repeatedly refers to the connection between the concepts of Moira and Ananke. In *Totem and Taboo*, for instance, he links it to the creation of spirits as man's first cultural creation or "first theoretical achievement,"<sup>11</sup> with which this part of his originally conceived omnipotence is entrusted for the first time to external forces that resist his narcissism. But what about *tyche*, which Freud does not explicitly mention? Is it not representative of the libido which, according to Freud, resists submission to Ananke? Libidinal *tyche* would thus be located beyond the reality of the universe, and thus beyond the pleasure principle, insofar as reality implies a necessity that directs the speaking being onto the paths of the pleasure- and reality-principle.<sup>12</sup>

Such an interpretation is in line with Kierkegaard's unusual definition of repetition as prospective remembrance, that is, a remembering not of the past but of the future. An earlier subtitle of Kierkegaard's *Repetition* read "A Fruitless Venture." Repetition, the narrator finds, is fruitless,

<sup>10</sup> Dieter Bremer, "Der Begriff des Schicksals bei Hegel und seine griechischen Ursprünge," 26.

<sup>11</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Totem and Taboo," in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 13, 93.

<sup>12</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, lecture XXVI.

impossible, yet it is precisely its fruitlessness that bears fruit (that is un-consumable). Repetition is barren in the sense of not reproducing, of being incommensurable with reproduction. Reproduction is always a reproduction of the self-identical, while we only ever repeat that which cannot be reproduced. As such, repetition is neither hope nor recollection. The latter are all too fruity: “Hope is an enticing fruit that fails to satisfy, recollection sorrowful sustenance that fails to satisfy.” Willing the fruitless flowers of repetition requires the courage of hopelessness: “It requires youthfulness to hope and youthfulness to recollect, but it requires courage to will repetition. He who will only hope is cowardly.”<sup>13</sup>

For a proper reading of Freud’s examples, a slight yet crucial shift in perspective is therefore necessary. They are not about the subject’s current situation repeatedly reproducing a fixed point in the past, which, as an unavoidable determinant, would provide the template for the future. According to this reading, the past would be fixed or immutable and, as such, would dictate the immutability of the subject’s future. In contrast, repetition is something entirely different: what is repeated is a fixed point of the future itself. The demonic power that commands over subjects and gives the impression of the subjects’ “being pursued by a malignant fate” is a compulsion that *pursues subjects from the future*. Fate, as Freud understands it, therefore implies a temporal loop: the subject follows in the footsteps of its fate, *while preceding it*.

The point regarding the repetition of the future can be illustrated by the example of trauma, which Lacan touches upon in his analysis of repetition.<sup>14</sup> Trauma, in the emphatic sense, does not operate from the past, but from the future as the subject’s prospective fate. This is why Lacan can say that the subject of trauma cannot reproduce or remember it, but this does not prevent the trauma itself from remembering the subject – but from the future, in random moments of encounter that are structurally experienced as failures. In short: the object of the compulsion to repeat is chance, *tyche*, something that cannot be anticipated and therefore

<sup>13</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, “Repetition,” in: *Repetition and Philosophical Crumbs*, 4.

<sup>14</sup> Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*, 51.

emphatically belongs to the future. As Frank Ruda writes in *Abolishing Freedom: A Plea for a Contemporary Use of Fatalism*, “there is a repetition that strangely precedes what it repeats.”<sup>15</sup>

### How to Fail (Successfully)

Psychoanalysis relates the notion of fate to the concept of the compulsion to repeat. The object of such repetition is the impossibility of repetition (as reproduction), which makes of repetition a compulsion to fail (to reproduce). But in this failure, as Lacan often points out, something nevertheless succeeds, and we could say with Bob Dylan that psychoanalysis “knows there’s no success like failure, and that failure’s no success at all.” If the subject succeeds in failing, this is because failure is the success of truth, which comes to light precisely where we witness a failure

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<sup>15</sup> Frank Ruda, *Abolishing Freedom: A Plea for a Contemporary Use of Fatalism*, 8. Ruda mentions in passing that his “argument resembles to some extent what Jean-Pierre Dupuy [in *The Mark of the Sacred*] calls ‘enlightened doom-saying’.” There are certainly several obvious similarities between Ruda’s (Badiouian) and Dupuy’s (Girardian) projects, but suffice it to only mention the key use of the concept of “self-transcendence,” which in both cases forms the core of the “counter-history of rationalism.” Here, we cannot dwell in detail on the idea of the future as conceived by Dupuy, who, as a thinker of liberalism, bases his critique of contemporary neo-liberal “economystification” and the project of re-politicizing the economic sphere on the reintroduction of the idea of the future into the sphere of economic rationality, so that this project can be summed up in the slogan: *Economy without politics is economy without a future*. However, is Dupuy’s analysis compatible with conceiving of the future as repetition? The key difference between Dupuy’s “back to the future” proposal and our own would be that Dupuy conceives of the future through the concept of self-transcendence, i. e., the immanent political self-transcendence of the economic sphere, while our thinking about the future is more closely related to Eric L. Santner’s concept of the “surplus of immanence.” In short, the surplus of immanence as the core of repetition arises precisely at the point of the impossibility of self-transcendence, just as the subject of fatalism arises at the point of impossibility of the subject of free choice. See Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *The Mark of the Sacred*; Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *Economy and the Future: A Crisis of Faith*. For the concept of “surplus of immanence,” see Eric L. Santner, *The Weight of All Flesh: On the Subject-Matter of Political Economy*.

of meaning. Think of Freud's *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* which bears brilliant witness to this: something gets stuck, it fails, but that is precisely why it (i. e., an unconscious formation) works. Or think of jokes as another in the series of unconscious formations: for a joke to succeed in articulating a truth, it must depart from meaning (or at least from the expected meaning); for a slip of the tongue to succeed, it must depart from intended sense.<sup>16</sup> It is inaccurate to say of someone who has told a joke that they have succeeded in telling a good joke. Rather, and more precisely, they *unfailed* in telling a good joke in the same sense that the woman from Freud's example has *unfailed* three times in a row to marry men who soon fell ill, so that she had to nurse them until their death.

Failure, which manifests itself in *tyche* – that is, in the punctual effect of fate, insofar as fate is essentially something that happens – is not the opposite or a mere negation of the predicate of success, but rather corresponds to the affirmation of the non-predicate, which defines the difference between Kant's negative and infinite judgments analyzed by Slavoj Žižek.<sup>17</sup> Just like the undead (zombies, vampires, etc.) are not merely not dead (and hence alive) but rather *not not* dead (that is, neither living nor dead), that which *unfails* is irreducible to the fact that it does *not* succeed, in turn bearing witness to a surplus that eludes the opposition between success and failure. The most we can say about this successful failure is that it did *not not* succeed. If using a double negation, we say that something did *not not* succeed (and hence that “there's no success like failure”), that does not mean that it succeeded (for “failure is no success at all”): the negation of negation does not coincide with affirmation but rather remains irreducible such that the theorem  $\neg \neg p \equiv p$  does not apply. Only under these conditions can failure become an object of compulsion and of repetition, that is, of *the compulsion to (unfailingly) repeat*. The subject does not repeat failure as such, but only failure that is by its nature not a failure – because it succeeds in bringing about a surplus of enjoyment.

<sup>16</sup> See Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life: Forgetting, Slips of the Tongue, Bungled Actions, Superstitions and Errors*; Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*.

<sup>17</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*, 113.

If anything, this success is not something we should or could strive for, but rather something we cannot escape and which cannot *not* succeed, because *it unfails* every time.

By way of example, we can think of the elaborate strategies of procrastination devised by the obsessional neurotic, who will do anything to delay encountering the Real, to anticipate the occurrence of contingency, which by its very nature cannot be anticipated and which he will therefore always encounter despite (or because of) all his or her efforts to avoid it. With his protective measures, the obsessional neurotic arranges everything down to the last detail so as to avoid chance and ensure that nothing happens. Here, the very pseudo-certainty of a looming catastrophe functions as a means of avoiding catastrophe, whereby doubt and uncertainty act as conditions for asserting pseudo-certainty as a paradoxical contingent certainty. In this sense, it cannot be said that the obsessive fails to arrive at the right time, but rather that they *unfail* in arriving at the right time, which is the source of their paralyzing enjoyment.<sup>18</sup>

This is also the matrix of contemporary survivalism and its project of outliving humanity. Survivalist preparations are not about the afterlife, but the outlife. Survivalists are actively preparing for the onset of extraordinary circumstances, prepping for the apocalypse, anticipating disaster – so that it will not have happened and that their preparations for the outlife will have been completely successful insofar as they will have been completely unnecessary. Do these subjects not “act as if they were not free” (as one of the slogans in Ruda’s book has it) and thus as if the future were inevitable, necessary – all with the aim of preventing an accidental catastrophe, a catastrophe of chance? And does Ruda’s *Abolishing Freedom* not claim that in these fatalistic times we are not fatalistic enough? That our fatalism is obsessive, that is, the fatalism of protective measures, trapped

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<sup>18</sup> In his analysis of the Rat Man, Freud highlights these two key moments of doubt and uncertainty, emphasizing both the need for uncertainty in mental life, which is reflected in compulsive rituals as methods of producing uncertainty, as well as the rejection of clocks so characteristic of obsessive-compulsive individuals. Sigmund Freud, “Notes upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis,” in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 10, 232–33.

in the premise that it is possible to avoid the paradoxical contingent necessity of fate? And that in doing so, we overlook the fact that the onset of this fate results from our attempts to avoid it; that our attempts to cure the illness effectively are “flights into illness” (to use Freud’s term)? Hence the gospel according to Ruda: “The worst has already happened.” The slogan repeats the temporal paradox of repetition: we are living in a post-apocalyptic state that precedes the apocalypse itself. For how could the catastrophe of the event be worse than persisting in the current state of “catastrophe without event,”<sup>19</sup> i. e., in a state of suffocating actuality that equates the future (and thus the change in the coordinates of our socio-economic reality) with a terrifying vision of the end of all ends, renouncing the very idea of a future and thus preserving the *status quo*?

Ruda’s book stages a confrontation with Aristotle’s concept of freedom as capacity. Here, every free act can always be said to be the rational realization of a possibility, so that every free act merely effects a transition from the modality of the possible to that of the actual, thereby realizing itself as necessary. In the name of fatalistic freedom, Ruda abolishes Aristotle’s concept of freedom, which is the code for our enslavement to the possible: the road to abolishing slavery leads through abolishing freedom. Ruda opts for *Wahnfreiheit* as opposed to *Wahlfreiheit*, a “mad freedom” instead of the “freedom of choice.” For from the perspective of free choice advocates, the fatalist freedom must necessarily appear as a *Wahn*, as a ruinous delusion of apocalyptic proportions. In a series of lucid analyses that traverse the history of rationalism, Ruda, in the name of fatalism, opposes the idea of naturalized freedom, freedom as capacity and possession that is realized in the act of choice, in order to wrest freedom from necessity and surrender it to the impossible and the contingent.

Historically, fatalism has presented a problem for philosophy, which saw belief in fate as an example of escapism from responsibility and therefore as something that cannot form the basis of a credible philosophical position. It understood fatalism as an attack on and criticism of rational

<sup>19</sup> I am borrowing the diagnostic description of our contemporary age as a time of “catastrophe without event” from Eva Horn, *The Future as Catastrophe: Imagining Disaster in the Modern Age*.

judgment, on which rests the type of freedom called freedom of choice (Greek: *proairesis*). It is therefore not surprising that Aristotle treats *tyche* or chance (which, in contrast to him, we read as the punctual emergence of fate) precisely in the context of free choice as an irrational addition, a *paralogon*, that does not correspond to rational choice, to *logos*, though it does not undermine it. Unlike *automaton*, which Aristotle attributes to inert objects, children, and animals, denying them the ability to choose, chance (lucky or unlucky) for Aristotle can only befall those capable of rational choice, for “what is not capable of action cannot do anything by chance. Thus an inanimate thing or a beast or a child cannot do anything by chance, because it is *incapable of choice*; nor can good fortune or ill fortune be ascribed to them ...”<sup>20</sup> For Aristotle, only beings capable of rational judgment and thus of freedom have a fortunate or unfortunate hand in their choices, so that fortune goes hand in hand with *proairesis* and *logos*.

The alternative dictated by the principle of freedom of choice is therefore as follows: either we have the possibility of choice and are capable of chance (*tyche*), or we have no possibility of choice and are capable only of spontaneity (*automaton*). The alternative roughly corresponds to the division between the subject, understood as a being of *logos* and freedom, and the object, which lacks both. Psychoanalysis radically shifts this alternative. As we have seen, Lacan does not place *automaton* in the field of the automatism of nature, which lacks rational thought and the ability to choose, but rather links it to the instance of the signifier without which there is neither *logos* nor subject. It is where Aristotle only sees an asubjective field of *automaton*, that Lacan situates the subject of the unconscious (as essentially different from the subject of cognition). The subject of fatalism emerges at the point of impossibility of the Aristotelian subject of free choice and is hence the symptom of the universe of choice as such.

As for *tyche*, Lacan also explicitly detaches it from the Aristotelian context in order to wrest chance from the accidental and hand it over to contingency:

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<sup>20</sup> Aristotle, “Physics,” in: *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 197b; my emphasis.

Aristotle's formula – that the *tuché* is defined by being able to come to us only from a being capable of choice, *proairesis*, that the *tuché*, good or bad fortune, cannot come to us from an inanimate object, a child or an animal – is controverted here. The very accident of this exemplary dream depicts this. Certainly, Aristotle marks the extreme limit of that point that stops it on the edge of the extravagant forms of sexual behaviour, which he can only describe as *teriotés*, monstrosities.<sup>21</sup>

The dream referenced in this passage is the famous nightmare from *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in which the apparition of a dead child visits its sleeping father with the words “Father, don't you see that I'm burning?” spoken at the very moment when a candle in the next room tips over and ignites the tablecloth under which the child's body lies.<sup>22</sup> To summarize the well-known point of Lacan's reading of this dream, the father wakes up from his dreams in order to avoid the Real of the dream itself, which is more real to him than external reality and which consumes him like a flame. But what is crucial for the discussion here is that *tyche*, the dream-encounter with the Real apparition of the dead child, is very much the product of some inert being, the dead son who appears in the dream, or the candle that tips over in reality.<sup>23</sup> This encounter with the Real is by no means a random (side-)effect of a being capable of free choice, but rather the effect of an object, the *objet petit a*, an inert piece of the real, with the help of which chance is realized.

When speaking of the demonic compulsion of fate, Freud adds that in this case “the subject appears to have a *passive* experience, over which he has no influence, but in which he meets with a repetition of the same fatality.” Lacan's reinterpretation of Aristotle's duality of *tyche* and *automaton* radically shifts both the opposition between subject and object and the opposition between active and passive. The passive experience of fate is neither passive nor asubjective. Fate as *automaton* implies subjectivity that stems entirely from the activity or action of the structure, which, on

<sup>21</sup> Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*, 69.

<sup>22</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 509.

<sup>23</sup> Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*, 58.

the other hand, as *tyche*, is realized with the help of a contingent and inert piece of the real. In this precise sense, the unconscious is “out there,” and the trauma (as incarnated in object *a*) enters a relation with the excarnated being of the subject – remembering *us*, rather than *us* remembering *it*.

For Aristotle, chance is defined by the possibility of choice in the sense that the subject of choice could have chosen something, but did not, and yet it happened anyway. In contrast to this, we would now propose the formula of fatalist freedom, insofar as it does not coincide with freedom of choice and insofar it does not reduce contingency to an accidental moment that in no way undermines the *logos*: *Choose that which cannot not be chosen because it is impossible to choose it*. The subject of fatalism is thus confronted with the following: it is impossible to choose *and* impossible not to choose. Fatalist freedom kills two birds with one stone, just like Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, who wants to die *and* live in Paris.

If we were to look for examples of fatalist freedom, we would find plenty of them in Kafka. The hunger artist cannot eat and cannot not eat – and therefore eats nothing itself. Josephine the singer cannot or does not know how to sing and cannot or does not know how not to sing – her skill is in that she cannot not sing. The man from the country cannot enter the Law and cannot not enter the Law – therein lies the precariousness of his fate. Josef K. is neither guilty nor innocent – his guilt lies in his very innocence.<sup>24</sup> All these examples repeat the contradiction of the unfailed, which provides the key to grasping their economy: the hunger artist is *un-eating*, Josephine is *un-singing*, the man from the country is *un-entering*, and K. is *un-guilty*, which does not mean that they do not eat, do not sing, do not enter, and are not guilty. Underlying this structure is the paradox of the psychoanalytic concept of enjoyment: it is impossible to enjoy (which, however, does not mean that we do not enjoy) and it is impossible not to enjoy (which, however, does not mean that we enjoy). Enjoyment is at once lacking and excessive, a surplus scarcity, that is, lack as excess.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Simon Hajdini, “The Tripwire of Modernism: Hunger as Function and Ornament,” in: *Understanding Lacan, Understanding Modernism*, 178.

<sup>25</sup> For the term “surplus scarcity,” see Eric L. Santner, “Marx and Manatheim,” 31, 36.

If enjoyment, as Lacan famously writes, is “prohibited [*interdite*] to whoever speaks,”<sup>26</sup> then the emergence of speech is the erasure of enjoyment. However, this erasure is not a neutral absence, but rather an excessive lack or surplus enjoyment: enjoyment is simultaneously prohibited and unavoidable. Therefore, psychoanalysis does not promote a transgression of the prohibition, its abolition as a path to a well measured enjoyment, to the Aristotelian “golden mean,” i.e., to enjoyment without excess. Enjoyment rests only in its excess – it is an addition, a supplement without a whole to which it is added. In this sense, enjoyment corresponds to repetition and its tychic object, to repetition as prospective remembering that precedes what it repeats. Herein lies the point of Freud’s paradoxical term “choice of neurosis.” The subject, as conceived by psychoanalysis, finds itself in a double bind of choice, both unable to choose *and* not to choose. For psychoanalysis, choice and fate are not opposites. On the contrary: we can only choose our own fate (we can only choose what cannot be chosen and what emphatically is situated beyond free choice), so that there is no other fate than the one we choose. Fate is something we choose, but by chance, so that the choice unfolds behind our backs as a chance encounter – with *it* choosing *us*.

If today’s subject is burdened with the hardships of unsatisfactory success, the reasons for this must also be sought in the enjoyment in failure, which shows that the source of our insurmountable hardships lies not so much in the failure of socio-political and economic reality as in its excessively successful triumph. Today, we are witnessing a flood of success manuals that promise us guidelines and strategies that will do away with our daily misfortunes and failures. As a venerable heir to fatalism, psychoanalysis offers guidelines for failure. The real question for our time is not how to succeed, but how to unfail.

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<sup>26</sup> Jacques Lacan, “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious,” in: *Écrits*, 696.

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GREGOR MODER

## Alienation in Yugoslavia: The *Praxis* Journal and the Problem of Anti-Humanism

Bled, Socialist Republic of Slovenia, Yugoslavia, November 1960. It is a lovely day, and it seems that the Party bureaucrats will be able to enjoy the sunny view of the mighty Alps surrounding the charming little church on a tiny island in the middle of a beautiful mountain lake while eating the famous cream cake and reflecting on the wonderful simplicity of dialectical materialism – or diamat, as they like to call it. This scientific paradigm was able to explain the dialectical totality of the world by comprehending the sun, the mountains, the lake, the reflection of the mountains in the lake, the cream cake, all social processes, both historical and contemporary, and even individual ideas in the minds of party bureaucrats as parts of an infinitely complex but scientifically totalizable system of dialectical relations.

But that day did not go according to plan. The fifth congress of the Yugoslav Association of Philosophers and Sociologists, held in Bled, was devoted to the “theory of reflection” as announced by Lenin in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* and elaborated in detail by the Bulgarian materialist Todor Pavlov. The central thesis of this theory was that human consciousness is only a subjective reflection of objective reality. Despite the venerable roots of this materialist theory, a group of philosophers from Zagreb, led by Milan Kangrga and Predrag Vranicki, convincingly demonstrated

in their interventions at the symposium that the theory of reflection was not only naive but, much worse, deeply un-Marxist. The unexpected turn of events at the 1960 symposium in Bled had a lasting impact on the development of social philosophy in Yugoslavia: its traces could be felt from then on in its fundamental discussions, in the structure of international networks, and in the social and political spheres.

In the Department of Philosophy at the University of Zagreb, a decision was soon made to establish a new philosophical journal called *Praxis* and to organize what became an important international forum, modestly named the Korčula Summer School. For the *Praxis* group, the most decisive concept was that of alienation, as developed by Marx in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* and as established in the philosophy of the Frankfurt School. Marx's early manuscripts were first published in 1932 and were a significant novelty in the context of Marxism as a scientific study of economic relations, as they were marked by the spirit of Feuerbach and, generally speaking, a humanist view of the world. The concept of alienation, and especially alienation in socialist Yugoslavia, was a key concept for the *Praxis* group, perhaps even the only concept that gave this heterogeneous constellation of philosophers a common basis. While Marx used the concept of alienation primarily to describe the alienation of man from nature and from his own essence in the capitalist economic system and, in somewhat unclear terms, positively defined the project of socialism as a project of dis-alienation, for the *Praxis* group, this concept was important precisely because they could also use it to criticize the existing Yugoslav socialism.

Gajo Petrović, one of the founders of the *Praxis* journal, defined the group's programmatic orientation in the editorial of the first issue of the journal as follows: "The development of an authentic, humanist socialism is not possible without the renewal and development of Marx's philosophical thought."<sup>1</sup> The text titled "Why *Praxis*?" defines the purpose of founding the new journal quite candidly and determines its central themes and vantage points. By defining "an authentic, humanist socialism" as the

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<sup>1</sup> Gajo Petrović, "Čemu *Praxis*?", 3.

desired outcome, Petrović clearly took the position that existing Yugoslav socialism was neither authentic nor humanist. Secondly, by opting for Marx's philosophy rather than Marx's science and emphasizing the importance of renewing and further developing that philosophy, he quite openly set out a program according to which it is necessary to nurture and develop *philosophical thought* if we ever want to establish a political regime of authentic socialism. This intellectual orientation was a clear departure from Soviet scientific Marxism, from Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, and from the notorious "theory of reflection," which was the basis of the official doctrine of the Soviet-style dialectical materialism. A few lines below, Petrović wrote:

The contemporary world is still a world of economic exploitation, national inequalities, political unfreedom, spiritual emptiness, a world of misery, hunger, hatred, war, and fear. Old anxieties have been joined by new ones: atomic destruction is not just a possible future; it is already actualized today as a necessity and as a concern that poisons our lives every day. Man's ever-increasing success in creating means to "subjugate" nature is successfully turning him into an auxiliary instrument of his own instruments. And the pressure of mass impersonality and scientific methods of "processing" the masses are increasingly impeding the development of the free human personality.<sup>2</sup>

The terms used and the topics chosen are very revealing. These lines, written in the mid-1960s, may seem unusually contemporary, except that the anxieties of that time, including nuclear war, have been joined by new ones. The idea that we humans have successfully become "instruments of our own instruments," that we have been enslaved by the very processes with which we have come to dominate nature, is a very felicitous phrase and certainly sounds true. The gadgets and robots for everyday use that modern technology has provided us with were perhaps created with the intention of helping us in our work and our daily activities, and they are

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<sup>2</sup> Petrović, "Čemu Praxis?", 3.

supposed to save us a great deal of time and energy. However, they have also proven to be an enormous waste of time and resources, both mental and physical, considering that we have to constantly ensure that they are working properly, that they are updated, that their batteries are sufficiently charged, not to mention the fact that the apps available to us for social interaction (and especially for *asocial* interaction) consume most of our free time. The smartphone has become not an instrument that helps us navigate the world, but the structure of our world itself, so that in reality, it is we humans who must constantly adapt and keep ourselves up to date in this rapidly changing technological world. Hegel's dialectic of master and slave has found its latest confirmation in the functioning of modern devices.

In Petrović's text, we also find a binary opposition between what he called "free human personality" on the one hand and "mass impersonality" on the other. For Petrović, the free personality was an immediate and obvious goal of Praxis philosophy. It was probably the personalist thought of Zagorka Golubović, one of the key Belgrade members of the group, that can be considered as the most profound attempt to justify this position at the intersection of philosophy, sociology, and anthropology. In her memoirs, she defined it as follows: "One could say that the essential assumption of personalist theories is that the development of free personalities is a *conditio sine qua non* of social and cultural progress without imposed authorities and restrictions ... or that no 'higher goal' can nullify fundamental human rights."<sup>3</sup> She added that personalism does not mean liberalism alone, since "the autonomy of society and personal autonomy are mutually dependent."<sup>4</sup> Gajo Petrović arrived at a very similar conclusion when he rejected the idea that individuals must submit to class, since "*there is no revolutionary class struggle without free personalities* capable of raising themselves above the factual level of their class and of realizing their revolutionary, universally human potentialities." In this respect, he even regarded true socialism as a "cult of personality," while understand-

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<sup>3</sup> Zagorka Golubović, *Moji horizonti: mislim, delam, postojim*, 165.

<sup>4</sup> Golubović, *Moji horizonti*, 167.

ing the practices of glorification of leaders and great political figures as a “cult of impersonality.”<sup>5</sup> The Praxis group thus placed central importance on the concept of creative personality in the development of socialism, and their criticism of Yugoslav self-management in this regard was meant to be taken quite seriously.

Petrović most often used the term impersonality to refer to Stalinism, which was the central and most popular target of the Praxis group. Criticism of Soviet Marxism was also the most obvious point of agreement between the group and the official positions of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. Ever since the split with the Soviet Union in 1948, criticism of Stalin and the Soviet economic system was widely understood as the only correct patriotic position in Yugoslavia. In the above passage, it is therefore particularly telling that the obstacle to “authentic socialism” is defined in relation to the scientific method; even though this undoubtedly also involves a broader criticism of the Enlightenment project, as was characteristic of the Frankfurt School, the key question for Marxism was whether it (i. e., Marxism itself) should be understood as a philosophy or as a science. At the same time, we should add something that may not be entirely obvious from the above quotation, namely that the Praxis group was also critical of the specific Yugoslav political and economic system, the system of self-management. Zagorka Golubović pointed out that the official party criticism of Stalinism remained external, superficial, as the party never really used it to criticize “Stalinism within its own ranks” and to criticize its own practices – which, as she insisted, became the fundamental task of the Praxis group.<sup>6</sup> The group chose as its motto the idea of “ruthless criticism of all that exists,” which clearly included the existing reality in Yugoslavia – and the party structures were well aware of this.<sup>7</sup>

Let us return once more to Petrović’s editorial. His criticism of human subordination to technology is not only a criticism of Stalinist bureaucracy but can also be seen as a broader criticism of technological modernity

<sup>5</sup> Gajo Petrović, *Marx in the Mid-Twentieth Century*, 131.

<sup>6</sup> Nebojša Popov, ed., *Sloboda i nasilje*, 37.

<sup>7</sup> This is a formulation from Marx’s letter to Arnold Ruge from September 1843, MEW, Vol. 1, 344.

and the specific influence of probably the most important thinker of authenticity in the twentieth century, namely Martin Heidegger. The use of terms such as “instrument” and “anxiety” seems strategic. In the article that Petrović contributed to the first issue of the *Praxis* journal, in addition to the editorial, the connection between Heidegger’s thought and Marxist humanism is made quite explicit. Moreover, in the conclusion of the article, Petrović even directly linked the Praxis group’s position with Heidegger’s intervention in Marx. He writes:

Is not praxis that most authentic “mode” of Being that reveals the true meaning of Being, and therefore is not a special mode but the developed essence of Being? Is not praxis the starting point that makes it possible for us to see both the essence of the nonauthentic “lower” forms of Being and the meaning of Being “in general”?<sup>8</sup>

Heidegger’s concept of authenticity, or more precisely, *Eigentlichkeit*, of being one’s own, is in fact quite complex. Praxis philosophers in general employed the term authenticity to refer to the field of existentialist philosophy and, ultimately, to the field of humanism. According to this widespread interpretation, people must reject the everyday life of habits to which they have become accustomed in modernity and return to the “forgotten” question of their own being in order to come into their own, or “be who they are.” Only in such a return to themselves can their existence be authentic. From the perspective of Heidegger’s teaching, the problem with such an interpretation, and especially the problem of linking the concept of authenticity with actual social practice, is that it assumes that authentic human practice is even possible.<sup>9</sup> In this regard, it is very telling that in the German translation of his text, Petrović did not use Heidegger’s

<sup>8</sup> Petrović, *Marx in the Mid-Twentieth Century*, 189.

<sup>9</sup> Even though Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, where the concept of authenticity is one of the central categories, shares the historical moment with the rise of Nazism, it is by no means an exercise in Nazi metaphysics. For the purposes of this article, I can only note that *Being and Time* is an attempt to pose the right question, while Nazism was first and foremost an outburst of (wrong) answers.

term *Eigentlichkeit*, but replaced it with the term *Authentizität*.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps he found the French interpretation of this concept better than the original; or perhaps he was well aware that the translation had significantly shifted the problem that Heidegger had assigned to the concept. In any case, not only Gajo Petrović, but the Praxis group as a whole believed that Marx's concept of alienated labor, as found in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, could be adequately addressed with the proposal of authentic, creative human practice. Moreover, they believed that this could be achieved with the help of Heidegger's philosophy.

In fact, we can find some support for the connection between Heidegger's philosophy and humanistic Marxism in Heidegger himself, since in his famous letter "On Humanism" he spoke in surprisingly complimentary terms about Marx's concept of alienation; moreover, he explicitly related his concept of fundamental human homelessness to Hegel's and Marx's concept of alienation and pointed to the historicity of being itself. Heidegger wrote:

Homelessness is coming to be the destiny of the world. Hence it is necessary to think that destiny in terms of the history of being. What Marx recognized in an essential and significant sense, though derived from Hegel, as the estrangement of the human being has its roots in the homelessness of modern human beings. This homelessness is specifically evoked from the destiny of being in the form of metaphysics, and through metaphysics is simultaneously entrenched and covered up as such. Because Marx by experiencing estrangement attains an essential dimension of history, the Marxist view of history is superior to that of other historical accounts. But since neither Husserl nor – so far as I have seen till now – Sartre recognizes the essential importance of the historical in being, neither phenomenology nor existentialism enters that dimension within which a productive dialogue with Marxism first becomes possible.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Gajo Petrović, "Praxis und Sein," 40.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, 258–59.

While phenomenology and existentialism are incapable of productive dialogue with Marxism because they have not grasped the historicity of being itself, Heidegger naturally reserved the right not only to participate in such a dialogue, but also to win, or rather to prevail (to borrow his term *überwinden*). For him, homelessness was by no means simply something that humanity could eliminate. Instead, homelessness was a defining characteristic of human existence as ek-sistence, throughout the long historical arc of the modern age, because in this historical horizon, being itself revealed itself as something withdrawn from man, forgotten, abandoned, and thus, in a sense, self-alienated. In other words, no matter how hard we may try to eliminate homelessness through political and social measures, we will not even begin to address the problem of the alienation of being itself, and human essence will still remain something elusive. The “overcoming of homelessness” from being itself, as Heidegger formulated the challenge,<sup>12</sup> can therefore never take the form that can be imagined within the framework of humanism, and thus also not in the form of the Praxis movement’s authentic humanist socialism. But no matter how strongly and openly Heidegger criticized humanism, his humanist followers never took him seriously enough in this regard; the Praxis philosophers were no exception.

It is important to note that Gajo Petrović was well aware that Heidegger’s philosophy could only be of limited significance for the development of Marxist thought.<sup>13</sup> He believed that *Being and Time* undoubtedly speaks of alienation when it refers to everyday existence as inauthentic (*uneigentlich*), but he wrote: “For Heidegger, then, man’s alienation is not a historical stage, which in the course of further development can be overcome. Man as man is necessarily alienated; besides his authentic existence, he also leads a nonauthentic one, and it is illusory to expect that he will live

<sup>12</sup> Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, 258.

<sup>13</sup> And as pointed out by Dean Komel, it is also highly questionable whether it is justified at all, given Heidegger’s explicitly negative stance toward communism, to assume that the definition of alienation expressed in the above passage can in fact serve as a meaningful basis for a productive dialogue between Marxism and Heidegger’s phenomenology. See Dean Komel, “The Influence of Heidegger’s Thought on the Development of Philosophy in Ex-Yugoslav Countries,” 648.

in the future only authentically. At least on a social plane, this problem cannot be solved."<sup>14</sup> In other words, what distinguishes Marx from Heidegger is precisely the idea that a dis-alienated society is possible in practice.

In addition, Petrović was critical of those Marxists who believed that humans originally lived in an unalienated society and that alienation could therefore be understood as a kind of historical fall from grace. In this regard, he took a critical look at Engels' classic work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, and in particular at the description of the Iroquois society of the Onöndowa'ga (Seneca) tribe in North America. Engels describes it, following the work of American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan, as wonderful in its "childlike simplicity," as "communitistic," as a society where "all are equal and free – the women included," where life in accordance with ancient customs and traditions requires neither police nor courts; and he understands its decline as "a degradation, a fall from the simple moral greatness of the old gentile society."<sup>15</sup>

Even more important is Petrović's critique of Henri Lefebvre, a frequent guest at the Korčula Summer School, contributor to the journal *Praxis*, and one of the intellectual sources of the student movement in France in May 1968. In his work *Critique of Everyday Life*, Lefebvre, among other things, addressed the question of the origins of civilization through a reflection on old countryside celebrations, which in some places have survived "to this day." It is very interesting that, on the one hand, Lefebvre supported this reflection with "some fairly precise documents," while, on the other, he explicitly understood it as an exercise in imaginative representation, calling on us to "conjure up this country life" in our minds.<sup>16</sup> Although celebrations, as he acknowledged, are on the one hand contrary to everyday life, on the other hand they only intensify it – and in this sense they can reveal something universally true about humanity. Lefebvre's imaginative portrayal of rural celebrations is one of unity not only with the forces of nature, but also with oneself; in this image, human being "was basic and elementary, but at least he lived without being

<sup>14</sup> Petrović, *Marx in the Mid-Twentieth Century*, 86.

<sup>15</sup> Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of Family, Private Property and the State*.

<sup>16</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, 201.

fundamentally 'repressed.'<sup>17</sup> Petrović did not delve deeper into either Engels' or Lefebvre's theory, which is a pity, as both discussed the issue of sexuality and gender as part of their understanding of so-called primitive life. This exposes a blind spot of the Praxis group in general: it seems that their question of universal human essence did not encompass the issues of sexuality and gender difference. Instead, undoubtedly in the context of Heidegger's critique of humanism, Petrović dismissed Engels' and Lefebvre's ideas about the origins of humanity as "enthusiastic" and added that, in his opinion, Marx was more of a critic than a proponent of the thesis of the original non-alienation of man.<sup>18</sup>

The rejection of naive enthusiasm for primitive society is linked to another pitfall that Gajo Petrović avoided in his reflection on the problem of alienation – he avoided placing this issue in an eschatological, redemptive framework. It was Karl Löwith, responding to the publication of Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, who pointed out that the philosophy of history in Hegel and Marx followed the well-known formula according to which "philosophy of history is, however, entirely dependent on theology of history, in particular on the theological concept of history as a history of fulfilment and salvation."<sup>19</sup> As for Hegel, the connection to the Christian metaphysical tradition is made quite explicit, since he described the philosophy of history as a kind of theodicy.<sup>20</sup> With regard to Marx, Löwith wrote that at the center of his theology of salvation is the wage laborer:

Being completely alienated from himself ..., the wage laborer – this impersonal producer of commodities who is himself but a commodity for sale on the world market – is the only revolutionary force which can redeem society at large. The proletariat embodies modern economy as human fate in such

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<sup>17</sup> Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, 207.

<sup>18</sup> Petrović, *Marx in the Mid-Twentieth Century*, 86.

<sup>19</sup> Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 1.

<sup>20</sup> See G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, 41: "From this point of view, our investigation can be seen as a theodicy, a justification of the ways of God."

a way that his particular interest cannot but coincide with the common interest over against the private interest of private property or capital. Only in this universal and eschatological perspective could and did Marx assert that the proletariat is “the heart” of future history, while Marx’s philosophy is its “brain.”<sup>21</sup>

In Löwith’s presentation of the Marxist concept of alienation and the historical task that awaits the wage laborer as the embodiment of human destiny we can recognize a similarity to Heidegger’s existential-historical approach to the problem; and Löwith did indeed count Heidegger among eschatological thinkers.<sup>22</sup>

However, we cannot accuse Gajo Petrović of having such high expectations of the proletariat and Marxism; after all, he lived in socialist Yugoslavia, and his understanding of alienation was much more down-to-earth. He wrote: “Marx himself thought that man had always been self-alienated, but that he need not always remain so. Like Engels, he thought that man could and ought to come into his own.”<sup>23</sup> In his commentary of alienation, Petrović preferred to rely on Erich Fromm, another regular guest at the Korčula Summer School and a friend of the Praxis group: “In this sense, Marx in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* speaks about communism as a society that means ‘the positive supersession of all alienation and the return of man from religion, the family, the state, etc. to his human, that is, social existence.’”<sup>24</sup> For Petrović, alienation was not an inevitable element of the human condition, but neither was dis-alienation a fantastical or theological return of humanity to the promised land or to a

<sup>21</sup> Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 38.

<sup>22</sup> Although Löwith only discussed Heidegger in a few footnotes in *Meaning in History*, it is clear that he understood the concepts of future and resoluteness (*Entschlossenheit*), which are essential to the work *Being and Time*, as existentialist, but fundamentally eschatological concepts. See Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 252–53, n. 21; 255, n. 1.

<sup>23</sup> Petrović, *Marx in the Mid-Twentieth Century*, 87.

<sup>24</sup> Petrović, *Marx in the Mid-Twentieth Century*, 87. The quote from Fromm refers to Erich Fromm, *Marx’s Concept of Man*, 104. For Fromm, the abolition of private property is essential for overcoming alienation.

lost paradise. Precisely in this respect, in that he understood a dis-alienated society only as something *possible* in the future, and not as a historical necessity or theological destiny, Petrović freed Marx (and Marxism) from eschatological frameworks and, more importantly, more or less directly acknowledged the central role of historical contingency in Marx's philosophy of history. In this, his task, perhaps surprisingly, coincided with the endeavors of a completely different kind of Marxist philosopher, the anti-humanist Louis Althusser.

### Praxis and Edvard Kardelj

The Yugoslav authorities took the issues and efforts of the Praxis group very seriously. Branislav Jakovljević, author of *Alienation Effects: Performance and Self-Management in Yugoslavia, 1945–91*, believes that the success of the Praxis group, including the international reputation and recognition they achieved with the Korčula Summer School and the journal *Praxis*, and especially with their criticism of the bureaucratized system of self-management, which was not only agreed with by intellectuals but also resonated with the general population, contributed to the widespread student protests in Belgrade in June 1968. According to Jakovljević, the theory of alienation as discussed by the Praxis group played the role of a kind of mediator or even served as a theoretical basis of the political discussion between the many spontaneous social movements on the one hand and the state authorities on the other. Jakovljević writes:

Part of the reason Marcuse and other reformist Marxists kept coming to Korčula was that in Yugoslavia their ideas were not confined to street protests, but had at least some chance of filtering up to the highest levels of institutional politics. The theory of alienation was one avenue of this traffic between critical theory and state politics.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Branislav Jakovljević, *Alienation Effects: Performance and Self-Management in Yugoslavia, 1945–91*, 120.

Yugoslavia was extremely interesting to Marxist theorists because it offered – albeit to a limited extent – an experimental terrain for their ideas. Although the party leadership tolerated and even supported the Praxis group to a certain extent, the differences in their views on development and the concept of self-management were ultimately insurmountable. In the mid-1970s, the journal *Praxis* and the Korčula Summer School lost government funding; in 1974, the Zagreb members of the group were threatened with a ban on university work if they did not cease the activities of *Praxis*, while attempts had been made to remove the Belgrade members from the university ever since the student demonstrations of June 1968, which was ultimately achieved when the decision was escalated to the General Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Serbia in 1975. The *Praxis* journal had 11 volumes in total, from the first issue in September and October 1964 to the last, joint issues 3-5 between May and October 1974. The Korčula Summer School as an international forum was first held in 1963 (in Dubrovnik) and last in 1974, with the most notable edition taking place in August 1968, during the global student protests, under the title “Marx and the Revolution.”<sup>26</sup>

Edvard Kardelj, the leading intellectual force behind the idea of workers’ self-management as a specifically Yugoslav economic model, dealt in considerable detail with the criticism of the Praxis group in his influential and often reprinted work *Smeri razvoja* (*Courses of Development of the Political System of Socialist Self-Management*). He labeled the Praxis group as extreme, ultra-leftist intellectuals and, somewhat paradoxically, accused them of anarchism on the one hand and Stalinist tendencies on the other. In a characteristic passage of the work, Kardelj does not explicitly name the Praxis group, but refers to the slogan of the “ruthless critique of all that exists” and explicitly links it to mass protests: “According to the views of a good part of the ultra-leftists – including the majority of our own – the workers’ movement presents completely bureaucratized institutions which are merely a replica of the bureaucratized bourgeois

<sup>26</sup> See Nebojša Popov, *Contra fatum*; Dobrilo Aranitović, *Bibliografija časopisa Praxis*; Petar Milat, “Praxis i Korčulanska ljetna škola. Tragovi jednog desetljeća,” in: *Praxis. Društvena kritika i socialistički humanizam*.

society and state. ... The main and only form [for ultra-leftists] is direct action by the working class: wildcat strikes, factory occupations, street demonstrations, actions outside workers' institutions. This is, as the ultra-left emphasizes, a radical alternative to the institutionalized workers' movement, social democracy, and bureaucratized communist parties. In fact, it is a kind of modern aspect of anarchism."<sup>27</sup> And yet it is clear, as Gal Kirn, among others, has pointed out, that Kardelj took the humanist critique of the Praxis group seriously enough to ultimately incorporate it, at least in part, into his own concept of self-management.<sup>28</sup> Elements of such an absorption of humanism can be found in one of the most famous formulations of (Yugoslav) self-management by the late Kardelj:

Happiness cannot be given to a man by the state, by the system, or by a political party. Only the man himself can create his own happiness. But not alone as an individual, only in equal relationships with other people. In these relationships, he must self-govern and freely control his individual and general social relationships and – in appropriate democratic organizational forms – also the state, the system, and the political party as instruments of his own self-management. The vanguard forces of socialism and socialist society can therefore have only one goal – to create, depending on the possibilities of a given historical moment, conditions in which people will be as free as possible in their personal expression and creativity, so that they can – on the basis of social ownership of the means of production – work and create freely for their own happiness. This is self-management.<sup>29</sup>

There is undoubtedly at least a grain of truth in Kardelj's thought, which draws on the Marxist tradition and at the same time flirts with Thomas Jefferson's idea of the pursuit of happiness. A political system, whatever it

<sup>27</sup> Edvard Kardelj, *Smeri razvoja političnega sistema socialističnega samupravljanja*, 66.

<sup>28</sup> Commenting on the fact that Kardelj placed man's pursuit of happiness at the center of his concept of self-management, Kirn writes: "It is impossible not to recognise the ironic 'return of the repressed' man from the Praxis philosophy in Kardelj's humanism, at a time when the political horizon began openly adopting the Euro-communist tendency." Gal Kirn, *Partisan Ruptures*.

<sup>29</sup> Kardelj, *Smeri razvoja*, 9–10.

may be, is not possible without an extensive institutional and bureaucratic apparatus, neither of which can directly guarantee happiness, but can only hope to create the conditions for it. However, the positively defined goals of such measures – freedom to work, creating one’s own happiness, freedom of personal expression – were precisely the characteristic emphases of the Praxis philosophy. Although Kardelj harshly rejected Praxis as a political force, he adopted their positive goals as his own.

A particularly bold example of such appropriation was the speech Kardelj gave in November 1975 at the opening of the Political School of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia in Kumrovec in the Socialist Republic of Croatia. On the one hand, his address to future teachers of Marxism for everyday use is conceptually rather uninteresting and dull (with a few exceptions), but on the other hand it offers a remarkable insight into the pure expression of the direct relationship between the university as a system of knowledge and political power, so that in the history of political-philosophical speeches, it can perhaps even be compared to Heidegger’s infamous *Rektoratsrede* in May 1933 when the Nazis took over the university in general (and specifically in Freiburg). In Yugoslavia in 1975, when the forced silence of the Praxis philosophers resonated strongly among university and school staff, and when the official authorities finally achieved the exclusion of the “ultra-leftist” professors in Belgrade, Edvard Kardelj, the chief ideologue of the Yugoslav doctrine of self-management and Tito’s potential successor, placed the concept of practice (as the title already suggests)<sup>30</sup> at the center of his address to students of Marxism at the opening of the political school. Moreover, he articulated even radical criticism – criticism of all that exists – as the proper activity of the party: “As the working class, as a league of communists, and as a socialist society, we must be critical of ourselves and our practices. And we must be radically critical.”<sup>31</sup> There is no doubt that Kardelj saw the Praxis group

<sup>30</sup> See Edvard Kardelj, “Revolucionarna praksa in marksistično izobraževanje” [Revolutionary Practice and Marxist Education].

<sup>31</sup> Kardelj, “Revolucionarna praksa,” 78. Kardelj immediately added, however, that the criticism by the League of Communists of Yugoslavia was “productive,” while the criticism by the unnamed Praxis thinkers was “destructive.”

and its concepts as an important ideological opponent, and perhaps even the most immediate reason for the establishment of the Political School.

I mention all these details only to emphasize that the long-term influence of the humanist philosophy of the Praxis group in the context of the political and ideological history of Yugoslavia should not be underestimated. The central importance of the creative human personality in the political system became, through their intervention – and through the gradual appropriation by the official authorities – a prevailing, widely held opinion, even a political imperative, and certainly something that began to circulate as a self-evident truth, as a formula that was always at hand and could spontaneously appear on anyone's lips. When, in this ideological context, a new group of philosophers and sociologists emerged in Ljubljana in the late 1970s and especially in the 1980s, quickly establishing itself as the next most propulsive theoretical direction in Yugoslavia, the question of alienation had already exhausted its critical potential, and ideology became one of the central themes of social and political analysis.

### **The Role of Louis Althusser**

Legend has it that shortly after the first issue was published in October 1964, authors from all around the world began submitting unsolicited contributions to the attention of the editors of the *Praxis* journal. Word of the promising new Marxist journal spread quickly. Among others, it was Louis Althusser who sent his text for publication as early as 1965. The editors carefully reviewed his text – and categorically rejected it. If we are to believe the charismatic Milan Kangrga, one of the founders of Praxis, the rejected article was soon published in the French communist magazine *La pensée*, bringing the author great fame and recognition in the West at the time.<sup>32</sup> Kangrga never mentioned the title of the rejected article, but it may have been the text “Marxism and Humanism,” which was published in 1965 in Althusser's book *For Marx* by Maspero, a book that indeed launched

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<sup>32</sup> Milan Kangrga, *Šverceri vlastitog života*, 19; Popov, *Sloboda i nasilje*, 29.

the author into orbit. This assumption is supported primarily by the content of the text in question, its direct critique of humanistic Marxism, and its reference to the epistemological significance of Marx's intervention in political and social theory.<sup>33</sup> In addition, Althusser dealt in that text with the question of why the Soviet Union, as a state based on political Marxism, needed humanism and the question of human essence at a certain point in time – we can certainly assume that he wanted to hear the views of Marxists from Yugoslavia on these considerations. In his text on Marxism and humanism, Althusser rejected the entire humanist problem in Marx, from the concept of alienation onwards, as not without practical usefulness, but scientifically (or theoretically) irrelevant. Hence his conclusion:

Strictly in respect to theory, therefore, one can and must speak openly of *Marx's theoretical anti-humanism*, and see in this *theoretical anti-humanism* the absolute (negative) precondition of the (positive) knowledge of the human world itself, and of its practical transformation. It is impossible to know anything about men except on the absolute precondition that the philosophical (theoretical) myth of man is reduced to ashes. So any thought that appeals to Marx for any kind of restoration of a theoretical anthropology or humanism is no more than ashes, *theoretically*.<sup>34</sup>

All this must have stuck in the throats of the Praxis group; and indeed, they rejected Althusser's theory in general, not just that specific contribution. Althusser's epistemological question, grounded in Bachelard's

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<sup>33</sup> This is suggested by Borislav Mikulić in his book on anti-humanism and in a recent interview. See Borislav Mikulić, *Čovjek, ali najbolji*, 20, and Filip Balunović and Ivica Mladenović, "O jugoslovenskoj praksi filozofiji. Razgovor s Borislavom Mikulićem," 209. This assumption is not without problems of its own, because the text of "Marxism and Humanism" was not originally published in *La pensée* in 1965, as Kangrga has often stated from memory, but in the June 1964 issue of *Cahiers de l'ISEA*, which means before the first issue of the journal *Praxis* was published. Of course, it is possible that Althusser sent the article to the editors of *Praxis* for republication, hoping to reach new readers, while Kangrga recounted the event anecdotally.

<sup>34</sup> Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, 229–30.

theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis, was vehemently reduced to and completely misunderstood as an attempt to return to Stalinist forms of dialectical materialism as a variation of scientific reductionism. Althusser's epistemological and political Spinozism, according to which Marx's scientific definition of capitalism cannot, in itself, eliminate the ideologies that sustain capitalism, was understood as a direct opposition to their efforts at dis-alienation.

In his commentary of Althusser's *For Marx*, even Gajo Petrović, who was a rather precise and by no means naive reader, reduced Althusser's understanding of the relationship between the young and mature Marx to Stalinist Marxism, or to a kind of concession that Stalinism was able to make to the works of the young Marx, to a "liberalization" or "reasonable" correction of an overly simplistic Stalinist scheme.<sup>35</sup> It is particularly interesting that Petrović correctly understood the influence of Bachelard's epistemology in Althusser's definition of the break or cut in Marx's scientific work – but its influence, as well as the broader influence of linguistics and psychoanalysis on Althusser's philosophical thought, was, in Petrović's assessment, entirely subordinate to the question of the systematic suppression of the young Marx's works, which were (ostensibly) considered dangerous under Stalinism. He wrote the following about Althusser's division of Marx's works into several categories – early works, works of the break, transitional works, and mature works: "The main goal was arbitrary interpretation, as evidenced by the main concepts of Althusser's book [*For Marx*], which conclude with the radical Stalinist thesis that Marx was not a humanist, but a representative of 'theoretical anti-humanism.'<sup>36</sup> This reveals the core of the problem for Petrović and the Praxis group in general: the question of anti-humanism. The necessity of a humanistic and anthropological standpoint was completely self-evident to them.

A similar discussion took place in the Slovenian journal *Anthropos* in 1970 and 1971. In response to Boris Majer's critical depiction of structuralism, Marko Kerševan wanted to "draw attention to some misunderstandings

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<sup>35</sup> Gajo Petrović, "Razvoj i bit Marxove misli," 349.

<sup>36</sup> Petrović, "Razvoj i bit Marxove misli," 350.

of Althusser's formulation of problems."<sup>37</sup> In two issues of *Anthropos*, Majer critically reviewed the works of Foucault, Lacan, and especially Althusser, and in doing so – in keeping with the name of the journal – firmly defended the notion of man as a historical subject and as that which Marxism is ultimately all about. And even though Majer dealt with structuralism in much greater detail than the Praxis group (after all, he published a work devoted to *Strukturalizem* in 1971), his concluding thought can nevertheless be read, at least in part, as principled support for the position defended by Petrović in the editorial of the first issue of the journal *Praxis*. In the conclusion to his assessment of structuralism, Majer wrote: "The most disturbing and worrying thing is that man no longer conceives of himself as the creator of history, as a historical subject, but increasingly as an appendage of impersonal technological structures that completely define him, act in his place, and thus exclude him as a historical subject from history. In other words, this means recognizing the existing world as the only possible human world, accepting the domination of the reified world over man as an eternal and unchangeable fact."<sup>38</sup> The key term here is "impersonal technological structures" – whatever Majer had in mind with this, it is clear that, in his view, the problem with structuralism was precisely that it did not understand man as a historical subject and as an active being, at least not in the sense of a person, but as an "appendage." In this, I believe, we can easily recognize a similarity with Petrović's critique of the technological world and the subjugation of humans to their own instruments (see above), as well as the central importance of human personality in the later stage of Yugoslav socialism, where the ideas of "all-round development" and the "humanization of socialist relations" were enshrined in the constitution of 1974.

In his brief response to Majer, Kerševan defended Althusser and above all attempted to clearly articulate what neither the Praxis philosophers nor Majer were able to see due to their spontaneous, knee-jerk assertion of the centrality of human being. First, Kerševan pointed out that Althusser did

<sup>37</sup> Marko Kerševan, "Althusser in marksistična teorija v družbenih vedah," 142.

<sup>38</sup> Boris Majer, "Človek, struktura, zgodovina (nadaljevanje)," 110.

not reject the concept of the autonomous human subject because he believed that man was a non-historical being or that man as an individual was less important than ideas (or structures), but because Althusser considered the assumption of human autonomy as scientifically irrelevant. Kerševan writes: "Whether their actions become historical actions is not decided by [people themselves], their will, their intentions; this character is 'imparted' to their actions, or not, by the 'structures' in which they are involved; these structures determine the place their actions occupy."<sup>39</sup> In Kerševan's account, theoretical anti-humanism simply means that there is no reason to concern oneself with individual will or intentions when discussing historical causality. Kerševan's understanding of anti-humanism is thus compatible with Hegel's philosophy of history and must be read, as I suggest, in connection with Marx's famous formulation from the beginning of *The Eighteenth Brumaire*: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please in circumstances they choose for themselves; rather they make it in present circumstances, given and inherited."<sup>40</sup> I believe that Kerševan thus translated the question of structure into the well-known question of specific historical circumstances, without which it is impossible to conceive of action. Secondly, Kerševan emphasized that, from Althusser's point of view, the very concept of man is not only too general and too abstract, but above all unscientific. Althusser considered Marx to be an ahumanist or anti-humanist in exactly the same sense that modern science is methodically atheistic. And although Kerševan (along with Althusser) acknowledged that revolutionary humanism can also inspire revolution and has mobilizing power, the problem of humanism is that "it cannot provide an adequate analysis of social relations—only science can do that."<sup>41</sup>

Kerševan's response to Majer is entirely appropriate, and I believe that his explanation of Althusser's concept of structure as specific historical circumstances without which human activity cannot be properly under-

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<sup>39</sup> Kerševan, "Althusser in marksistična teorija v družbenih vedah," 143.

<sup>40</sup> Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in: *Marx's Eighteenth Brumaire. (Post)modern Interpretations*, 19.

<sup>41</sup> Kerševan, "Althusser in marksistična teorija v družbenih vedah," 148.

stood as historical is even original and productive. Althusser's epistemological Marxism can indeed be criticized, as Mladen Dolar put it in relation to the concept of ideological interpellation, on account that "it can explain its proper success, but not how and why it does not work," i. e., on account that it can explain the successful functioning of ideology, but cannot explain its transformation.<sup>42</sup> But while Dolar defended Lacan's concept of the subject as precisely that which interpellation cannot quite grasp in an "autonomous" subjectivity (i. e., performing ideologically desirable actions without the need for external coercion), Kerševan's solution to the problem of human subjectivity can be understood as implicit support for the Hegelian understanding of historical action. In any case, the controversy between Kerševan and Majer clearly shows how the new generation of theorists in Ljubljana abandoned the inherited alternative, according to which one can only oppose Stalinism and diamat by adopting a humanistic, anthropological Marxism or by affirming the concept of the autonomous human subjectivity.

Althusser's intervention in Marxism in the 1960s and 1970s was extremely productive and even explosive for Yugoslav social philosophy. With the thesis of an epistemological break, in the course of which Marx had to abandon humanistic, anthropological ideology and establish the scientific foundations of his new theory, Althusser touched on a sensitive area in which the philosophers of the Praxis group had only recently managed to carve out a space for thought that was independent of the official party and critical of its policies. Althusser's rejection of the theoretical significance of human creativity and free personality as nothing but ideology was completely contrary to their efforts. However, at the end of the 1970s, and especially in the 1980s, the talk of the central importance of the individual and the free expression of his personality in the system of self-management became part of everyday language at all levels of social and political administration. At best, the system could create conditions in which people could pursue their own happiness and creative expression. Even primary school teachers began to emphasize that students were

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<sup>42</sup> Mladen Dolar, "Beyond Interpellation," 78.

not learning because their teachers told them to, but for their own benefit; the reality of this humane approach was, of course, that the students were still learning because their teachers told them to, but now they also had to want to do so themselves. For a group of new critical thinkers based in Ljubljana, Althusser's outright rejection of such forms of "free subjection" was undoubtedly a refreshing move, certainly a step in the right direction. An even more important, decisive reason why Slavoj Žižek, Rastko Močnik, Zoja Skušek, and, on the other hand, Eva Bahovec, Zdenko Kodelja, and others accepted Althusser as their essential interlocutor was his explicit linking of Marxist themes to psychoanalysis, especially under Lacan's influence.<sup>43</sup> But this would already take us beyond the scope of this article.

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<sup>43</sup> As an example, the philosophy of education emerged as one of the central topics, among other things, because it was directly linked to Althusser and his thesis about school as the central ideological apparatus of the modern state. See in particular the thematic issue of the journal *Problemi* 23, 4 (1985) titled "A Well-Rounded Personality?", in which this supposedly central concept of socialist education was subjected to massive criticism.

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JELA KREČIČ

## Hamlet, Love, and Reasonable Doubt

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* remains one of the most intensely debated works in literary history. In this essay, I propose a reading centered on the theme of love, on the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia. More precisely, I will explore how the play's pervasive atmosphere of doubt – triggered by the ghost's revelation and sustained by Hamlet's skepticism toward everyone and everything at the Danish court – shapes and destabilizes the lovers' bond. Put differently, I will analyze how the failure to attain knowledge or certainty affects the very being of those involved in a romantic relationship.

To examine this question, I draw on René Descartes's *Meditations* which elevate doubt to a form of sublime madness, and on Jacques Lacan's interpretation of Cartesian subjectivity. Finally, I extend the inquiry beyond Shakespeare's text to consider how Ernst Lubitsch's comedy *To Be or Not to Be* (1942) offers a metafictional resolution to Hamlet's existential dilemma and proposes a more emancipatory vision of love in relation to doubt.

### Descartes avec Hamlet

Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, written roughly forty years before Descartes' *Meditations*, shares an important aspect with this philosophical treatise: they both conceive modern subjectivity through the lens of doubt.

To briefly summarize Descartes' procedure in the *Meditations*, he attempts to establish the certainty of the subject's knowledge. In the first meditation, he outlines several reasons for doubting the possibility of acquiring adequate knowledge: for example, our senses can deceive us, our perceptions are not always reliable, and we cannot always distinguish between dreams and reality. Yet some truths – such as mathematical ones – seem persistent and independent of our sensory apparatus. Even if my capacity for reasoning were somehow flawed by the grace of God, it seems unlikely that I would be wrong about these truths. That is why Descartes raises the stakes and proposes the existence of an omnipotent Deceiver: the most radical instance of doubt, since this malicious spirit is capable – or even predisposed – to deceive us about everything, including every perception and conception, along with basic mathematical truths.

In *Hamlet*, the protagonist's doubts arise after encountering the ghost of his father, who reveals that the current king, his brother Claudius, murdered him. The ghost simultaneously insists that Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, is innocent. Armed with this knowledge and a symbolic mandate to avenge his father, Hamlet nevertheless sinks into an acute state of doubt.

If we pause to reflect on the notion of an omnipotent Deceiver and consider Hamlet's predicament, we see that after hearing the ghost, he regards everyone as a potential deceiver. First and foremost, the Deceiver is incarnated in his uncle Claudius, the murderer who has attained both the crown and a new wife through an act of regicide, that is, through the ultimate deception. But as Claudius is now king, suspicion extends to the entire court, including Hamlet's mother (who may not be involved in the murder but is blinded by her infatuation with her new husband), Polonius, and, by association, Ophelia. Yet even the father's ghost cannot be entirely trusted and functions as a Cartesian omnipotent Deceiver. Hamlet himself acknowledges this when he stages the play-within-a-play in the so-called "Mouse-trap" scene. The father's ghost could, in fact, be the devil. In Hamlet's words:

The spirit that I have seen  
 May be the devil: and the devil hath power  
 To assume a pleasing shape; yea, and, perhaps,  
 Out of my weakness and my melancholy,  
 As he is very potent with such spirits,  
 Abuses me to damn me: I'll have grounds  
 More relative than this – the play's the thing  
 Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king (2.2.633–640).<sup>1</sup>

Since the ghost may have deceived him, Hamlet resolves to test his suspicions regarding the murderous Claudius by means of a theatrical performance that dramatizes precisely the theme of royal fratricide.

After the ghost's testimony shatters his world, Hamlet mirrors the Cartesian tortured subject, doubting everything and everyone. Unlike *Meditations* (where Descartes provides a proof of a truthful and benevolent God), however, Hamlet lacks the higher authority that would guarantee the validity of his knowledge – he can find no reassurance from the ghost, Claudius, Gertrude, or God. *Hamlet* thus can be read, in part, as a drama of seeking a trustworthy authority. This quest also has a political dimension: the corruption in the Danish government indicates a need for a more just ruler, ultimately represented by the Norwegian prince Fortinbras, as the Danish kings are proven corrupt and all die by the play's end.

If we can identify significant similarities between Descartes' subject and Hamlet, it is equally crucial to emphasize the differences between them. Hamlet's pursuit of certainty operates in a manner quite opposed to Descartes' method: he does not rely on philosophical deduction but on fiction – the play-within-a-play, *The Mousetrap*. He stages this performance in order to observe Claudius' reaction. Here fiction becomes the vehicle for truth – a notion that resonates with Lacan's readings of *Hamlet*.<sup>2</sup> There is no immediate or direct path to truth; rather,

<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*. All excerpts and references to *Hamlet* are rendered in "act, scene, line" form, with reference to the 2019 Cambridge University Press Edition.

<sup>2</sup> See Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre VI: Le désir et son interprétation*.

truth can only be apprehended through a carefully constructed imaginary framing.<sup>3</sup>

Appearance and deception are of crucial importance in *Hamlet*, although the protagonist's stance toward them is highly contradictory. He is critical of Polonius and Claudius who cunningly attempt to gain certainty regarding Hamlet's mental state. Polonius instructs his daughter, Ophelia, to extract from Hamlet evidence that he has lost his reason due to unrequited love. Yet Hamlet himself pursues certainty by feigning madness – a ruse intended to facilitate his investigation and the acquisition of knowledge. He despises pretense in others while simultaneously adopting the same method to advance his own agenda.

The protagonist frequently voices his aversion to the realm of appearances. When his mother asks why he seems so unreconcilable with the fact that people – including his father – must die, Hamlet replies: “Seems, madam? nay it is; I know not ‘seems’” (1. 2. 72–76). He further reproaches Ophelia for wearing makeup, thereby presenting a face other than the one God has given her. While Hamlet places his wager on the power of theatrical pretense, he nonetheless maintains faith in a truth that lies beyond deceptive appearances.

Returning to the question of the omnipotent Deceiver or the *evil spirit* in the drama, Hamlet himself may be considered as such a figure, particularly in relation to the two female protagonists. On the one hand, he cannot reconcile himself to the fact that his mother did not mourn his father long enough; he also reproaches her for the sexual pleasures she shares with Claudius.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, he is merciless towards Ophelia. It is apparent that, before the events of the play, they had been romantically involved. This is suggested indirectly, among other things through the letters he once sent her, assuring her of his devotion. The lines from Hamlet's letter to Ophelia are delivered by Polonius as he tries to convince Gertrude that unrequited love has triggered Hamlet's madness:

<sup>3</sup> See also Alenka Zupančič, “A Perfect Place to Die: Theatre in Hitchcock's Films.”

<sup>4</sup> One might note that Lacan's reading of Hamlet somewhat subverts the established psychoanalytic reading that finds in Hamlet a classical Oedipus desire for the mother. For Lacan, on the contrary, the crucial question for Hamlet is, what is his mother's desire, what does the other want? See Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre VI*.

Doubt thou the stars are fire,  
 Doubt that the sun doth move,  
 Doubt truth to be a liar,  
 But never doubt I love (2.2.115–118).

It seems there was a time when Hamlet protested his love to Ophelia in terms of absolute certainty: if she can doubt natural laws (the movements of the planets), even every truth, she cannot doubt his love. Now, however, he undermines every certainty regarding their relationship. First, he denies ever giving her mementos accompanied by love letters, then he accuses her of relinquishing her virtues, adding, “I did love you once.” Then he goes on to explain: “You should not have believed me, for virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it. I loved you not” (3.1.115–118).

Like an evil demon, then, he insults her but also robs her of any certainty in his love and, at the very least, contributes to her ruin, if not directly causing it. It is precisely this deadly aspect of love to which I would now like to turn our attention – namely, I want to examine how doubt in love touches upon the very core of the subject’s being.

### Descartes’ Doubts

We must therefore return to Descartes and his hypothesis of the omnipotent Deceiver. This spirit, as we recall, renders all my knowledge questionable, leaving me with no certainty about anything. From this premise, Descartes derives his famous *cogito*. The insight underlying it is that even if the evil spirit deceives me about every item of knowledge, I nonetheless exist as the one who has been deceived, as the one who has been seduced. If I have thought, if I have doubted, if I have persuaded myself of anything at all, then I have indeed existed – even if the validity of my knowledge remains in question. By the method of doubt, we thus arrive at the first point of certainty: the existence of the subject.

In the next step, Descartes seeks to secure a certain guarantee for the subject’s knowledge as well. The certainty of being is not the same as

the certainty of knowing. Only by proving the existence of a benevolent, non-deceptive God – the Other – does Descartes establish an instance that guarantees also the validity of the subject's knowledge.

The fundamental objection to Descartes – one taken up to a certain extent by Lacan in *Seminar XI* – is that *cogito* and *sum* (thinking and being) are not commensurate entities. To put it succinctly: the subject cannot choose herself as being. In the forced choice between thought and being, we are always compelled to choose the *cogito* (thought and meaning) at the expense of being. We are always already drawn into the symbolic order of the Other, which becomes the guarantor of our being. I must first exist within the symbolic – within the order of the signifier, meaning, and sense – in order to have any certainty about my own existence. In the words of Alenka Zupančič:

I can choose only meaning (the existence of the Other as the locus of signifiers), but with this choice I lose the immediate certainty of my being: my being is now mediated by the Other; the Other is the locus, the symbolic structure that precedes me and determines that and what I am.<sup>5</sup>

Certainty of being is thus mediated through the symbolic. Yet this forced choice of alienation comes with a remainder of doubt, which affects both the side of the subject of the *cogito* and that of the Other. Lacan's reading suggests that the subject's choice of the Other as the field of signifiers and meaning subsequently entails *separation*. The Other is not a perfect, complete structure; it cannot be fully reduced to sense or meaning. The signifying structure is itself marked by lack – the Other contains gaps or intervals (meaning, as it is generated, remains open, ambiguous) – and for this reason the Other functions as an enigma. Let us recall a well-known Lacanian quotation:

A lack is encountered by the subject in the Other, in the very intimation that the Other makes to him by his discourse. In the intervals of the discourse of

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<sup>5</sup> Alenka Zupančič, *Disavowal*, 58.

the Other, there emerges in the experience of the child something that is radically mappable, namely, *He is saying this to me, but what does he want? /* In this interval intersecting the signifiers, which forms part of the very structure of the signifier, is the locus of what, in other registers of my exposition, I have called metonymy. It is there that what we call desire crawls, slips, escapes, like the ferret. The desire of the Other is apprehended by the subject in that which does not work, in the lacks of the discourse of the Other, and all the child's whys reveal not so much an avidity for the reason of things, as a testing of the adult, a *Why are you telling me this?* ever-resuscitated from its base, which is the enigma of the adult's desire.<sup>6</sup>

The inconsistency, the incompleteness of the symbolic, poses the question "What does the Other want?", to which the subject responds with another question: "Do I have what the Other wants?" The subject is placed in the position of having to offer not only what she has, but above all what she does not have, which is precisely Lacan's definition of love: *donner ce qu'on n'a pas*, to give what one does not have. What the subject does not have is her very being.<sup>7</sup>

Separation thus illuminates the relation between the subject and the Other from a different perspective: both are marked by a lack, which is the result of their emergence through the forced choice between thinking and being. For the Other, this lack concerns the gap between signifiers – ambiguity or enigma, pertaining to the signifiers' logic; for the subject of the *cogito*, it is the loss of being incurred in choosing the signifier. The remainder of being that the subject is compelled to sacrifice in order to live within the symbolic, within the signifier, leaves a trace as non-being, which Lacan calls the *objet a*. This paradoxical object clings to the subject of the *cogito*, subordinated to the signifier. This non-being (a void in the place of being) is also, in this interpretation, the only thing the subject can offer in response to the enigma of the Other or the Other's desire.

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 214.

<sup>7</sup> I owe this argument to Mladen Dolar. See Mladen Dolar, "Cogito," 80.

The fact that Lacan illustrates the constitution of subjectivity through the forced choice by introducing the notion of love as the split subject's response to the ambiguous Other may point to a deeper connection between love and the constitution of subjectivity, as well as the possibility of knowledge. In love, the offered non-being (the paradoxical *objet a*) concerns a pair, that is, two split subjects who, in relation to one another, also play the role of the Other. The question, however, is what the two of them will do with the attributed enigmatic quality and this unusual gift of love in the form of the *objet a*. Their union finds no support in the symbolic; it exists as a fidelity to an event whose meaning, at the moment of its occurrence, is unclear – if indeed it has any meaning at all. And if, for both subjects, it means at least that it *means something*, and if the indeterminate meaning of what they form together must be given a certain form of the life of the couple, then this opens the possibility for the creation of love as described by Alain Badiou in his *In Praise of Love* – a love that can also be understood as the possibility of a re-creation of both subjectivities.<sup>8</sup> The scene of the Two, which the couple must construct, is also a defense against the ambiguity of the symbolic itself. Yet this reading might perhaps be better grounded in Lacan's radically different understanding of the *cogito* from his *The Logic of Fantasy*.<sup>9</sup>

In this alternative reading, the *cogito* finds itself on the side of the unconscious, in the field of non-being. In the forced choice between *cogito* and *sum*, the subject can now choose only being. The reasons for doubt culminate in the subject quite literally un-thinking all thoughts until nothing remains but the certainty of being (*I am*). The unconscious consists, more precisely, of those thoughts – that store of symbolic formations (dreams, slips) – which, as Alenka Zupančič succinctly notes, cannot count on the subject's recognition; from them no "I am" follows. On the contrary, their effect can only be: "This is not me."

"The thinking that is cut off and goes to the waste bin is precisely the unconscious."<sup>10</sup> According to this interpretation, the *cogito* is the site of

<sup>8</sup> See Alain Badiou, *In Praise of Love*.

<sup>9</sup> See Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XIV: La logique du fantasme*.

<sup>10</sup> Zupančič, *Disavowal*, 63.

non-being. “However – and this is Lacan’s key addition – this thing that is not there, this ‘cut-off’ part, does not disappear without leaving a trace, a gap: and this gap is the unconscious properly speaking; the consistency of the unconscious is that of the gap.”<sup>11</sup> It is a non-being that exists, that ex-sists.

This means that being, the choice of being (without thinking) is struck by the gap of non-being. “What is conveyed by a slip of the tongue or a dream is not some deeper or more reliable truth, but rather, the certainty that thinking goes on even though I am not there as the subject of thinking – that is, even if I am not there where I think, or I think where I am not.”<sup>12</sup> This constellation of split subjectivity is well illustrated by anxiety, that dreadful certainty of non-being, as Zupančič terms it: “The certainty at stake here, however, is not the certainty of being, but rather the certainty of thinking that goes on out there where I am not, and in this sense, the certainty of non-being.” Furthermore, “One might say that anxiety is ... the closest we can get to experience of the lack-of-being without repression or concealment.”<sup>13</sup>

According to this reading, love could be defined as the event that activates precisely the field of unconscious thought, in which we cannot recognize ourselves. Or love introduces a complete uncertainty of the meaning and sense of the big Other, which is at least temporarily suspended in favor of the unconscious thought. Love is an event that the subject cannot consciously choose (cannot anticipate, plan, or rationally decide upon). On the contrary, we might say, love chooses the subject. Only afterwards can the subject acknowledge that she loves this particular other. Love chooses the subject, suspending her being (in the symbolic, in the signifier). Or more precisely, non-thinking, the lack of knowledge, is what decides instead of the subject, and with it comes the dreadful certainty of non-being – that is, radical uncertainty about who I am, what I am, if I am?

The event of love results in an uncertainty of being (an inauguration of existential anxiety), and the crucial question is what the couple in love

<sup>11</sup> Zupančič, *Disavowal*, 63.

<sup>12</sup> Zupančič, *Disavowal*, 65.

<sup>13</sup> Zupančič, *Disavowal*, 66.

can do with this anxiety. Here we return to Badiou's figure of love as creation, which, following the Lacanian reading, is driven precisely by the suspension of subjectivity (being). The pair is given the opportunity to create their world, which in turn creates (or at least alters) the subjects' "I am," their being. Only belatedly does the couple, as this new creation, position itself within the symbolic order. The subject gains a certainty about her own being from the loving other, not from the symbolic – indeed, the certainty or rather meaningfulness of the symbolic is established as a consequence of the certainty of love.

In other words, according to this Cartesian-Lacanian reading of love, the original loss – the existential uncertainty of the subject at the event of love (the transformation into a subject of love, one might say) – can be soothed, stabilized, or domesticated through the concrete creation of the couple's shared life, which also restructures their symbolic order. In this context, the loving couple retroactively establishes the meaning or even justification of the symbolic, rather than the other way around.

Based on this frail and precarious constellation of love, it becomes obvious that love can be the scene in which the subject encounters the enigma of the Other in a more intense or even dangerous form, where there is always room for doubt (about love, about the loving other, and the loving subject herself). If we risk yet another Lacanian reading, marriage can be seen as the retrospective symbolization of the event of love, through which the couple suspends reasons for doubt about each other. In practice, reasons for doubt in the Other or in the shared love can of course always arise at any time and sometimes have a disruptive impact on the fate of the married couple, but at least in principle and for some period of time, marriage is a tool through which the subjects assure each other and the Other that their bond is undeciful, to use Descartes' term.<sup>14</sup> The big Other authorizes the couple's symbolic world and grants it a guarantee (Badiou might call this a guarantee of persistence), but it is up to the couple what they will do with this declared certainty. More precisely, a

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<sup>14</sup> It goes without saying that this is a very modern conception of marriage as an institution based on free will or free emotions, so to speak, of the two parties, and not on the parental, religious, or social constraints.

wedding ritual testifies that at least at one moment this love aspired to be eternal, and the truth of this commitment will be established in retrospect by the concrete practices of the couple's life (or love).

That love triggers a reconfiguration of the symbolic for the lovers is especially evident in cases of loss – whether through separation or death. The effect of this loss is often accompanied by the phrase “My world has collapsed,” indicating that with the loss of a beloved person one has lost the shared universe, and with it, the symbolic universe as the means of meaning and sense. And at this junction, we can return to Ophelia.

### **Ophelia's Story**

As we have indicated, Ophelia is exploited by drama's various characters. Everyone uses and manipulates her to gain better knowledge of one another. However, the key factors in her descent into madness are Hamlet's sowing of doubt and the brutal death of her father – also caused by her beloved Hamlet – which serves as the final push over the edge into madness.

The songs she sings and recites in her delirium are symptomatic; they blend the motif of grief over her father's death with mourning Hamlet, who has betrayed her love. She sings several songs, among which we find lamentations for Polonius:

He is dead and gone, lady,  
 He is dead and gone,  
 At his head a grass-green turf,  
 At his heels a stone (4.5.38–41).

Her next lamentation seems to be of another nature:

Larded all with sweet flowers,  
 Which bewept to the ground did not go  
 With true-love showers (4.5.43–45).

When trying to explain to the bewildered Gertrude and Claudius the meaning of her singing, she goes on:

Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's day,  
All in the morning betime,  
And I a maid at your window,  
To be your Valentine.  
Then up he rose, and donned his clothes,  
And dupped the chamber door,  
Let in the maid, that out a maid  
Never departed more (4.5.48–55).

Obviously, we cannot take her words, indicating a consummated relationship with Hamlet, at face value, but they at least confirm what her unconscious thinking – to use our Cartesian-Lacanian terminology – is struggling with.

It is not our aim to provide an in-depth psychoanalytic reading of what we could call a slip into psychosis, but two elements seem to stand out. Firstly, as said, we may conjecture that her delirium was triggered by Hamlet's attitude towards her and her father's death. Secondly, her delirious songs are, as Lacan would put it, already attempts at healing her trauma; they aim at rescuing her shattered world. The withdrawal of Hamlet's love during his apparent madness activated her unconscious thoughts, leaving her being in an entirely precarious condition. One might say that her suicide completes her surrender to non-being – a deed Hamlet himself is unable to commit, though he fantasizes about it constantly, and the most famous soliloquy in the play, "To be or not to be," debates exactly this question.

To sum up, one might risk the thesis that her slip into non-being results from Hamlet's persistent sowing of doubt about his affections toward her. We could say that Ophelia is collateral damage in the main hero's quest for knowledge, revenge, and moral or political restoration. Yet one might also speculate that the ease with which Hamlet sacrifices her for these seemingly noble causes could be the true trigger of her madness.

Hamlet's role in the destruction of Ophelia perhaps needed the 20th and 21st centuries – with the rise of feminism – to be recognized as such. Today, we would designate his behavior toward Ophelia as *toxic*, and his attempts to bewilder her as *gaslighting*.

The term *gaslighting* was coined with reference to the classic melodrama *Gaslight* (1944), which introduces a male character as an omnipotent deceiver. The movie portrays Gregory as an extremely malicious spirit who attempts to drive his wife Paula insane by questioning her mental faculties and reasoning. Gregory dismisses her perceptions – her visions, the dimming gaslights, and the sounds of footsteps in the attic – in order to convince her she is losing her mind.

Paula's husband forces her into the position of a Cartesian subject, thrown into uncertainty about her every perception. Yet the feeling that she is losing her mind is not the primary source of her uncertainty and anxiety; rather, it is Gregory's cold, contemptuous, and cruel attitude toward her supposed madness.

At one point, a benevolent spirit intervenes: the detective Brian, who assures Paula she is not mad, and that her husband was deliberately driving her insane. Yet neither Brian nor his explanation can calm her; indeed, when he reveals her husband's criminal past, Paula's world truly collapses. The paradox is that Paula can ultimately trust her perceptions and knowledge while being plunged into total uncertainty about her own being. The treatment she suffered from her husband ultimately drives her – not out of her mind, but *out of her being*. In other words, Paula could write perfectly reasonable philosophical treatises (on the question of *cogito* and *sum*, for example) while remaining uncertain of her own being.

There are many differences between Hamlet and Gregory – the most important one being that Hamlet's deeds are not primarily aimed at Ophelia. She is not his main target but rather his collateral damage. Also, Hamlet is, at least in the eyes of the other characters, himself mad, which should to some extent justify his cold demeanor toward Ophelia, although his apparent illness does not fully explain the change of heart in his love or why this change takes such a malicious and contemptuous turn.

There has never been much attention paid to Hamlet's role as a malicious spirit – an omnipotent deceiver, especially toward Ophelia, although his disdain for all female characters is highly pathological. Despite the loss he has suffered, there is no real justification for the way he abuses his mother or undermines not only women's reasoning but, more fundamentally, their very being.

As we see, there is a distinction between the role the symbolic universe and love play in the constitution of being: if the symbolic order collapses for any reason (as Hamlet's does with the appearance and revelation of his father's ghost), this is not as fatal for the subject's being as is the transformation of the beloved Other into a malicious spirit. One might risk the thesis that the birth of modern subjectivity that *Hamlet* introduces is symptomatically connected with the abuse or exclusion of women as less important subjects and less important beings.

I am not suggesting that Shakespeare or the play endorses Hamlet's actions, but it nonetheless reflects its time and ideology by excluding women and their subjectivity from the spotlight. They are merely tools used for the main hero's agenda.

Consequently, love in this drama turns deadly only for Ophelia, but it neither damages nor affects Hamlet's being. She is the one whose world is shattered by the loss of love, so much so that she literally ends up in non-being. Hamlet is indeed affected when, upon returning from England, he learns of Ophelia's death; at that moment, he jumps into her grave and swears:

I loved Ophelia: forty thousand brothers  
 Could not, with all their love, make up my sum (5. 1. 254–255).

However, none of this truly jeopardizes the certainty of his being. On the contrary. As Ophelia becomes the object of the hero's desire after her death, she helps restore his subjectivity and enables him to finally carry out his murderous project – as Lacan's interpretation would suggest. How else can we understand the dying Hamlet's request to Horatio at the end of the play to tell his story? It is the request of a subject who – no matter how

much Hamlet despises his own existence – still sees himself as worthy of a story.

The fact that Ophelia becomes important for Hamlet only after her death is again very telling. One can seriously doubt whether this love – which arises only after the beloved has perished – is true and honest, at least if we measure it by Badiou's concept of love. His idea of love as the creation of *two* is not an abstract ideal but something that demands concrete involvement with the other in everyday life. Only then can love live up to its concept.

### **That is Not the Question**

With *Hamlet*, we get a very dubious vision of love, a love that is in the last instance shattered by doubt. In the history of art, there is a great amount of literature and films that delve into this theme and the message we get from most of them is similar to *Hamlet's* – doubt can cause devastating consequences for all parties involved.<sup>15</sup> So the question is, are there any examples of alternative dealing with the always mysterious or even dangerous dimension of the beloved Other? Hollywood's comedy of remarriage is certainly a genre that highlights very concrete and pertinent reasons for doubting love, but nonetheless finds various strategies to resolve them.<sup>16</sup> However, I will focus on a film, Ernst Lubitsch's comedy *To Be or Not to Be*, which is not strictly a comedy of remarriage, but nonetheless focuses on a married couple and their love, tormented by doubt. Incidentally *Hamlet* plays the crucial role in their love games.

The film's plot is centered around the ensemble of the Polish National theater that joins the resistance against the Nazi occupiers. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (specifically its famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy) frames the story around the time before the German occupation and after a successful operation and escape of a group of Polish actors to England. I won't go

<sup>15</sup> Think only of another of Shakespeare's characters, Othello.

<sup>16</sup> I can only point to Cavell's famous book in this fascinating genre. See Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*.

into the details of how this theatrical group outwits the Gestapo, but will focus on the meta-fictional use of *Hamlet*, which in this film revolves precisely around a love couple.

The role of Hamlet is played by the famous Polish actor Joseph Tura (Jack Benny), and his wife Maria Tura, also a leading star of the Polish theater (Carole Lombard), plays Ophelia (at least according to my interpretation). Their relationship is strongly strained by suspicion. But comedy – especially Lubitsch’s – can point to a comedic yet philosophically interesting way out of lingering uncertainty.

Joseph doubts his own acting greatness, but even more so Maria’s fidelity. Soon we learn that his suspicions are not unfounded, yet Lubitsch sides with Lacan, who sees every jealousy, even if justified, as pathological. Why? Let’s wager a thesis that jealousy is the way a jealous individual protects their own being and tries to keep it undeceived. Descartes’ reasons for doubt are not of the same order as the jealous person’s reasons for doubting their loved one. Descartes tries to ensure the integrity of the subject’s knowledge, whereas the jealous person tries to secure the integrity of their being, seeing the other as someone who always potentially threatens it. In other words, the ideal partner for the jealous person would be someone who only endlessly reassured them. So, in jealousy it is difficult to speak of love as a creation; indeed, it is hard to speak of love at all.

How do Maria Tura, and her dramatic persona Ophelia, respond to the husband’s suspicion and insecurity? By simultaneously sabotaging both the hero Hamlet and the husband. When Hamlet/Joseph Tura begins the monologue, “To be or not to be,” a man in the audience leaves the theatre hall, which throws Joseph Tura – and Hamlet – off track. The film audience quickly learns that the man who walked out on Hamlet’s most famous monologue was a fan of Maria Tura, whom she had invited to her dressing room for a brief romantic rendezvous at the safest time when her husband was performing a key scene in the famous play.

This scene is nicely interpreted by Mladen Dolar. He sees walking away as the only correct answer to Hamlet’s notorious dilemma. When faced with this question, charged with all the existential weight, one simply has to walk away, not get caught by the forced choice it imposes. In Dolar’s

words: “To be or not to be? Sorry, I have to see my mistress. Comedy consists of answers, not of questions: the comedy of unexpected answers popping up in unlikely places, coming from another quarter than the direction aimed at by the question.”<sup>17</sup> And further: “If posing the question in these terms already implied the necessary answer ‘not to be,’ ... then the only way to choose ‘to be’ is to choose an out-of-place being with no place in this alternative, neither to be nor not to be.”<sup>18</sup> One could say that love demands precisely such an out-of-place being – or, better yet, a being that allows itself to be displaced; hence I might dare to propose that the structure of love is essentially the structure of comedy.

In Lubitsch’s film, this is underscored by a key feminist undertone. Maria Tura as Ophelia does not accept the framework set by Hamlet as a persona and Tura as a husband. To the question “To be or not to be?,” posed by two problematic male figures – Hamlet and the conceited actor Joseph Tura – the heroine Ophelia, through the actress Maria Tura, offers a truly feminist response: she simply ignores the hero’s and husband’s being. To these doubts, she responds by adding new reasons to doubt. In the film, Joseph’s jealousy and self-doubt mirror a Cartesian quest for assurance in love – a desire to vindicate his being through the other’s fidelity. But Maria, through playful sabotage, disrupts this dynamic. She refuses to be confined by Hamlet’s role or by her jealous husband. Her actions – ignoring his authority, the authority of Hamlet, and offering other reasons for doubt – become a feminist stand: not rejecting love but refusing to play by its oppressive rules. Her love does not seek to secure Joseph’s self-indulgence; rather, she opens space for mutual creation – an act of love as comedic displacement, not possessive anchoring.

It is important to note that Joseph’s search for certainty in the relationship and Maria’s accumulation of reasons for doubt function as a love game or perhaps even foreplay for both characters. It becomes clear that this dynamic is their personal theater, a mode through which they practice love. When the reality of war takes over their lives and the lives of the

<sup>17</sup> Mladen Dolar, “To Be Or Not To Be? No, Thank You,” in: *Lubitsch Can’t Wait*, 123.

<sup>18</sup> Dolar, “To Be Or Not To Be?,” 123.

Poles, they temporarily suspend all games, all doubts, and teasing. In tense situations, they are just a boring couple devoted to each other.

When things normalize and they successfully flee to England with the ensemble, they, however, return to their usual love-jealousy routine. The film's ending reinforces the feminist undertone – Joseph gets the chance to play Hamlet again in England. And when he begins the famous monologue, the familiar scene repeats: a spectator walks out of the hall, surprising not only Hamlet/Joseph but also Maria's former Polish lover.

In this, I see a happy ending of Joseph and Maria's love story, where love is generated through feigned promiscuity and staged jealousy. But we can also recognize a happy ending for Ophelia on the metafictional level. Through Maria Tura she gains the opportunity to free herself from Hamlet's exhausting being and his malicious gaslighting. If we doubt in order to protect our being, we at the same time destroy the possibility of a couple, of love. A being in love is out of joint, we might paraphrase the famous line from *Hamlet*, but precisely as such this being opens the possibility for the creation of the scene of Two. If love is to have any emancipatory dimension, it can only be a comedy.

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ANTHONY CURTIS ADLER

## Unmusical: The Politics of Music in Grillparzer's "Der arme Spielmann" and Kafka's "Josefine"

### Unmusical

Writing to Milena Jesenská, his translator and lover, Kafka relates his dream from the previous night. Overtaking the letters just sent, he suddenly travelled to Vienna to see her. Milena knew of his arrival, and, waiting for her to come meet him, he's surrounded by a small group of his own people, there as if to second him in a duel. Yet rather than supporting him with their presence, they talk among themselves, most likely about his affairs, and he hears only a murmur: "I could not and did not want to understand anything."<sup>1</sup> When finally – but only after first appearing ghost-like behind her husband – he and Milena find themselves alone, there begins "an insanely quick conversation ... all short sentences; it went *bang bang* and lasted almost without interruption throughout the dream."<sup>2</sup>

In the middle of recounting his dream, Kafka makes a parenthetical confession: "Do you know that I am completely unmusical, more completely than anyone I have ever known."<sup>3</sup> This is not the first time Kafka had mentioned his unmusicality to someone – Max Brod indeed discusses

<sup>1</sup> Franz Kafka, *Letters to Milena*, 49.

<sup>2</sup> Kafka, *Letters to Milena*, 49.

<sup>3</sup> Kafka, *Letters to Milena*, 49.

it at length in his biography – yet in the context of this “horrid” dream, unfolding in the most musical of European capitals, it acquires a deepened significance.<sup>4</sup>

For while the dream starts with a typical anxiety-inducing situation – arriving somewhere with an important purpose in mind – it is not the physical encounter with Milena that eludes him but something else: understanding, or, more specifically, the immediate understanding possible through living speech, conversation.<sup>5</sup> Hence the curious anxiety attached to overtaking his own letters – the letters that, throughout their affair, raced back and forth from Prague to Vienna and whose successful arrival occasioned so much worry. Overtaking his own letters means not only preempting a single act of communication but written communication as such; subordinating written communication – conditioned on the absence of the one to the other, indeed on the impossibility of shared immediate mutual understanding – to the immediate, fulfilled understanding that speech promises. Having lost faith in writing, the letter becomes a mere means to secure a liaison; a glorified, long-winded visiting card. The dream’s underlying anxiety is not that he won’t meet her but rather that he will; that, meeting, they’ll talk face to face – without understanding. It’s the anxiety that words will become a murmur or a staccato *bang bang*

<sup>4</sup> Max Brod, *Franz Kafka: A Biography*, 115–16.

<sup>5</sup> Alison Turner (1963), in an early study on Kafka’s relation to music, draws attention to the connection between music and understanding, suggesting that his relation to music mirrored his fear of meaninglessness and incomprehension. More recent work has also continued in this direction, while focusing more on the political than the existential. Especially significant is the work of Benert, who reads into Kafka a critique of Wagner’s political aesthetics, centered around a “cultic notion of musical community, according to which the Volk reconstitutes itself as such not through their active, collective participation in musical performance, but through their passive reception of the medium’s auratic message.” Colin Benert, “Notlagen’: Kafka’s Intervention in Wagner’s Musical Politics,” 125; see also Ido Lewit, “‘He Couldn’t Tell the Difference between *The Merry Widow* and *Tristan and Isolde*’: Kafka’s Anti-Wagnerian Philosophy of Music.” Such readings resonate with Deleuze and Guattari’s discovery in Kafka of a “a deterritorialized musical sound, a cry that escapes signification, composition, song, words – a sonority that ruptures in order to break away from a chain that is still all too signifying.” Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, 6.

*bang*; insanely quick, lacking the right tempo and measure, thus eluding understanding.

Kafka's unmusicality, his dream suggests, involves the incapacity for an understanding grounded in the immediacy and reciprocal presence of speech. Musicality is the deep foundation for the understanding belonging to the spoken word. Sensing everything at stake, Milena must have been taken aback by this confession. In a subsequent letter, Kafka reassures her that unmusicality, while definitely "a general human misfortune" like being unable to cry or to sleep, is, for him, not such a misfortune as it might seem. Inherited from his forefathers on his father's side, it's something tangible that connects him to them. Moreover: "understanding people who are musical means almost the same thing as being unmusical."<sup>6</sup> If musicality is the condition of the immediate understanding of speech, and hence of a politics anchored in the charismatic potency of the voice, unmusicality makes it possible to understand musicality, and thus to understand a politics that, in the very presupposition of the possibility of immediate understanding, cannot in fact understand itself.

## Aesthetic Education

Ubiquitous and desacralized, music is now everywhere – not as standalone entertainment, but as pleasure, an anodyne, a lure attending quotidian activities. It serves the commodity or has become a commodity: a signifier of prestige, affluence, hipness. Yet for a tradition tracing back to Plato, if not earlier, music is not only synonymous with human culture broadly conceived but has everything to do with the cohesion of the political community. As the mysterious, ambiguous power – think Dionysus, Arion, the Sirens – to create and destroy communities, it's essential to an education that, in equal parts moral and political, forms the bodies and souls of children as members of the polity.<sup>7</sup> In ancient Greek, being μουσικός

<sup>6</sup> Kafka, *Letters to Milena*, 61.

<sup>7</sup> Plato, in both the *Republic* (424 b–c) and the *Laws* (700–701), attributes great political significance to music, forbidding musical innovations in the ideal republic

(*mousikos*) means having a nature receptive to, and graced by, the gifts of the nine muses, “a votary of the muses,” “a man of letters and accomplishment”;<sup>8</sup> of these nine, only Terpsichore is concerned with something approaching music in the modern, narrow sense. The one who is *mousikos* is not just “musically gifted” but cultured, educated, skilled, even scholarly.

In the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, with the emergence of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline, this Platonic tradition is recast on the new basis of Kant’s *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (*Critique of the Power of Judgment*), which derives the judgment and experience of the beautiful from the free play of the representative faculties of the mind. No longer primarily mimetic, music – in its political, ethical, pedagogical function – will now be understood more specifically in terms of a play of sensations.<sup>9</sup> Yet one can also point to another nearly contemporaneous source. In the seventh walk of *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (*Reveries of the Solitary Walker*),

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and blaming them for the emergence of a life of “excessive liberty.” Likewise in the *Politics* (1340b–1342b), Aristotle defends musical education, carefully restricted to the “ethical” modes and excluding “professional” instrumental training. However, such views about music were not merely the specialized opinions of philosophers but reflected the importance the ancient Greeks attached to music and dance. As Werner Jaeger remarks: “Poetry and music had always been the foundations of the education of the mind, and had involved religious and moral education too. Plato thinks this idea of the power of poetry so natural that he never tries to find the exact reasons for it.” Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, 213–14.

- <sup>8</sup> Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, eds., *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*, 520.
- <sup>9</sup> Kant describes the role of “free play” in the representation of the beautiful in the following passage: “Thus the state of mind in this representation [i. e., the representation of the beautiful object] must be that of the free play of the powers of representation in a given representation for a cognition in *general*.” Aesthetic pleasure, he further argues, is nothing else than the “consciousness of the merely formal purposiveness in the play of the cognitive powers in the case of a representation through which an object is given,” and this pleasure, which itself has a “causative power,” inclining us to “linger over the consideration of the beautiful,” is the ultimate *a priori* ground of the judgment of taste. This is the kernel of the complex argument of Kant’s account of beauty, and alone accounts for the paradoxical nature of the judgment of taste: its subjective universality. Kant’s attitude toward music itself is complex: in his ranking of the arts, it comes right after poetry, yet if judged according to the culture it provides for the mind, it would come in last place. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 102, 107, 201–6.

Rousseau describes the pleasures afforded him by his botanical research. For Rousseau, botany would be, in Kantian terms, a fundamentally aesthetic pursuit, aiming not at practical knowledge of plants' medicinal properties but at the rapturous, ecstatic contemplation of nature in its rich tapestry of colors and forms.<sup>10</sup>

Within the German tradition, Schiller first brings the connection between musicality, broadly conceived, and politics into a clear light. While sharing Kant's criticism of music's predominately sensual nature, and while still regarding poetry as the highest artform, he also appreciates the deep connection between music and aesthetics.<sup>11</sup> Thus, in a letter to Goethe, written March 18, 1786, and cited by Nietzsche in *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* (*Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*), he remarks that his poetic compositions begin with a musical mood.<sup>12</sup>

More sensual than poetry, since its material – sound – is an object of immediate perception and lacks rational content, music, this implies, nevertheless comes closest to a pure representation of the aesthetic state as such, the playful accord of the faculties of cognition. It is in this context that we might understand the following remarks from Kafka's diaries:

Schiller somewhere: The main thing (or something like that) is “to transform affect into character ...”<sup>13</sup>

Even more, I believe something is happening in me that is very close to Schiller's transformation of affect into character ...<sup>14</sup>

The passage invoked by Kafka comes from Schiller's “Über die Verbindung des Animalischen und Geistigen in dem Menschen [On the Connection between the Animal and Spiritual Nature of Man].”<sup>15</sup> Though written in 1780, Schiller, around twenty-one at the time, already anticipates the

<sup>10</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, 119.

<sup>11</sup> Kant, *The Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 202.

<sup>12</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Kritischen Studienausgabe*, 1:43.

<sup>13</sup> Franz Kafka, *The Diaries*, 123.

<sup>14</sup> Kafka, *The Diaries*, 145.

<sup>15</sup> See Friedrich Schiller, “Über die Verbindung des Animalischen und Geistigen in dem Menschen,” in: *Sämmtliche Schriften*, 1:171.

most important thesis of the aesthetic works written in the wake of the French Revolution: the concept of aesthetic education. In his *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* (*Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*), he will argue that the ultimate goal of politics – replacing an arbitrary political order formed by violence and chance with a rational political order – is only possible through an education cultivating each individual's aesthetic disposition.<sup>16</sup> Characterized by the anarchic yet harmonious play of the faculties, the aesthetic disposition mirrors an ideal political order where cultivated inclinations of the multitude freely unfold without creating chaos. While such transformation of affect into character is already implicit in Aristotle's understanding of habit as second nature in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, it is crucial to Schiller's notion of aesthetic education.<sup>17</sup>

Kafka's diary entries are from November 9, 1911, and December 8, 1911 – not quite a year before the beginning of his epistolary affair with Felice Bauer and the composition of his “breakthrough” work, “Der Urtheil [The Judgment].” Near the beginning of his journal, Kafka spends several pages – apparently, several aborted drafts beginning with a similar phrase – reflecting on the harm done to him by his own education.<sup>18</sup> His reproach touches not only his teachers or his parents but some of his relatives, houseguests, writers, girls from dancing lessons, a swimming master, an usher, a school inspector, people met only once on the street, and even a cook, who, in fact, seems the focus of special attention.<sup>19</sup> He ends with a striking image:

I should have been the little ruin dweller, hearkening to the cries of the jackdaws, flown over by their shadows, cooling off under the moon, burnt by the sun, which, streaming through the rubble, would have shone for me from all sides on my bed of ivy, even if at first I would have been a little weak under the pressure of my good qualities which would have had to grow in me with the power of weeds.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Friedrich Schiller, *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen*.

<sup>17</sup> See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103a.

<sup>18</sup> Kafka, *The Diaries*, 7–13.

<sup>19</sup> Kafka, *The Diaries*, 8–9.

<sup>20</sup> Kafka, *The Diaries*, 9.

This fantasy of an impossible natural upbringing – almost a caricature of Rousseau’s educational philosophy – goes hand in hand with an aesthetic-moral reform; an aesthetic-moral reeducation seeking to remedy a nature ruined by bad education. Such an education, moreover, has a clear end: marriage, children. In an entry from November 14, 1911, he writes: “It seems so awful to be a bachelor ...”<sup>21</sup> Marriage is not yet a political relationship – the *polis* is different in kind from the *oikos*. Yet as the simplest and most fundamental but also most absolute and difficult relationship, it counts as the precondition of all politics; if even in marriage the self cannot exist in relationship to others without either dominating or being dominated, then we are doomed never to leave the natural condition, where political relations are governed by coercion. Marriage, as it were, is the prelude to all true partnership. Yet if, conversely, marriage cannot be understood as a mere contract, governed by a principle of equitable exchange, then social-contract theory, the basis of liberalism, also cannot offer a solution to the conundrum of politics.

Kafka intuited the deep connection between music and aesthetic education; he recognized that the capacity for music is at the root of the aesthetic capacity; that music presents the very schema of an anarchic but orderly relationship of faculties. And, at the outset of his literary career, he sought his own aesthetic education or re-education, forming affect into character. An affective reform would make possible not only his own private happiness but a happy marriage. When, seven years before his letter to Milena, he confesses to Felice Bauer his incapacity to appreciate flowers, adding that this incapacity “is associated to some extent with my inability to appreciate music, at least I have often sensed a connection,” he senses nothing less than his own unreceptivity for the purely aesthetic experience first envisioned by Rousseau.<sup>22</sup> Being fundamentally unmusical means lacking the capacity for the aesthetic education by which one could become a member of a harmonious whole without sacrificing one’s individuality. For the unmusical, indeed, even the simplest union, marriage, could not be possible; there can only be struggle.

<sup>21</sup> Kafka, *The Diaries*, 127.

<sup>22</sup> Franz Kafka, *Letters to Felice*, 218–19.

Yet his remarks to Milena suggest that while being unmusical prevents ordinary understanding – the understanding possible in the immediacy of being together and speaking together – it also allows another kind of understanding. For those who are musical, and who understand each other in the immediacy of presence, can never really understand themselves, since this would require stepping outside the circle of immediacy. Thus unmusicality, while banishing one from the project of aesthetic education, might allow the thinking of another politics – a politics based on another kind of understanding, another kind of community. Perhaps it is a question of understanding the limit to understanding – that which immediate understanding can never grasp. Moreover, though, and this is our more immediate concern, unmusicality becomes the condition of a new kind of literature.

### The Poor Musician

In one of his letters to Milena, Kafka includes a copy of Franz Grillparzer's "Der arme Spielmann [The Poor Musician]" "not because it means so much to me; although it once did years ago."<sup>23</sup> Yet even this apparent indifference, he remarks in a postscript to another letter, is a feint. He was only being cautious in saying it didn't mean anything to him; in fact, he's ashamed of the story, as if he'd written it himself.<sup>24</sup> He then goes on to list "a number of defects, ridiculous moments, dilettantish features, and deadly affections (which are especially noticeable when read aloud, I could show you where)."<sup>25</sup> Yet even these criticisms, peculiar and exaggerated as they are, seem to arise, as Brod suggests, from his "exaggerated self-identification with the author."<sup>26</sup> Grillparzer's story touches Kafka so intimately that he can only regard it as his own work, subjecting it to a criticism all the more exacting – as unrelenting as the criticism that he exerted on

<sup>23</sup> Kafka, *Letters to Milena*, 66.

<sup>24</sup> Kafka, *Letters to Milena*, 84.

<sup>25</sup> Kafka, *Letters to Milena*, 84.

<sup>26</sup> Brod, *Franz Kafka*, 223.

himself and his works – despite all his affection for it. For there can be no doubting the deep meaning Grillparzer’s novella had for Kafka. In a diary entry dated August 9, 1912, Kafka, who has just read “The Poor Musician” aloud, records his “recognition of what is manly about Grillparzer,” and goes on to list, among other things, the “calm command over himself. The slow pace that neglects nothing. The immediate readiness, when it’s necessary, no sooner, for he has long seen everything coming.”<sup>27</sup>

“Der arme Spielmann” begins with the narrator walking through Brigittenau, an outlying district of Vienna, on the first Sunday in July after the full moon. This Sunday, this year as every year, is a “proper folk festival [*Volksfestival*], if ever a festival has earned the name.”<sup>28</sup> For indeed the entire people (*Volk*) has assembled – and even the more elevated members of society, like the narrator himself, are only present in their capacity as members of the people. As such a folk festival, it involves the people coming together to celebrate itself. While ostensibly celebrating the anniversary of some local churches, the apparently worldly, profane nature of the festival, bereft of special liturgical significance, suggests that, rather than celebrating the church as the hierarchical institution guiding the people toward God through the spiritual authority of the priesthood, the people are in fact subverting its sacralization. By repeating the consecration through a celebration of its anniversary, thronging in mass to the site of the consecration, they are returning the church to its origin in the people; as if recalling that every church is in essence an *ekklēsia*, a gathering of the people. The people gathers around itself, first becomes present and visible to itself, brought to itself through its spontaneous desire for sociality. Thus, it repeats the original, anarchic genesis of the people, preserving the people through such repetition.

Music must play a vital role here. Belonging to the people, never standing *outside* or *apart from* the people, the musician nevertheless gains a certain distance from the people and, through this distance, is able to play *to* them, guiding them into a certain more orderly, cohesive, harmonious

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<sup>27</sup> Kafka, *The Diaries*, 224.

<sup>28</sup> Franz Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 7.

formation. For the people becomes present to itself through hearing and understanding a common music giving voice to its own feelings, passions, yearnings. Neither a special technical facility nor inborn talent, musicality, in this radical sense, is precisely the ability of the musician, without ceasing to belong to the people, to take distance from the people through the accomplished exhibition of that which belongs most intimately to the people itself.

As a dramatist, the narrator is the spiritual descendent of musicians – Ancient Greek tragedy, after all, originated with the chorus. Thus it is no surprise that he too, as a “passionate lover of human beings [*Menschen*], especially of the common folk [*Volkes*]” finds the “unbridled applause of an overstuffed theater ten times more interesting, indeed instructive ... than the cleverly contrived judgments of a literary matador, crippled in body and soul, swollen like a spider from the blood of exsanguinated authors.”<sup>29</sup>

But while drawn to the gathered throngs, the narrator never ceases to distinguish himself from them, imagining that his own *anthropological* impulse, as he puts it, were somehow different than the people’s desire to witness and be surrounded by and gather around itself. And indeed, as musician, the narrator must somehow be able to believe this. But if the narrator is drawn to the festival to learn from the people, and thus to refresh the musicality that he as a successful dramatist must surely possess, what he finds there, at the threshold to the festival – causing him to lose interest in the festival, and the people, and turn away – is something different: an unmusicality more captivating than any music.

For following his preamble, the narrator recalls a curious incident from the festival two years earlier. Just about to enter the fairgrounds surrounding the Brigittenau church, he passes through a place where a few hapless musicians, among them a peg-legged invalid and a crippled boy, were busking, hoping to glean the first fruit of the crowd’s generosity as it swarmed into the festival grounds.<sup>30</sup> One, in particular, commands the narrator’s entire attention: a bald, hatless man, perhaps already in his seventies, dressed in a threadbare but clean overcoat and playing an old

<sup>29</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 7.

<sup>30</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 9.

decrepit fiddle. He keeps the tact not only with his foot but through an extravagant movement of his entire body:

But all these efforts to bring restraint into his performance were futile, for what he played seemed like an incohesive sequence of tones without tempo and melody. Yet he was entirely immersed in his work: his lips twitched, his eyes were rigidly fixed on the sheet music in front him – yes, genuine sheet music!<sup>31</sup>

The hats of the other musicians, playing by ear and memory, overflow; his, pitched in front of his music stand, remains empty. Even so, he continues to play for a while more, and then, to the narrator's surprise, mutters some words of learned Latin – *sunt certi denique fine* – packs his violin and music stand back up, and carves his way, as if returning home, through the masses streaming into the festival grounds.<sup>32</sup> Filled with “anthropological ravenousness,” intrigued and perplexed by so many contradictions – his “wretched yet noble figure, such undefeatable cheerfulness, so much artistic passion alongside such ineptitude” – the narrator follows him through the crowds, loses him, and eventually finds him again, playing before of a group of rude boys who, unhappy with his waltz, walk off scolding and cursing.<sup>33</sup>

His conversation with the musician only confirms these contradictions. Asked why he left so early, depriving himself of the chance for greater profit, the musician remarks that, while he plays the whole day for “the noisy people [*die lärmende Leute*],” the evening belongs to him and his art; “then I play from imagination, thus for myself without notes. Fantasizing, I believe, the music books call it.”<sup>34</sup> Visiting the musician in a single room shared with two apprentice craftsmen, the narrator discovers that his evening playing is even odder and less musical than his public performance.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 9–10.

<sup>32</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 10.

<sup>33</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 12.

<sup>34</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 13.

<sup>35</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 17.

Some light is cast on these mysterious contradictions, however, when the musician recounts his own life story. Born to a prosperous and powerful family – his father was a *Hofrat*, an imperial councilor who “under the modest title of a bureau chief exerted an enormous [*ungeheuren*], almost minister-like influence” –, the second of three brothers, he lagged far behind them in his studies.<sup>36</sup> Despite his father’s machinations, he failed the school exam – bungling an answer to a question given to him in advance.<sup>37</sup> His father then stops speaking to him, though letting him still live at home and eventually engaging him as a copyist in his chancellery.<sup>38</sup>

Sitting in his father’s house at dusk one day, lost in his own thoughts, he hears a song “so simple, so stirring, with the emphasis so rightly placed, that one hardly needed to hear the words.”<sup>39</sup> When he tries to sing it, however, he finds that he lacks the voice to hold the melody. It is at this moment that he discovers his old violin, abandoned from his youth, though still in tune – a servant, it seems, played it in his absence.<sup>40</sup>

As I led the bow across the strings, lord, it was as if God’s finger had touched me. The tone pressed into me and then back out. The air surrounding me was as if pregnant with drunkenness ... I kissed the violin and pressed it to my heart and played on and on.<sup>41</sup>

The source of the entrancing song, he later learns, is an unpretty girl, the daughter of a baker, who would come to the chancellery during lunch to hawk her goods.<sup>42</sup> She promises to have a client of her father’s, an organist, write down the notes of her song for him, but when he comes by some weeks later to retrieve the sheet music, he is spotted by one of his father’s

<sup>36</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 22.

<sup>37</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 23–24.

<sup>38</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 25.

<sup>39</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 26.

<sup>40</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 27.

<sup>41</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 27.

<sup>42</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 29.

servants.<sup>43</sup> Suspecting him of disgraceful behavior, his father casts him out from the house.<sup>44</sup>

Not long after, a series of disasters befall the family; one brother dies, the other is forced to flee the country, and when his father, harried by his enemies, finally succumbs to a stroke, the hapless middle son is left sole heir.<sup>45</sup> He eventually renews relations with Barbara, the baker's daughter, and is on the verge of getting engaged to her – he now has her father's blessings – and opening his own copying business when he discovers that his entire fortune, naively entrusted to the chancellery secretary, had been swindled away.<sup>46</sup> Barbara marries the butcher that had been wooing her, and, his marriage plans shattered, he decides to dedicate his life, with the little money remaining to him, to music.<sup>47</sup>

The poor musician's harrowing story teaches that unmusicality, far from being a simple absence, a lack, not only has its own constitutive structure but is more fundamental, more originary – as if musicality itself were founded in unmusicality, were characterized by the absence of unmusicality, rather than vice-versa. The positive essence of unmusicality is a receptivity to the people's voice, experienced as something divine – *vox populi, vox dei* – together with the absence of a voice answering to this voice, copying it, repeating it. It is the experience of a voice not only distanced from itself but incapable of hearing and understanding in the immediate proximity of speech. Or indeed, the very capacity to break from the immediacy of the people in its immediate self-presence without ever ceasing to hearken to the people, belonging (*gehören*) to them in their constitutive longing.

If the people's voice is the voice of God, this is so only from the distance that unmusicality first discovers. When the voice is heard without a voice answering to it, a two-fold mediation becomes possible: the mediation of the instrument, substituting for the absent voice, and the mediation

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<sup>43</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 33–37.

<sup>44</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 38.

<sup>45</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 38–39.

<sup>46</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 42.

<sup>47</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 53–54.

of writing, compensating for failed memory, or even for the very impossibility of grasping the sung notes such that they could be repeated. The people's divine voice, interrupted, makes possible the touch of the divine hand. It is only from this unmusicality, which first introduces a fissure into the immanence of the people, that musicality becomes possible. Musicality, so understood, *masters* this double mediation, restoring a semblance of the broken immanence. The essence of such musicality is virtuosity.

By birth, the poor musician belongs to the most elevated rank of the people: those commoners who, by mastery of the apparatus of governance, have been taken into the confidence of kings. Since ancient times, such mastery has depended on writing – the first bureaucrats, indispensable for the disposal of royal power, were scribes. While the poor musician is slow, a poor student, he, far from being illiterate, is, in a way, *too literate*, too much bound to the written word. His predicament is a literacy without virtuosity opposed to the virtuosity without literacy that characterizes the naive folksongs through which the “genius of the people” finds expression. Whereas his “brothers leapt around like antelopes from peak to peak in the objects of study,” he couldn't skip over anything; missing even one word, he had to begin anew.<sup>48</sup> It is as if he could find no way back from writing to smooth, flowing speech. Indeed, when he fails his school exam, it's not just that he forgot the lines of Horace; he even failed to hear the repeated promptings of the schoolmaster.<sup>49</sup>

Telling, in this regard, is his manner of playing: what most eludes him, whose very lack he can't even comprehend, is the semblant continuity that the virtuoso elicits as he passes from writing back to fluent speech, from the written note to the performed sound. But just this incapacity brings him closest to divine harmony:

His interpretation differentiated only two things: the consonance [*Wohlklang*] and the dissonance [*Übelklang*], of which the former pleased,

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<sup>48</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 23.

<sup>49</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 24.

delighted him, whereas he, as much as possible, avoided the latter, even when it was harmonically justified.<sup>50</sup>

Rejecting the subtle interweaving of consonance and dissonance, a *chiar-oscuro* allowing music to conjure forth subtle nuances of a fallen world, he tries to seize on the harmony as if it could appear alone, in its purity – an absolute presence bereft of all dialectical intrigue. Musical virtuosity, mastering the double mediation of language and instrumentality, demands forgetting this positive and absolute harmony. Taking the place of a pure consonance, unmediated by dissonance, is an infinitely mediated relation between harmony and dissonance, melody and harmony, tone and rhythm, content and form; all that which is, in fact, the essence of musicality.

We recall Kafka's words to Milena: "understanding people who are musical means almost the same thing as being unmusical." Grillparzer's novella illuminates this cryptic remark: so far as musicality is the virtuosic forgetting of an original unmusicality, restoring the semblant immanence of speech, then the understanding it commands, the glib semblance of understanding, is in fact a misunderstanding, and indeed a misunderstanding that misunderstands itself, since it can't even tell that it's not understanding – that what seems like understanding is merely the lack of interruption, the absence of breaks and gaps and caesura; mere continuity. Unmusicality understands those who are musical since it understands their own self-misunderstanding. But it is not only this: it also *hears* the irruption of the absolute, the pure voice, the original harmony. Hears and responds – *with writing*. For writing, here, is neither a supplement to speech nor an ultra-transcendental, if paradoxical origin. If, on the one hand, writing exists as its own domain, apart from the immanence of speech – the domain of the scribe, the bureaucrat – it nevertheless responds to the irruption of the voice as a divine presence shattering the calm and poise of the semblant, indeed *virtual* world of the virtuosity. Only through unmusicality can the musician stand *off* from the people

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<sup>50</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 20.

rather than getting lost in their virtuosity. And hence the formation of the people itself begins with the unmusical musician.

## Virtuosity and Repetition

It's strange that Kafka never once mentioned "The Poor Musician" to Felice herself, even though this reading, to judge by his diary, occurred just as their correspondence was flourishing. It is as if, having regarded it from the beginning as *his own* story, it represented an aspect of himself that he could scarcely admit to Felice: not his unmusicality *per se* but the meaning of this unmusicality, itself so intimately tied to his relationship with the opposite sex (it is, indeed, only to himself and girls or women that he will speak of the story). What his unmusicality means is the impossibility not only of *immediate, spoken rather than written understanding*, but of existing fully and in his truth as a member of society; hence the impossibility not of physical coitus, not of the most intimate epistolary exchange, but of a socially sanctioned, celebrated, fruitful relation with one woman: *marriage, legal paternity, children*.

But comprehending such unmusicality demands recognizing that marriage, paternity, children belong to the semblant order, the order of a virtuosic, virtual sociality that the writer, pursuing a true vocation, must relinquish – not because it gets in the way of work, not because of what it demands, but because it is so far outside the singular truth that the writer, in his unmusicality, occupies. It is perhaps only after already beginning to come to terms with the impossibility of marriage that he will speak of "The Poor Musician," though still not to Felice herself, but to Grete Bloch, serving in the strange role of an intermediary.

"The Poor Musician" is beautiful, isn't it? I remember reading it once to my youngest sister; I read it as I had never read anything to anyone before. I was so completely absorbed by it that there would have been no room inside me for an error in emphasis, breathing, intonation, sympathy, or understanding; it really burst forth from inside me with superhuman ease; I was delight-

ed with every word I uttered. This will never be repeated, I should never dare to read it out loud again.<sup>51</sup>

It's strange that Kafka becomes a perfect reader through this text, and this alone. However, it's not a virtuosic musicality that he achieves through his internalization of and identification with "The Poor Musician." An unmistakable sign for this is the impossibility of repetition. The virtuosic, like writing itself, is both infinitely repeatable and yet, as performance, is also qualitatively unique; the repeat performance will never be a perfect repetition. Indeed, *imperfection* is the very basis of repetition. What is truly perfect can never be repeated – and hence if an unmusical performance is possible, it must be perfect, perfectly unmusical – unmusical because perfect.

It is not unlike when, in *Das Schloss* (*The Castle*), K. and Frieda make love for a second time:

She sought something and he sought something, raging, grimacing, boring their heads into the other's bosom they sought and their embraces and their flinging bodies didn't make them forget, but reminded them of the duty to seek ...<sup>52</sup>

Striking in its cadence and its intensity, this passage suggests the very impossibility of finding, for the second time, what offered itself with such ease and simplicity the first time they made love. A perfect union, a perfect understanding is not impossible; but it can only happen once – and, maybe, the very prospect of repetition already brings it to grief. The anaphora at the beginning ("She sought something and he sought something") employs free indirect discourse to assume both K. and Frieda's perspectives; *seeking* speaks to their inner state, not just their observable behavior. K. and Frieda are united only in that both are searching for the same thing – but, separated, they now seek this same thing in the other; their unity has

<sup>51</sup> Kafka, *Letters to Felice*, 386–87.

<sup>52</sup> Franz Kafka, *Gesammelte Werke*, 4:59.

already irreparably escaped them. Their gestures, crude, bestial, are the same yet opposed; they have entered the realm of semblant virtuosity – lovemaking has become a performance. There is no longer the forgetfulness of those lost in immanence but a memory that, recalling the duty to seek, becomes the compulsion to remember, to repeat.

### Josefine, or Judaism and Music

There is one respect, at least, in which Grillparzer's novella could never quite speak to Kafka's situation. The work of a Christian author, it takes place in a Vienna from which Jews are oddly absent: at a Christian festival, at the verge of a church's hallowed grounds. If unmusicality is understood as having a political meaning, indeed as somehow constitutive of the people, then there can be no question that for Kafka, increasingly aware of the importance of his own Jewishness in relation to his art, the problem of unmusicality assumes a different form in relation to Jews, whose existence in diaspora, scattered amidst the peoples of the earth, renders their own existence as a people problematic. If "The Poor Musician" offers a "way out," it is one that he could never avail himself of. In Grillparzer's story, which is typically understood as representing the two sides of the author – his public persona and inner life – this bifurcation allows for unmusicality to appear as something hidden deep within the artist and his creation; an originative power that the artist taps into, struggles with, but then transfigures through his own virtuosic technique. This implies a culture that not only operates at two levels – interior and exterior, surface and depth – but that indeed achieves progress in the virtuosic, musical mastery of the semblant forms of life while never ceasing to maintain a relation to the awkward unmusical origin – the unmediated encounter with the divine.

It is significant, in this regard, that Grillparzer's novella stands under the clear influence of Goethe, and especially his novel *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (*Elective Affinities*). Eduard's uneven fluting anticipates the poor musician's off manner of playing, while Otilie's academic failures, originating in her need for *thoroughness*, her inability to leap over what

she can't understand, recalls the musician's own academic struggles.<sup>53</sup> And, like the musician, Otilie eventually becomes a scribe, a copyist – as in the remarkable scene where, making a duplicate of a lengthy contract written in Eduard's hand, her handwriting eventually becomes indistinguishable from his.<sup>54</sup>

Kafka, despite his great admiration for Goethe, will see in his style a seduction and an obstacle. In his diary, he writes:

By the power of his works Goethe probably holds back the development of the German language. Even if prose has in the meantime often moved away from him, in the end as at present it has still returned to him with strengthened yearning ...<sup>55</sup>

Goethe enables a virtuosic literature in which progress is possible, if, to be sure, only a semblant progress: a deepening virtuosity that remains tied back to the origin. It is a common thought among Jewish thinkers of this time that the Jewish people, an ancient people that has survived into modernity by holding scrupulously to old ways, exists outside the, if semblant, progress that characterizes the Christian world.<sup>56</sup>

It is significant, therefore, that in explaining his *unmusicality* to Milena, Kafka also suggests, if in somewhat ambiguous terms, that it ties him to his forefathers. That unmusicality would be something passed down, an inheritance rooted in blood, suggests that it is a political condition. Nor would it be absurd to connect it, in this regard, with his understanding of his Jewishness, and of the Jews as somehow existing fundamentally outside an *aesthetic* regime of Western Europe that they could adapt themselves to, superficially if sometimes brilliantly, without finding their truth

<sup>53</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Hamburger Ausgabe*, 257, 265.

<sup>54</sup> Goethe, *Hamburger Ausgabe*, 323.

<sup>55</sup> Kafka, *The Diaries*, 164.

<sup>56</sup> A clear articulation of the idea is to be found in the following passage from Franz Rosenzweig's *Der Stern der Erlösung* (*The Star of Redemption*), published six years after Kafka's death: "A circulation, the circulation of the years, ensures eternity for the eternal people. The peoples of the world are without circulation; their life rolls forewords in a broad stream." Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung*, 369.

in it.<sup>57</sup> Whereas the poor musician's unmusicality seems like a mysterious fate, cutting him off from his father, a subtle-minded bureaucrat, Kafka discovers in his own unmusicality a connection with his father's fathers, who, themselves, were not the subtle-minded, sensitive Talmudic scholars he found on his mother's side, but butchers.

Perhaps for the Jews, unmusicality is no longer the peculiar fate of the artist, an exceptional person who, standing off from the people, allows it to gather around itself, hearing in its own voice the voice of God. Rather, for Kafka, unmusicality is the fate of the Jewish people as a whole, or, rather, what binds them to their ancient fate, keeping them outside of the progress of other peoples, and defining the relation of the individual to the community. Perhaps Moses, who spoke face to face with God, was, with his stutter, the beginning of unmusicality, whereas Aaron's glib tongue represents the eternal temptation of idolatry, beauty, semblance and virtuosity. If a Jewish artist is possible, he could never hide behind the mask of a public persona; his awkwardness, his shame, his truth is fully exposed.

Such conclusions, extravagant as they might seem, are supported by Kafka's last work, "Josefine, die Sängerin oder Das Volk der Mäuse [Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse-Folk]," which appeared during his lifetime in the volume *Der Hungerkünstler* (*The Hunger Artist*). More than any other of his writings "Josephine" concerns the individual artist's relation to the people, with the peculiar double-title bringing equal attention to both elements. As Kafka's last literary testament on his own lifework, "Josephine" also presents Kafka's final answer to Grillparzer's novella. For indeed, "Josephine," like "The Poor Musician," is concerned with nothing else than unmusicality. Now, however, the whole mouse-folk is unmusical – music is too distant from their difficult lives, their favorite music is peace and quiet – but, among them, Josephine is an exception: not only is she a singer, but, through her singing, the people also come to be touched by music.<sup>58</sup> No one, it seems, can listen to her without being "carried away."

<sup>57</sup> Regarding Kafka's reception of the complex discourses surrounding the purported "unmusicality" of the Jewish people, tracing back to Wagner's 1850 *Das Judentum in der Musik* (*Judaism in Music*), see Sander L. Gilman, "Franz Kafka's Musical Diet."

<sup>58</sup> Kafka, *Gesammelte Werke*, 1:274.

What concerns the narrator – the story itself reads like a disquisition – is the question of how the completely unmusical mouse-folk are able to *understand* Josephine’s song, or, since Josephine herself denies such understanding, to at least believe that they understand.<sup>59</sup> He rejects the most obvious answer: that the beauty of her song is so great that even the dullest senses cannot resist it. For he himself feels, and others will also admit, that there is nothing special about her song. It is hardly even really a song at all, but rather a *pfeifen* – “peeping” or “piping” – something that all mice do, and indeed a characteristic vital expression (*Lebensäußerung*).<sup>60</sup> Yet if her piping is nothing special, it seems different, though only when seen from very close. Hearing, indeed, is not enough; one must *see* it as well. And, in this way, the mice-folk “admire [*bewundern*] in her that which [they] don’t at all admire in ourselves.”<sup>61</sup> In this Josephine is fully complicit: she cannot tolerate when others call attention to the “general folk-piping [*allgemeine Volkspfeifen*]”; she does everything possible to differentiate her art from theirs. And so, too, when she performs, not a peep is to be heard.

Not only is the mouse-folk unmusical, but it also exists outside the normal relation to time; it has no youth and only the most miniscule childhood.<sup>62</sup> There are no schools; only endless streams of new generations of children.<sup>63</sup> And since the children become immediately old, the people is both childish and elderly at the same time. This too explains their unmusicality: “we are too old for music, its excitation, its upswing doesn’t suit our heaviness; we wearily wave it away.”<sup>64</sup> But it also explains the power Josephine has over them. During the concerts, while Josephine is lost in admiration of her own virtuosity, struggling to draw from herself ever more incomprehensible accomplishments, the “actual crowd – this is clearly recognized – has withdrawn from out of itself [*aus sich selbst zurückgezogen*].” In the meagre pauses amid Josephine’s

<sup>59</sup> Kafka, *Gesammelte Werke*, 1:274–75.

<sup>60</sup> Kafka, *Gesammelte Werke*, 1:275.

<sup>61</sup> Kafka, *Gesammelte Werke*, 1:276.

<sup>62</sup> Kafka, *Gesammelte Werke*, 1:284.

<sup>63</sup> Kafka, *Gesammelte Werke*, 1:285.

<sup>64</sup> Kafka, *Gesammelte Werke*, 1:285.

struggles, the mouse-folk dreams, as if the solitary, restless individual, its limbs relaxing, could stretch out and wrap itself into the giant, warm bed of the people. There is, in her song, "something of the poor, short childhood, something of the lost, irrecoverable happiness, but also something of active daily life, of its small, incomprehensible, and yet persevering and ineradicable cheeriness." And all this is communicated not in "great tones, but softly, whisperingly, confidentially, and at times a little hoarsely. Naturally, it's a peeping. Why not? Peeping is the language of our people."<sup>65</sup>

If at first the singing Josephine appears as an exception to the people, it becomes clear that she is hardly more musical than the rest. Her power consists in performing, in an exaggerated display, the mouse-folk's peeping language. The unmusicality of Grillparzer's poor musician is the hidden, inner truth of the artist; the relation to the divine that is too easily forgotten among so many colorful, drunken festivals, so much artistic virtuosity, so much progress of a people marching down history's broad paths. Josephine's seeming musicality does nothing else than perform the unmusical language that belongs to the people as its most essential truth, marking its exclusion from history as a progress in virtuosity.

At the end of Grillparzer's story, Leopoldstadt, where the old musician lives, has been struck by a devastating flood. When the narrator returns to visit, a neighbor recounts the musician's final act: hearing the drowning children's cries, he jumped to their rescue, saving them, along with her husband's tax books and a few guilders in paper money. Catching a cold, he soon passed away.<sup>66</sup> The old musician is thus redeemed in the eyes of society, dying a hero's death. If the flood – the story was published in 1848 – represents a revolutionary cataclysm, saving power is to be found in a simple and immediate responsiveness to the call of human suffering. No such end awaits Josephine. Redeemed from earthly suffering, happily losing herself among her people's countless heroes, she will be forgotten like all her brothers.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Kafka, *Gesammelte Werke*, 1:287.

<sup>66</sup> Grillparzer, *Der arme Spielmann*, 57.

<sup>67</sup> Kafka, *Gesammelte Werke*, 1:294.

The saving power of Western music, distinguished as it is by the rich development of polyphonic texture and hence by a dissonant harmony, is the preservation of the individual, in its individuality, within the whole. The aesthetic and the ethical, indeed, differ in the last instance only in this respect: the aesthetic order preserves the semblant individual in its sensual existence – the ethical order grants the sensuous individual membership in the “kingdom of ends” only through its self-sacrifice. And in this sense, moreover, both the aesthetic and the ethical are extensions of cognitive understanding, which involves seeing the part in its relation to the whole. While the poor musician fails to redeem dissonance aesthetically, this very failure, with his heroic death, becomes his final, ultimate success: the salvation of the ethical community. The unmusicality of the mouse folk, in contrast, suggests the ultimate impossibility of either the ethical or aesthetic salvation of the individual. Just as Josephine’s singing life remembers only the endlessly flowing life of the people, a flood in which the individual is lost, her death can have nothing heroic about it. Thus “Josephine,” Kafka’s last story, offers the most extreme testament to the impossibility of understanding – not as a personal failing or lack but as the ultimately positive cognitive, aesthetic, ethical and political condition of Jewish existence – which his unmusicality revealed to him.

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FRANK RUDA

# Kafka's Proof: The Impossibility to Live

"Incidentally, his [Kafka's] unlimited pessimism is free from any tragic sense of destiny."

Walter Benjamin<sup>1</sup>

"A first indication of glimmering understanding is the desire to die. This life seems un-endurable, another unreachable. One no longer feels ashamed of wanting to die; one petitions to be moved from one's old cell, which one hates, into a new one, which one will come to hate. A last vestige of belief is involved here, too, for during the move might not the prison governor by chance walk down the passage, see the prisoner, and say: 'Don't lock this man up again. He's coming with me.'"

Franz Kafka<sup>2</sup>

## How to Prove (It)?

What is a proof? Clearly, it is an essential part of certain discourses. Religion, for example, does not require it. Otherwise, there would be no religious belief.<sup>3</sup> The discourse of law, the legal discourse, cannot but rely on

<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, 111.

<sup>2</sup> Franz Kafka, *The Zürau Aphorisms*, 13.

<sup>3</sup> There are obviously many proofs of the existence of God that seem to be religious proofs. Yet, as Kant has already demonstrated, they are not as such religious in

proofs. The same holds for the discourse of science. Proving ultimately proves to be a legal or scientific practice. Proofreading is an example of a legal kind of practice,<sup>4</sup> proving one's love to someone could appear to have a scientific quality.<sup>5</sup> Legal and scientific proofs are both essentially constructive. But in quite a different manner. A legal proof is constituted by operations that assemble and arrange a set of material such that it is formed into a consistent whole (for example into an intelligible objective scenario). The aim of such a proof is to allow for the formation of a conviction about the very totality that the proof constructs. This conviction is articulated in the form of a judgment. A proof thus constructs what is judged but thereby latently enables in its construction precisely the very form of judgment it is supposed to allow for. A juridical proof establishes the basis that is required (when it is needed) to form a judgment (of a situation) by forming not only the basis for but by also forming the actual judgment. Any legal proof is therefore anticipatory. It enables to form a judgment by allowing for already forming a judgment. Legal proofs imply a judgment and necessitate a second judgment that concerns the consistency and coherence of the proof's constitutive and constituting operation. Legal proofs entail in their very constitution a normative standard by means of which they can be judged. The normativity of this standard lies in the immanent coherence and consistency of their very ordering and organizing

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nature but are rather part of classical metaphysics. Their discourse is philosophy and they seek to be either juridical or scientific (recall Descartes' proof of the existence of God that clearly seeks to be scientific) but ultimately do not prove anything – at least if Kant was right. There is also in “rabbinic fashion” in “every interpretation” of the Talmud a juridical element, because it “is followed by the citing of a proof-text from the original legend, always introduced by phrases such as, *for he says.*” Iris Bruce, “Kafka and Jewish Folklore,” in: *The Cambridge Companion to Kafka*, 154. In the following there will be no such clear markers, and I will thus not be dealing with a proof in the rabbinic sense.

- 4 One should recall that Kafka was “correcting ... proofs” of an edition of his own writing “on his death-bed.” Osman Durrani, “Editions, Translations, Adaptations,” in: *The Cambridge Companion to Kafka*, 208.
- 5 To prove oneself in the face of a certain threat is obviously another way of proving. Yet, it either allows for forming a judgment (even if it is one's own judgment about oneself) or brings forth one's true character, thus it is either juridical or scientific.

operation. This means that in the legal discourse there is no proof without judgments (and the plural is essential). Legal proofs judge and are judged.<sup>6</sup> Because legal proofs imply judgments that are themselves judged, that is, second order judgments, legal proofs are essentially – even if they do not appear to be – open to interpretation. This is why the very functioning of legal proofs inscribes the necessity of interpretation into the center of the juridical discourse. Legal proofs immanently necessitate a second-order judgment. Decisions in court follow from proofs, yet they are fundamentally judgments of judgments and hence interpretations (that may frequently not seem to be what they are).

A scientific proof on the other hand does not unfold by reconstructing and organizing a given (not yet fully structured) matter. It often rather posits and constructs its very own terrain (and matter) and even the way in which it is constructing its way. Real scientific proofs are generic in this sense. Yet, if a scientific proof is a real proof there is no interpretation needed or even possible – it is essentially non-negotiable. And this also holds for proofs that prove that what needs to be proved is impossible to prove. Scientific proofs thereby do not enable or rely on judgments and their normative standards. Scientific proofs in their purest form take the guise of demonstrations (for example in pure mathematics), in their impure form they need experiments (in the natural sciences). They block any possibility of interpretation but imply the possibility of being repeated (by anyone). Without repeatability, there is no scientific proof.<sup>7</sup> Scientific proofs, because of their repeatability, are universal and exclude the particularity of interpreting opinions or evaluating judgments. What such a proof demonstrates is the necessity of specific coherent consequences that are derived from specific axioms – this concatenation is the proof itself.

<sup>6</sup> Which is why one can claim with Deleuze – although he is here referring to judgment in general – that “they judge and they are judged at the same time ...” Gilles Deleuze, “To Have Done with Judgment,” in: *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 129.

<sup>7</sup> One should here remark that when one has understood a proof, it is not necessary to repeat all of its phases. The principal repeatability of a proof does not necessitate an actual repetition, as soon as one gets the point. As Badiou remarked: “When you’ve understood a mathematical proof ... you’ve understood something that’s concentrated in a point.” Alain Badiou, *Philosophy and the Event*, 123.

Both legal and scientific proofs can use a range of different *modi operandi*. Formally, they can work inductively, deductively, apodictically or in an *ad absurdum* manner. Proofs in the empirical natural sciences and in criminal law often work inductively, in pure mathematics (and maybe also in questions of constitutional law) proofs are constructed either *ad absurdum*, deductively, or apodictically. *Deductive proofs* entail the consistently inferred consequences that are derived from a specific set of axioms. *Apodictic proofs* are proofs that assert what is absolutely necessary or absolutely impossible such that if one starts to doubt them one also doubts the very building blocks of human knowledge tout court (for example by questioning that  $2 + 2 = 4$ ). The construction of proofs by means of an *ad absurdum reduction* operates in such a manner that the proof demonstrates that an untenable or absurd consequence necessarily springs from the denial of the proof and thereby demonstrates its internal consistency. Why start a text on Kafka with such highly abbreviated classification of different concepts of proofs? The answer is: because Kafka once wrote a proof.

### Before the Beginning: A Proof

Franz Kafka, possibly the modern writer most obsessed with the functioning of the law, once at the beginning of his literary life wrote a proof. It appears in the first version of the first narrative (a kind of novella) that is still preserved from his very early days, namely in the posthumously published and rather rarely commented upon "Description of a Struggle."<sup>8</sup> It is commonly known that Kafka himself understood his birth as a literary writer to have taken place when in the night from the 22<sup>nd</sup> to the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September 1912 he finished "The Judgment." This means that, before Kafka was born as a writer, he wrote a proof. Kafka: being a prover before being a writer. For Kafka, before his beginning and thus before the beginning of Kafka, there was a proof. And this proof disappears, since it is not contained in the

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<sup>8</sup> There are obviously some articles and even book chapters dealing with this text; yet compared with the attention that was devoted to Kafka's later prose, it nonetheless appears to be rarely discussed properly.

highly modified and transformed second version of the “Description of a Struggle” that Kafka prepared after he was born as a writer. It is a proof that was written before Kafka’s proper beginning and vanished with it.

The “Description” (in its first version) was written at some point between 1903 and 1906. Kafka later singled out some parts of it for separate publications, notably the so-called “Conversation with the Supplicant” and the “Conversation with the Drunk,” both published in 1909, and also a chunk of text that became known as “The Trees,” published in 1913. He also tried to rewrite this early text later on in his life, in 1909, but failed to do so. It remained a fragment, even a fragmented – cut, rewritten and failed – fragment. Today it exists, so to speak, in two different versions that understandably could not but engender a struggle of interpretations. The text therefore not only describes a struggle – it embodies what it describes and generates struggling effects. Because of its fragmentary, divided nature, it is still a matter of discussion whether it should be included into Kafka’s oeuvre or not. If the “Description” seems to be something that even for Kafka remained weirdly impossible to integrate into his proper life(s work) as a literary writer,<sup>9</sup> does this nonetheless mean that it was written by someone who – at least latently – already was Kafka before the real becoming-Kafka of Kafka? By a Kafka before Kafka? Is the Kafka before Kafka not the Kafka *par excellence*? Or did Kafka become the real Kafka of the letter when he completely left behind the literal Kafka *avant la lettre*? Is the proof of Kafka overcoming Kafka’s only proof? Is overcoming the proof the proof that Kafka is now finally Kafka? Some saw in the early text only “contortions both psychological ... and physical” which amounted to “something of adolescent posturing.”<sup>10</sup> But, to cut a long (juridical background) story short: does this early text belong to Kafka or not?<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The “Description” exists in different versions – Kafka omitted subheadings – that were once sought to be integrated into the supposedly unified single harmonious whole of Kafka’s oeuvre. This motivated some quite harsh editorial interventions by Max Brod. For details, see Franz Kafka, “Beschreibung eines Kampfes,” in: *Franz Kafka-Ausgabe*, 1999.

<sup>10</sup> John Updike, “Foreword,” in: *The Complete Stories*, 7–8.

<sup>11</sup> If the proof were a legal proof, the impossibility to live would come with a prohibition to live, which would ignore the fact that Kafka lived a life, or at least

In any case, the proof that Kafka – or someone with the same name who maybe should not be confused with the famous author – wrote before he officially became Kafka appears in a text bearing a surprising title: it is called “Diversions, or Proof that it’s Impossible to Live.” Before the beginning of Kafka’s literary life, there is a proof of the impossibility of beginning, sustaining, continuing and living a life (for example as Kafka). If this proof is really what it says it is and it proves what it claims to prove, there might be a good reason as to why it is so hard to integrate it into the life(-work) of an author whose life began afterwards. If the proof proved what it says it proves, Kafka afterwards seems to have done (at least at first sight) what was proven to be impossible. Maybe Kafka’s later literary life is nothing but an attempt to come to terms with what he has proven before his life had begun; maybe Kafka’s life (as an author and of his work) is a repeated attempt to come to terms – that is also: to terminate – what was proven impossible in the first place. And maybe one could here also be reminded of another of Kafka’s fragmented texts, namely the short story about the hunter Gracchus,<sup>12</sup> for whom it became impossible not to live, but to die? After the proof of the impossibility to live there appears also a figure of the impossibility to die. Could one not see in this the two extreme pillars of Kafka’s literary universe? A life being stretched between an impossibility to live and an impossibility to die, or: Kafka.

When later in his life, Kafka noted that for him all there is, is “the misery of having perpetually to begin, the lack of illusion that everything is only a beginning and not even a beginning,”<sup>13</sup> this can be read as an expression linked to the peculiar early proof. If Kafka began his literary life, before beginning it properly, by proving that life is impossible, does his success not turn out to be his failure and equally his failure a success? Is this a failed beginning? There is a beginning which makes all beginnings

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tried to, as an author afterwards. To comprehend the specific mode of the deemed to be impossible life and gain a perspective on treating this impossibility, one has to read the proof in a scientific manner.

<sup>12</sup> One should here bear in mind that *gracchio* is the Italian word for “jackdaw” whose Czech translation is “kavka,” that is, “Kafka.”

<sup>13</sup> Franz Kafka, *The Diaries, 1910–1923*, 24; translation altered.

impossible and is thus not even a beginning (and it then leads to the impossibility of ending that which had never begun properly). Here the failure to begin and the beginning properly become demonstrably indistinguishable, a beginning before beginning is the beginning, whose success lies in the act of making beginning impossible. If the proof is a real (scientific) proof, early on, Kafka proved the very impossibility to live a life, and this means – taking the quoted remark into account – that there are only perpetually failed attempts to begin to live. Life in this sense is the perpetuated failed beginning to live – this might be one conceptual outcome of the proof that demonstrates life’s impossibility.<sup>14</sup> And as a part of a “Description of a Struggle,” does this not suggest not only that life is a struggle, or that life is a struggle that is always already lost, but rather that the struggle is a struggle with life that is always already lost, because one is unable to begin with it? Maybe the proof demonstrates that there is only a life under the condition that the impossible qua impossible happens.

For, (Kafka’s) life begins – or tries to begin – after its impossibility was proven. Yet this “misery of having perpetually to begin” is not only the result of proving life’s impossibility. For the title of the proof-section of the text is also called “diversions,” *Belustigungen*. The German term is ambiguous, as it can mean amusement, mockery but also to make somebody laugh.<sup>15</sup> The proof is thereby framed as being entertaining and diverting (maybe a very peculiar waste of time – life?), ridiculing and mocking or just amusing and funny (*lustig*) – it also entails the notorious German term *Lust*, which literally opens up the floodgates of desire and lust. *Lust* is, as

<sup>14</sup> And one can see here why the Gracchus story can be taken to depict the other side of this “structure” that is no structure.

<sup>15</sup> The diverging meanings – of “diversion,” which at the same time in German is rarely used as a noun in the plural – seem to mirror the meanings of the Latin *delectare* (that is one etymological root of the German term). One can thereby recognize a peculiar, because inverted reference to Horace’s famous “*Aut prodesse volunt aut delectare poetae, aut simul et iucunda et idonea dicere vitae,*” which is rendered in English as: “To teach – to please – comprise the poet’s views, Or else at once to profit and amuse.” Horace, *The Episodes, Satires, and Epistles of Horace*, 238. The only thing they teach for Kafka is a very particular lesson, yet one that remains amusing without creating any profit.

many have noted, what Hegel might have called a speculative word, yet regarding Kafka's term *Belustigungen*, let me briefly note in passing that it collapses the distinction between active and passive. It is not that there is something funny (*lustig*) but that one is amused (*belustigt*) by something, by the proof, and there is something actively pleasurable (*Lust*) about being the passive object of amusement (*Belustigung*). There is a funny, a comic kind of lust emerging from a proof that life is impossible, because it seems to mock the very subject of the proof (both what is subjected to the proof and the subject unfolding the proof). A lust that springs from amusingly mocking oneself to the point of demonstrating the impossibility of one's own position. This does not mean that life is a joke, but maybe rather that there is something *belustigend*, some comic kind of lust in the proof that life is impossible – not only because this leads to failed beginnings, but because there always already was a failed beginning when the proof starts its course. But how to prove what the proof is supposed to prove?

### Reading Kafka to the Letter

Roberto Calasso aptly remarked that “Kafka can't be understood if he isn't taken literally.”<sup>16</sup> This means – although the present article will not be able to fulfill this task in any exhaustive manner – that “each word demands attention”<sup>17</sup> and that, as Adorno observed, “each sentence is literal and each signifies...”<sup>18</sup> Taking Kafka and his proof literally means also to bear in mind Mladen Dolar's perspicacious observation that “Kafka is perhaps the first utterly non-metaphorical author.”<sup>19</sup> Methodologically this implies, as Hegel stated in the beginning of his *Science of Logic*, that we have to “take up what is before us,”<sup>20</sup> precisely as it is before us. Thus far – to the best of my knowledge – this has not been done with Kafka's proof. Rather,

<sup>16</sup> Roberto Calasso, *K*, 42.

<sup>17</sup> Calasso, *K*, 271.

<sup>18</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “Notes on Kafka,” in: *Prisms*, 245.

<sup>19</sup> Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 174.

<sup>20</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 69.

it remained nearly completely unnoticed. Such ignorance is not necessarily surprising, for the most obvious is sometimes the hardest to see. Badiou for example once noted with regard to Spinoza's *Ethics* that its most prominent and influential readers did not care much (if at all) about the very form in which Spinoza presents his arguments, that is, in the form of proofs.<sup>21</sup> Proofs seem to have a peculiar invisibility due to their very form. Badiou's point was that without any reference to its form, without reading it to its formal letter, readers were able to take the *Ethics* to be a lot of different things: a materialist manifesto, a pre-Marxist-Marxist treatise, a treatise on rationalism, an expression of the relation between the creative power of life and the structuring power of concepts, a book of pure spirituality, or a manifestation of the fetishistic power of scientific deduction. Ignoring the literal form allowed readers to act as if "the eyes of the mind, by which it sees and observes things," that is, the "demonstrations [the proofs] themselves,"<sup>22</sup> were blurred.

Reading with the open eyes of the mind is not only appropriate to Spinoza's *Ethics* but also to Kafka's proof. What to do with the paradoxical consequence that immediately emerges with Kafka's proof, namely the following one: if it is possible to prove the impossibility to live, there are only two options for the act of proving itself, namely it is either part of the set of life activities and hence has to be considered to be impossible itself, or proving is something that exceeds life as we know it (and as object of the proof). The first option proves the impossibility not only of life but also of proving this very impossibility, at least if proving implies living. The proof then would also prove the impossibility to prove the impossibility of life and thus could never prove what it seeks to prove. It would be a second-grade impossible proof. Kafka's proof would then disappear as a proof, precisely as it did after Kafka became Kafka. If one can prove the impossibility of life because proving it does not rely on life, nor is proving a way of being alive in an ordinary sense of the term, there can be – life or Kafka.<sup>23</sup> Let us consider the proof.

<sup>21</sup> Alain Badiou, "What Is a Proof in Spinoza's Ethics?", in: *Spinoza Now*, 40.

<sup>22</sup> Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, 388.

<sup>23</sup> For an instructive exploration of the link between scientific investigation and other "forms of life," see Aaron Schuster, *How to Research Like a Dog. Kafka's New Science*.

## Almost Proving

The proof occurs in the end as the second part of the first version of the “Description.” It is divided into several sub-parts, or stages that successively bear the following titles: “A Ride,” “A Walk,” “The Fat Man: a) Address to the Landscape,” “b) Beginning of a Conversation with the Supplicant,” “c) The Supplicant’s Story,” “d) Continued Conversation between the Fat Man and the Supplicant,” and “Drowning of the Fat Man.” Kafka’s proof unfolds from a ride to a walk, to four episodes related to the fat man, that again start with an address to a non-personal entity, moves from a conversation to a story and then continues the conversation. It ends with the drowning of the fat man.<sup>24</sup> To contextualize all this, it is instructive to reconstruct what happens before the proof begins: the story begins when two men meet at party in Prague. The narrator’s “new acquaintance”<sup>25</sup> approaches the former and starts to tell him about a very recent erotic adventure with a girl, Anna. Feeling uncomfortable when their conversation is noticed by other guests, the narrator stages an escape from the party by suggesting taking a walk to the Laurenziberg. As soon as he and his acquaintance leave the party, peculiar things start to happen. At first the narrator feels “very gay,” shouting “a name down the street,” throwing his “hat in the air,” his “acquaintance, however, walked on beside [him], unconcerned”<sup>26</sup> and remained silent. Puzzled by this mood-difference, the narrator falls silent and feels a certain unease when he notices that “it was impossible ... keeping step with [his] acquaintance”<sup>27</sup> – the couple is fundamentally out of rhythm and form.

This dilemma seems, as we learn from the narrator’s introspection, to necessitate that the two should part ways again, because they somehow already have. Yet, it is impossible for him to decide if he ought to say goodbye on leaving or not, a problem that prevents him from actually

<sup>24</sup> Benno Wagner, a true Kafka connoisseur, reads the “Description” as a “parody of Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* at all levels (frame plot, scenic detail, and logic of development).” Benno Wagner, “Insuring Nietzsche: Kafka’s Files,” 92. Yet, even Wagner does not mention the proof-aspect of the novella.

<sup>25</sup> Franz Kafka, “Description of a Struggle,” in: *The Complete Stories*, 16.

<sup>26</sup> Kafka, “Description of a Struggle,” 17.

<sup>27</sup> Kafka, “Description of a Struggle,” 17; translation altered.

managing to leave. The two are neither together nor can they separate. A conversation starts. The acquaintance claims that on a night like this, one should kiss girls and not go to sleep to smother one's erotic dreams in the warmth of one's bed. The narrator replies that he "neither smother[s] nor warm[s] anything," whereupon the new acquaintance proclaims: "Oh, go on! ... You are a humorist [*Komiker*]." <sup>28</sup> This leads the narrator to reflect: "From these words I imagined that my acquaintance suspected in me something which, although it wasn't there, made me nevertheless rise in his estimation by his suspecting it" and it is this thought which leads him to conclude "he must always remain with me, always." <sup>29</sup> The acquaintance, with whom he is fundamentally out of tune, seems to detect something comic in the narrator and it is this something, which, although it is not there, makes the narrator stick to his acquaintance. It proved impossible to leave him anyway.

Already in the beginning of the story, there is literally a comic course of impossibilities. It is impossible to keep walking (in rhythm), impossible to properly go on, impossible to leave, yet there is – at least for the new acquaintance – something comic about his neighbor that proves to have a binding force. A comic impossibility, something impossibly comic, which, although it is not there, makes the narrator cling to his new companion. One seems to get here a peculiar depiction of incapacities, the incapacity of leaving that is linked to the incapacity of staying together, which then generates a proper peculiar kind of comic impossibility. Yet, things change – not because of a sea-, but due to a river-change – when they pass over the river Moldau.

The narrator feels drawn away from his acquaintance and seeks to resist. He writhes and forms a curve to stay with him for longer, whereupon the acquaintance gets angry because of that "nonsense" <sup>30</sup> that seems to unnecessarily interrupt the common stroll. Because of the anger in the air, the narrator feels "a certain anxiety" <sup>31</sup> and assumes that he soon will

<sup>28</sup> Kafka, "Description of a Struggle," 18.

<sup>29</sup> Kafka, "Description of a Struggle," 18.

<sup>30</sup> Kafka, "Description of a Struggle," 20.

<sup>31</sup> Kafka, "Description of a Struggle," 21; translation altered.

be killed by his acquaintance (“Now is the time for the murder”) and contemplates if he should start to flee, yet abruptly concludes that the “end had come”<sup>32</sup> anyway. If staying with him is as impossible as leaving him, it seems that the ultimate logical outcome is that the situation has to end. But the narrator decides – as if he had contemporary pragmatism in mind – that he “couldn’t afford [his] last remaining seconds looking for reasons”<sup>33</sup> and nevertheless attempts to break logical impossibility by exiting it. He starts to run away from his companion when the first opportunity to do so arises. But during this attempt, he slips on the icy sidewalk and falls. His companion, who first did not even notice his absence, comes to his rescue and, helpfully, leans over him. Although the narrator’s “anxiety was beginning to return,”<sup>34</sup> there also emerged the insight into “a third way of perishing.” He is convinced he “could simply throw [himself] into the air.”<sup>35</sup> Out of the confrontation with the incapacity to stay together or to leave and after the failure of breaking this incapacity, another option, a new possibility arises. It will take a very surprising course. This is what the next part of Kafka’s text will depict. After now reassuring his companion that he should accompany the narrator further to the Laurenziberg, the first part of Kafka’s text ends and the proof begins. It has different stages and components.

## Proving

1. It begins with a surprise. For, the narrator “leap[s] onto the shoulders of [his] acquaintance, and by digging [his] fists into his back [he] urged him into a trot.”<sup>36</sup> He starts to ride his acquaintance, who, in Deleuze’s terms, experiences a peculiar becoming-horse. The narrator is thrilled and trembles “with courage” as he seems to have radically transformed the whole

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<sup>32</sup> Kafka, “Description of a Struggle,” 21.

<sup>33</sup> Kafka, “Description of a Struggle,” 21.

<sup>34</sup> Kafka, “Description of a Struggle,” 21.

<sup>35</sup> Kafka, “Description of a Struggle,” 22.

<sup>36</sup> Kafka, “Description of a Struggle,” 22.

situation. But his new horse collapses and he therefore “whistle[s] down a few vultures which ... settle down on him in order to guard him.”<sup>37</sup>

2. Then the narrator continues walking “unperturbed” and transforms by the sheer power of thought the steep slope into a valley such that his walk is facilitated. He also creates a wooded mountain on the other side of the street and when night falls, he starts to rest in the trees. He sleeps “deep and dreamless,”<sup>38</sup> but his “sleep was not free from continuous slight disturbance. All night long [he] heard someone talking beside [him]”<sup>39</sup> – yet he was unable to decipher the actual words, mostly he heard “the special kind of emphasis placed on them,”<sup>40</sup> which brings him pleasure. He starts – or did already start – talking to himself, stating that his “life was monotonous” before and he “deserve[s] some diversion,” which is why it was important “to be taken somewhere else,”<sup>41</sup> an exodus was necessary. An exodus of such a far-reaching kind that the narrator tries to avoid all thought and movement – because they are always “forced” – and seeks “stubbornly to forget.” Yet, his peaceful exodic rest is interrupted by someone sobbing softly and again “it seemed impossible to escape from my suffering.”

3. Four naked men appear carrying “a monstrously fat man”<sup>42</sup> on a wooden litter. Yet, after the fat man reshuffles the landscape, because its beauty diverts his attention, moving trees and mountains, his men drown in the now stronger river through which he was carried and he, still on his litter, is carried away by the flow of the water like a “wooden idol which had become useless and so had been cast into the river.”<sup>43</sup> The narrator follows the litter along the bank and assumes that he truly loves him – like

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<sup>37</sup> Kafka, “Description of a Struggle,” 23.

<sup>38</sup> Kafka, “Description of a Struggle,” 24. This is an important remark, for some readers saw in what happens next a manifestation of the logic of the dream. Yet, if it is a dream, it begins by exclaiming: *This is not a dream* – somehow akin to the analysis and stating *This is not my mother*.

<sup>39</sup> Kafka, “Description of a Struggle,” 24.

<sup>40</sup> Kafka, “Description of a Struggle,” 24.

<sup>41</sup> Kafka, “Description of a Struggle,” 25.

<sup>42</sup> Kafka, “Description of a Struggle,” 25.

<sup>43</sup> Kafka, “Description of a Struggle,” 27.

an image of God, "which once seemed obsolete" but "lives on because the moment to realize it was missed."<sup>44</sup>

4. The fat man starts to tell a story. There was once a time when he went to church to see a girl he fell in love with. Yet, when once the girl was not present in church, he noticed a young man, praying in a very exaggerated manner. He felt the duty to confront, better: interpellate him and the latter exclaimed: "I don't know what you suspect me of, but I'm innocent."<sup>45</sup> Yet, the fat man grabbed him and insisted that he will follow him wherever, because he wants to ask him a question, namely why he prays in the manner in which he does. The supplicant finally answers that he has the desire to be watched by the people and that he always hoped for the fat man to address him, because he wanted to tell his own story.

5. He tells the fat man of a party to which he went the night before, where his kneecap loosened and where he started having a conversation with a girl who criticized him for not being attached to truth enough, as he finds this desire too tiresome.<sup>46</sup> And, as if wanting to prove to her that this was correct, he asked the piano player of the party to let him play. When after some reluctance he finally did and the supplicant sat down, he was carried away by two men, while everyone agreed he played nicely. He was consequently complimented out of the party. For obscure reasons, he was filled with joy, met a drunk, tried conversing with him, but ended up guiding him to a place where he could spend the night.

7. Now the fat man continues to report from his conversation with the supplicant, in which he raised the question as to why he prays in the ways he does – and if it "ought not to be possible to live differently?"<sup>47</sup> The supplicant denies this option and describes the general human condition in the following way: "We build useless war machines, towers, walls, curtains of silk, and we could marvel at all this a great deal if we had the time. We tremble in the balance, we don't fall, we flutter, even though we may be uglier than bats. And on a beautiful day hardly anyone can prevent us

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<sup>44</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 3.

<sup>45</sup> Kafka, "Description of a Struggle," 29.

<sup>46</sup> Kafka, "Description of a Struggle," 33.

<sup>47</sup> Kafka, "Description of a Struggle," 37.

from saying: 'Oh God, today is a beautiful day,' for we are already established on this earth and live by virtue of an agreement."<sup>48</sup> Human beings are ugly fluttering bats, producing useless cultural inventions with such to praise the beauty of the day – a silent agreement of the human species. This means that "after all, we're not aiming at any definite purpose or at the truth, but simply at making jokes and entertainment."<sup>49</sup> Life is diversion and there seems to be no truth in and to it and no purpose.

8. At this point everything speeds up. "The fat man could not go on talking, he was forced to turn and disappear in the loud roar of the waterfall."<sup>50</sup> The narrator looks at this scene, which seems to swallow everything – as if even the insight that life is nothing but diversion (*Belustigung*) is a diversion of the fact of life.

### Impossible Life: A Measure

What is the lesson of this proof? It ends with the following lines: "Please, passers-by, be so kind as to tell me how tall I am – just measure these arms, these legs."<sup>51</sup> What life – at this point – appear to lack is a measure. Neither a conversation nor prayers, neither cultural inventions nor an – explicit or implicit – intersubjective agreement, neither a diversion nor a proof can provide a measure that would make living an oriented life possible. The proof proves some measure needed – for the arms and legs that allow us, as Kant famously argued, to distinguish between right and left. If the proof proves the impossibility of life, it is an impossibility that derives from lacking orientation – and Kafka's novella is certainly a literary embodiment of such a lack of orientation. Kierkegaard is supposed to have once claimed that courage is life's only measure and Kafka's proof seems to suggest that this is actually true. Yet, there is no courage without anxiety (and therefore without an instance of the superego) – and without an idea

<sup>48</sup> Kafka, "Description of a Struggle," 37.

<sup>49</sup> Kafka, "Description of a Struggle," 38; translation altered.

<sup>50</sup> Kafka, "Description of a Struggle," 38.

<sup>51</sup> Kafka, "Description of a Struggle," 39.

of justice.<sup>52</sup> Kafka's proof shows that the first thing to assume to even have a proper concept of life is that life as such is impossible and that working with this impossibility is what it means to invent a life that could never be just a given, but it is a diversion from life just being a diversion. In other words, one ought to assume that there will never be any life (not only worthy of that name, but at all), which is what might allow for a proper life to emerge. Only by assuming the outcome of the proof there arises an anxiety – and “only anxiety excites you”<sup>53</sup> – which one will be able to work with; one will be able to raise the incapacity of living a life to a true point of impossibility. Kafka's early text, of a Kafka before himself, an impossible Kafka, treats such a point. This could be a starting point for an examination of Kafka's concept of life.

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<sup>52</sup> A longer elaboration of how these concepts hang together can be found in Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 156 ff.

<sup>53</sup> Kafka, “Description of a Struggle,” 40.

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MLADEN DOLAR

## On Application

Let me start in the manner (or the mannerism?) of an old professor – with etymology.<sup>1</sup> The word “application” came to English in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, in the sense of “bringing something to bear on something else.”<sup>2</sup> – One should stop for a moment to fully appreciate this wording. The definition is truly admirable in the purity of its abstraction – what could be more abstract than this mere relationality of somethings, to the point that one could wonder how come that application never featured on the honorable lists of universal categories (from Aristotle to Kant) along with, say, quantity, quality, substance, necessity, possibility, unity, among others. It appears to be missing on every list, while being a prominent candidate for the title of the most abstract. Application as “bringing something to bear on something else” actually has the makings of a meta-category. One can recall that the big problem with categories, in their paramount Kantian framework, was precisely their application. How can the most abstract

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<sup>1</sup> The present paper is a revised version of my contribution to the workshop “The Specter of Applied Science” organized by VIA University College Aarhus in January 2025. I would like to express my gratitude to the organizers and other participants for a very memorable workshop.

<sup>2</sup> For what follows regarding etymology I rely on <https://www.etymonline.com/word/application> and <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/application>.

categories of understanding, *Verstand*, be applied to the sensuous, the empirical, the manifold, to something with which they have no common measure? This was indeed Kant's central problem: the whole key section of his first *Critique*, the notorious transcendental deduction of categories, happens to be Kant's convoluted way of figuring out precisely the tricky question what application is. (And there is a host of Kant scholars closely perusing the so-called B-deduction, devoted precisely to application.) It occurred to me that this could easily turn into a paper devoted to Kant – but this is just an aside, let me not go there.

The word came to English from Old French, where it was in turn inherited from Latin, *applicatio*, “a joining to, an attaching oneself to, connecting to,” stemming from *ad-plicare*, to fold (*plica*<sup>3</sup> is a fold, a crease). It is related to the terms “implicit” and “explicit” – in-folded, unfolded; to implicate and to explicate (to explain) – all these are based on *plica*, the fold. Explaining, explicating, is unfolding what has been folded. – As an aside (another one), one can immediately recall two philosophical references of a very different kind: on the one hand, Gilles Deleuze's book *Le pli, The Fold*, with the subtitle *Leibniz and the Baroque*, a book which made famous the metaphor of the fold, highlighting this very baroque object.<sup>4</sup> It evokes all the intricate folding of textures and fabrics in baroque art, and Deleuze argues that Leibniz's monad figures as its philosophical counterpart, the epitome of the fold of space, movement, and time. On the other hand, there is Robert Brandom's voluminous book *Making It Explicit* (1994, shortly after Deleuze), with the formula of “the explication of the implicit,” proposed as the paramount clue to Hegel's endeavor – is this the formula that could encapsulate Hegel's dialectic? Was Hegel's major feat the unfolding of Leibnizian fold? We'll come back to this.

In comparison to the in-folding and unfolding (out-folding), contained in implication and explication, which all present an in-and-out movement, application presents a traversal and horizontal move of something

<sup>3</sup> The word “plica” still exists in contemporary English, but limited to the medical use, a groove or fold of skin.

<sup>4</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, 1992 [1988].

getting folded in/with something else,<sup>5</sup> not just explicating what has been implicit in an entity, not just the coming out of what has been immanent and making it manifest, but presenting a relation to something else, relating to an alterity, to another field, thus producing the fold of the immanent with something other. This is not just unfolding what was implicitly present, but a link to something heterogeneous in relation to the homogeneity of implicit/explicit. Application thus stands in opposition to implication/explication.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, application implies a certain hierarchy or temporality, namely that we first have a something which is then in the second step applied to something outside it; we have to have an entity which precedes the application, while the second entity (“something else”) is thus posterior and secondary in relation to the first one which is applied to something external to its realm. There is an ontological precedence, so to speak, of the one over the other.

Following the etymology, there are more meanings to the word. Chronologically, the second meaning appeared in English around 1600, in Shakespeare’s time,<sup>7</sup> with the sense of application as “a sincere hard

<sup>5</sup> There are other terms stemming from the same root or metaphor, like “complicate,” “replicate”... (“supplicate” has a different etymology, stemming from *placare*, to placate, to assuage, to appease, to soothe). There is also an adjective “plicate”: “folded multiple times lengthwise like a fan, pleated.”

<sup>6</sup> Let me point out a peculiar use of unfolding at the very beginning of *Hamlet* with the change of guard at Elsinore: “*Barnardo*: Who’s there? *Francisco*: Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself.” (I.1.1–2) These are the first two lines of *Hamlet*. – Unfold yourself – but can one ever? Maybe the invention of psychoanalysis, at its minimal, entails precisely that one can never unfold oneself. The unconscious ultimately presents the impossibility of unfolding oneself, the alien kernel at the core of unfolding, of bringing out what was implicit. However much one brings out, there is a kernel that persists through “making it explicit,” but without which we wouldn’t be subjects. We are the subjects of the impossibility of unfolding ourselves (in the two senses, “subject of” and “subject to” this impossibility). – “Stand and unfold yourself” could be taken as a version of the Freudian *Grundregel*, the ground rule of psychoanalysis: Lie down on the couch and unfold yourself, say anything that comes to mind.

<sup>7</sup> I was trying to find out whether Shakespeare ever used the word “application,” but all I could find was advertisements for the Shakespeare App, offered by the Apple Store, an app to “memorize, edit and publish Shakespeare’s plays, sonnets and monologues,” believe it or not. – It turned out that if Shakespeare didn’t quite

effort, diligence, close thought or attention,” by extension “devotion, commitment.” Doing something with application is doing it seriously. This meaning was there already in Latin, derived from the primary meaning of “joining to, attaching oneself to” – say, in order to attach oneself to otherness one indeed needs “a sincere hard effort” and diligence, it doesn’t come easily, “by itself,” one must make a step beyond oneself. One needs application to perform application, if one is to take seriously applying something to something heterogeneous. Whereas the first meaning of application dwells in pure abstraction (“bringing something to bear on something else”), in neutrality and anonymity, this second meaning brings in the subjective stance, the affective attitude of engagement that one needs to assume, or even an ethical stand. There is an ethics of application. The objective stands opposite to the subjective, both within the semantic extension of the same word. – My old Latin dictionary from my high school days gives the following “neutral” example: *se applicare ad philosophiam*, to devote oneself to philosophy. So “application” seems to involve and call for philosophy (already at the dictionary level). Philosophy figures as a particularly salient case of something that must be practiced with application.

But then there come two further meanings, both fatally common and omnipresent. In chronological order, the third meaning of application would be “a formal request to be hired for a job or paid position,” also for admission to a school, a program, a course, an application for funding, etc.<sup>8</sup> This meaning was first attested in English in 1851, and the date evokes precisely the emergence (or rather the rapid, wide spread) of the job market, the workforce massively seeking employment on the market. Another name for this is capitalism, the era of job applications. Everybody is subject to applications, everybody is an applicant<sup>9</sup> – it has become

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use the term “application” (except once in the spurious play *Edward III*), he used variations of “apply,” most notably in *Romeo and Juliet*, where Friar Laurence says: “Virtue itself turns vice, being misapplied, / And vice sometimes by action dignified” (II. iii. 17–18). I owe this reminder to Kozma Prelević.

<sup>8</sup> It can have further ramifications with “petition, entreaty, request.” Also in legal sense: “The application for the deferral of the hearing was granted.”

<sup>9</sup> One can make a conceptual pair supplicant/applicant (the etymology is different, though). “Supplicant” can be taken as a pre-modern stance, it implies begging

a universal condition, gaining a new surge and additional weight in the present times of growing precarity.

This brings in quite a different angle as to the relation between philosophy and application, one far more trivial and common: not the devotion required for engaging with philosophy, but the masses of job applications that are imposed on all philosophy students in order to survive (as I closely know from personal experience with all my students, at home and internationally), invariably with a low success rate. Furthermore, in the philosophical job applications and the applications for funding of philosophical research, the crucial thing one must display is that philosophy can be applied, “bearing upon something else,” put to practical use, ultimately serve the market (and create the surplus value). In this third sense, one’s skills, the internal capacities, one’s knowledge (no doubt acquired with a lot of application in the second sense, i. e., subjective efforts) have to be applied to this particular kind of the other (the Other?) which is the (job) market, bringing them to bear on this other field, where they can be “evaluated,” not for their intrinsic value, but by the measure of a very different logic of applicability. The market is the other on which the philosophical “something” must bear.

Finally, there is the fourth and last meaning (so far), pertaining to the computer era: “a program designed to carry out specific tasks or solve specific problems within a larger system”; or from another dictionary source, “a computer program that the end user perceives as a single entity; as a tool for a well-defined purpose.” This meaning stems from as early as 1969, when computers were in their infancy, and no doubt at the time (more than half a century ago) nobody could possibly foresee or imagine the brilliant future career of this innocent-looking additional sub-meaning of the

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humbly, a deferential petitioning, pleading, entreating, with religious subtext of prayer, displaying one’s humility. With capitalism supplicants have (allegedly) turned into applicants, supposedly free agents on the free market. From supplicant to applicant – maybe not a bad shorthand for the transition from premodernity to modernity. But with growing precarity, aren’t we engaging in the opposite trajectory from applicant to supplicant? With what Maurizio Lazzarato describes as “the indebted man,” or with what Varoufakis describes as the end of the market as we knew it, heading for “techno-feudalism”?

word. The latecomer has taken over and (almost) dwarfed the preceding meanings, particularly with its steep rise during the last two decades. We live in the era of apps, unable to survive any length of time without smartphones and the constant usage of apps, with ever new apps constantly mushrooming for every imaginable purpose – stargazing, diet schemes, fitness, navigation, vacation, Shakespeare quotes, promotion codes, dating, etc., encompassing everything from trivial practicalities to our most intimate (as the truism goes, applications know more about ourselves than we do; do we use apps or do apps use us?).<sup>10</sup> WhatsApp, the epitome of apps, was founded in 2009 by a few guys in California, then bought by Facebook in 2014 for 19.3 billion USD, having 500 million users at the time. Now it has well over 2 billion monthly active users worldwide (including myself). It provides an iconic and most economical answer to the question “What’s up?” (“App is up.”) For this new additional meaning to be successful, the word had to be curtailed, abbreviated, cut off from its history, neutered, as it were, not decapitated but truncated, i.e., keeping just its head and cut off from its trunk – “app” is enough, the shorthand concomitant and coinciding with its application. (The dictionary also offers “applet” as a pet name, diminutive as the sign of intimacy and affect.)

So much for etymology and the dictionary. It is well known that Lacan had a passion for etymologies (a passion that I share) – one of his favorite books was *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue française* by Bloch and von Wartburg, the colossal undertaking published in 1932 (with many revisions and reprints). And so did Heidegger, notoriously so. But their passions point in opposite directions. While Heidegger was trying to dig out and restore the originary meaning, covered by oblivion and multiple layers of ontic concerns, for Lacan etymology was the tell-tale sign of contingency, an archive of the historical vagaries, the depository of their real: “A language ... is nothing else but the sum total of equivocations that its history has allowed to persist there. This is the way that the real ... has

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<sup>10</sup> Apps seem to practice a version of what Freud called *die gleichschwebende Aufmerksamkeit*, the equally distributed attention, paying equal attention to what we don’t pay attention to, surveilling the margins that escape us. They are our quasi-analysts.

made its deposit there in the course of ages."<sup>11</sup> It's the contingent vagaries and equivocations that touch upon a real, testify to a real, not the restoration of some supposed originary real, a primordial meaning that one would have to unearth.<sup>12</sup>

Still, the contingent history of the term amounts to a narrative, binding together four different meanings,<sup>13</sup> a slide from philosophical abstraction to the triviality of apps: first, the highly philosophical folding and weaving of something with something else, with the alterity, the intricate relation of "one" to the "other," ontologically speaking; second, the subjective application, required by application, as diligence, engagement, devotion, commitment; third, job application, the relation to this seemingly trivial other, the unfathomable vagaries of capitalist markets and the inscrutable logic of their requirements; and fourth, the application as the computer program, pertaining to technological wizardry, where the relation to otherness seems to have waned. Namely, one applies a computer program to an area which had to be already made computable, apt for application, adapted to its workings, so that the (seeming) other is ultimately an extension of the "same" (computability), but of an infinitely expanding "same" with the capacity of integrating any otherness into its deployment, an infinitely applicable homogenization of heterogeneity. But if there is the process of progressively integrating all alterity, by myriad applications, of taming it, as it were, domesticating it, making any otherness at our disposal, then on the other hand the process itself appears to be increasingly out of our control. What maximally serves at our disposal may well be beyond our disposal, thus itself becoming "other" in relation to us. The more the computers,

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Lacan, "L'étourdit," in: *Autres écrits*, 490.

<sup>12</sup> This real obviously pertains to singularities of particular languages and sticks to them. Although "application" is a Latin word imported into a host of languages, the line that we are pursuing pertains specifically to English. In my own language, Slovenian, the second (diligence, devotion) and third meanings (job application) don't exist at all, while the first and particularly the fourth meaning are widespread. "Application," notwithstanding its international demeanor, is embedded into what Lacan called *lalangue*, and thus ultimately strictly speaking "untranslatable."

<sup>13</sup> I am simplifying, a dictionary lists no less than twelve different meanings of "application."

apps, AI, etc. resemble “us,” the more they can perform all our tasks (better than we can), the more they seem alien, the Other. There is (perhaps) a new constellation of “the one” and “the other” to be accounted for.

Let me now dwell a bit on the philosophical notion of application, on its philosophical implications. I would argue for two contradictory theses: first, there is no such thing as a simple application; and second, there is nothing but application, application is universally around, constitutively so, though its omnipresence may be hard to conceive.

Let’s first go back to the minimal dictionary definition: “bringing something to bear upon something else.” I have already mentioned that this definition implies a certain hierarchy and precedence, namely that there is a first “something” which is in the second step applied to “something else,” a second “something,” with the assumption of priority of “something” to its application, and with the further assumption that the first “something” is *de iure* independent of its (multiple) applications which are temporally posterior. But can this be? Can there be an application where the initial something can remain unaffected, untainted by its application? Does this implied hierarchy and priority ever hold? Doesn’t the “something else” strike back on the initial “something” and transform it? Isn’t there always a reverse impact of the secondary on the supposed primary?

Let me make a digression and give an example, not just any odd example, but the fate of psychoanalysis. The history of psychoanalysis has been entwined with the question of its application. It’s clear that psychoanalysis emerged as a clinical practice, the practice of a new treatment of psychic ailments, “the talking cure” in the intimacy of a *tête-à-tête*, in a laboratory situation, as it were, but very soon the prospect arose of its wider application. Already in 1908 Freud wrote the paper entitled “‘Civilized’ sexual morality and modern nervous illness,” where already the title proposes the implication (application?) that what causes the modern nervous illness may well be our “civilized” sexual morality (“*kulturelle*” *Sexualmoral*, says Freud, where “cultural” is put in quotation marks), thus making the first move towards the further implication that what’s wrong with the patients is not their private pathology, but a social pathology which conditions their private troubles. The quotation marks encircling “culture” are most

telling – it’s rather the culture that becomes the patient on the couch. Now, is this “implication” just the explicitation of the implicit involved in clinical practice? Or is it rather an “application” to another much wider domain, concerning the underpinnings of our culture and social structures at large? From then on, psychoanalysis made a spectacular career precisely as “applied psychoanalysis,” increasingly so, with Freud massively devoting his attention to anthropology, history (think of *Totem and Taboo*), sociology (think of *Mass Psychology*), religion (from *The Future of an Illusion* to *Man Moses*), civilization at large (*Civilization and its Discontents*),<sup>14</sup> to art, science, politics, philosophy, etc., applying psychoanalysis to ever wider circles, while at the time the clinical practice remained limited to a rather small number of patients in a handful of countries. By the time Freud died, in 1939, everyone knew about psychoanalysis, worldwide and in a vast number of disciplines, almost in every walk of life, despite the tiny amount of people who actually had a clinical experience of it. The history of psychoanalysis can be conceived as the history of its massive application, the applied psychoanalysis carrying the torch of its spread.

Was the clinical practice, the supposed “something” that bears on something else, affected by these applications? Of course it was. Psychoanalysis is unique as a cure by the fact that what happens on the couch has (implicitly), so to speak, world-historical implications. Through the practice of the cure virtually everything is at stake, from the most bodily to the most abstract (and particularly the intersection of the two), from the singular vagaries of enjoyment to philosophical speculation, from the individual symptoms to the social fabric and its tear. Were the psychoanalytic clinical concepts affected by these applications? Of course they were. Take *Totem and Taboo* (1912–13), first published under the title *Some Points of Agreement (Übereinstimmungen, overlaps) between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*.<sup>15</sup> It massively used the clinical entity of obsessional neurosis in the attempt to explain the very origins of religion, and of course obsessional neurosis will never be the same the moment one can

<sup>14</sup> All the abovementioned Freud’s texts are gathered in two volumes, Sigmund Freud, *Civilization, Society and Religion*, and *The Origins of Religion*.

<sup>15</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Origins of Religion*, 45.

apply it to the most “primitive” societies and the earliest structures of our culture. The “savages,” *die Wilden*, turn out to be not quite savage through the lens of this application, while the obsessionals appear more “savage” than what could be assumed. The fact that the concept of obsessional neurosis can be applied to such a distant domain – distant in time, space, and content – changes its very nature and conceptual impact.

In sum, it can be argued that psychoanalysis, such as we know it, is the child of its application – as opposed to the parent of its applications. It’s the multiple applications to other fields, far away from the clinical, that shaped its fate. Its multifaceted applicability changed its inherent nature just as it changed, in several ways, the nature of the fields where it was applied. To be sure, there has always been a lot of harsh opposition to it, but the telling fact is that nobody could quite ignore it. (The critical question is: has this changed, is this still the case in the past few decades? Has psychoanalysis lost its critical edge?) As to the inherent clinical practice, doubts were always raised as to its effectiveness, its therapeutical success rate as a cure (how does one measure the success of a cure which posits that society is sick, not just the individual?), but one cannot doubt the successfulness of its applications.<sup>16</sup>

Jacques Lacan made a curious reverse move as to application and gave it another twist. After having been excommunicated from the official psychoanalytic organization (IPA), he founded, in June 1964, his own organization, *École freudienne de Paris*, an organization which will subsequently meet with huge success and which Lacan will later dissolve at the height of its glory, in January 1980 – seeing it as a victim of its own success (to make it short). In founding EFP he had to determine its organizational structure, and we learn from its founding act<sup>17</sup> that EFP is to be divided

<sup>16</sup> There is something paradoxical in this situation: namely, when dealing with application one usually starts with a theory and then considers its application to practice, but here we start with a clinical practice and its conceptual grasp and then consider its applications to other distant domains. The applications of practice spread out to theory, so to speak.

<sup>17</sup> Lacan, *Autres écrits*, 230–32. The best source for all the documents concerning this is Jacques-Alain Miller, *L'excommunication*. – See also Lacan, *Autres écrits*, 232: “The ethics of psychoanalysis is the practice of its theory.”

into three sections: first, the section for pure psychoanalysis, which deals with the practice and doctrine of psychoanalysis in the proper sense of the word – and this proper sense concerns above all the didactical analysis, i. e., the process of formation of analysts (the analysis whose aim is not the cure, but the passage, *la passe*, of the patient, the analysand, to the position of the analyst), with the specific proviso that psychoanalysis *per se*, in itself, is not a therapeutical technique. Second, the section of applied psychoanalysis, which concerns therapy and clinical practice. Third, the connections of the Freudian field to other domains and sciences (structuralism is specifically mentioned). The surprising part of this proposal is that therapy, the cure, the treatment, now figure as the application of pure psychoanalysis. Treating psychic ailments in clinical practice – the birthplace of psychoanalysis – is seen as its (secondary?) application as if the pure psychoanalysis (if such a thing exists) also happens to involve a contingent side-effect of possibly healing psychic troubles. (As though it is not in itself made for helping people, but it can accidentally also have that beneficial effect.) One can see the paradoxical nature of this move: it's not that pure psychoanalysis would precede its therapeutical application, it's rather its retroactive effect; its purity is the result of retroaction. It initially had to start with therapeutic aims before it could be extrapolated and distilled in its purity, not subservient to well-being (not to what Lacan frequently called *le service des biens*, the service of goods, which involves adaptation to reality), not serving anything, just being done for its own sake (*ad maiorem Dei gloriam*, as the Jesuit slogan ran) and for no other purpose. Pure practice, pure thought? The intersection or coincidence of the two? The therapy, the treatment, the cure, they are already applications bearing upon another domain (as opposed to “pure psychoanalysis’ whose purity is retrospective).

Let me now go back to the main line of argument. I proposed to argue, first, that there is no such thing as a simple or innocent application. Once one applies “something” to “something else,” to another domain, then the “something else” strikes back, it affects and reshapes the initial something, thus putting into question its ontological precedence, independence and self-identity. Precedence turns into interaction, *Wechselwirkung*, the one

and the other mutually affecting each other. The retroactive effect of what comes second demotes the priority. – But maybe a further, bolder and more speculative move is needed (maybe already alluded to by Lacan’s move of retrospective purity). One should conceive a constellation where there is ultimately no prior something that is then applied in a second step, but where the first something is a pure retroactive effect of its application. The initial entity that we start with would thus be empty, just a mirage, it would only get its consistency and positivity retroactively once the move to the other has been accomplished. Its entire reality would thus consist in its application (“bearing on something else”) which enables its retroactive constitution. What appeared to be the second is actually the first, which became the first only by virtue of the second. This may sound like a highly speculative exercise – but isn’t this what stands at the heart of the Hegelian dialectic? Maybe at the heart of thought *tout court*?

Hegel proposed this excellent word, which maybe summarizes his endeavor, namely *Sichanderswerden*, the good English translation (proposed by A. V. Miller) is “self-othering.”<sup>18</sup> Any self becomes itself only by passing into its other, through becoming other than itself. We cannot grasp any “itself” independently in its immediacy without its passage into its other. Any immediacy is already mediated by otherness. The simple point I am getting at can be summed up like this: What we call dialectic is universal application, the universalization of application. In dialectic, only applications exist (or rather insist). No entity exists apart from its application. Bearing upon an other is the core of any self. The ontological priority and temporal precedence are thus gone; we are caught in a temporal loop where the second retroactively becomes the first. A long tradition had it that the origin is where things are at their fullest and their purest, then they get degraded, diminished, compromised, affected by their fall into otherness, their application. But with Hegel the origin is empty, it’s where things are at their poorest (as opposed to purest), at their most vacant – it’s only the application, the evolvment into otherness that retroactively constitutes the alleged origin. – To briefly come back to Brandom, and to

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<sup>18</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 10.

Leibniz, mentioned before: this is not the explicitation of the implicit nor the unfolding of what was folded. Rather, what seemed to be implicit and folded is in the first place produced by this process of self-othering. It's an optical illusion that everything was implicitly already there before its being unfolded and explicated. As I pointed out before, application stands opposite to implicit-explicit, to explication and explicitation. Instead of making it explicit, shall we say making it applicite?<sup>19</sup>

One can read Hegel's entire *Phenomenology of Spirit* as a theory of application. When the natural consciousness, *natürliches Bewußtsein*, a non-philosophical consciousness – and the aim of the *Phenomenology* is to bring the non-philosophical consciousness to philosophy – proposes a certain theory, it is simply invited to apply it to see whether it can stand the test of “bearing upon something else.” And each time it does this it turns out that the application transforms the initial theory and that it has very different consequences from what it purported. Consciousness produces certain concepts and entertains various theories, different at each stage, but the moment one applies them, it turns out that these concepts and theories entail a very different message from what one surmised or imagined. Say, in the beginning, when consciousness which swears by sense certainty as the criterion of truth – the allegedly richest, manifold and immediate sensual experience – is invited to say something about it,

<sup>19</sup> I cannot enter here into the massive debate about whether Hegel thereby actually espoused the otherness or whether this move rather served to make otherness subservient to the same, and thus neutralized, sublated, *aufgehoben*, rather than engaging in proper application (“bearing upon an other”). All controversies surrounding Hegel's legacy turn around this thin line. Most tellingly, Kierkegaard, in the immediate aftermath, saw Hegel as the last proponent of anamnesis, the Platonic reminiscence, the deployment and coming out of what had already been there, thus a mere unfolding. He sought the remedy to counter this in repetition, a most ingenious proposal. Can repetition be the way to proper application? There is a paradox. Against Hegel's domesticating the otherness, Kierkegaard proposes “more of the same” (namely repetition) as the best way to break out of the vicious circle of “sameness” and get to alterity. The same, when repeated, when properly applied, turns out to produce otherness. This would be the proper application that could counter the move towards the progression of *Aufhebung*. – I can remind that Lacan opted for Kierkegaard and repetition, against both Freud and Hegel. See Mladen Dolar, *Remembrance and Repetition: Kierkegaard and Psychoanalysis*.

it turns out that the alleged riches evaporate and get caught in the web of language as the realm of abstraction, not adapted to the immediate experience, so that the consciousness can only come up with the emptiest of concepts and the most abstract statements (“here,” “now,” etc.).<sup>20</sup> What is apparently the most concrete theory runs out into the biggest abstraction – could we say that it was submitted to the talking cure? – Most generally, if one reads the *Phenomenology* as a theory of application, it can be said that every theory proposed in the course of the book – and the *Phenomenology*’s grand ambition is to put to the test the exhaustive list of all possible theories – every theory produces its symptom the moment it is applied, and their truth lies in the symptoms they produce, not in the laudable intentions. Here is another theme to ponder on: application and symptom – the symptom produced precisely at the point where no application is mere application but engages otherness in a way that one cannot quite foresee and control. – But this doesn’t go for Hegel alone, one can argue that every philosophy worthy of its name calls for application and presents, in one form or another, a theory of application. This is why the requirement of application, obligatory in any application for funding – the call for applied science etc. – is completely off-mark. It is a call for adaptation, not application, the demand to adapt theory to the given realities, making it useful for the *service des biens*. While a proper application would require the transformation of what it applies to as well as the transformation of the theory that is being applied.

I grew fond of this word “application” while I was writing this paper. It allows, and even calls for, a speculative turn, highly abstract reflections (what is the one, what is the other, what is a relation), and at the same time linking speculation at the other end to the trivial and the practical, the stern reality of job (and funding) applications and the avalanche of computer apps. Application can serve as a makeshift synonym for the

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<sup>20</sup> Note that the situation is here the reverse of what we are usually faced with – usually one has to apply a theory to the sensual empirical experience, while here the assumption which takes the empirical experience as the starting point and the source of truth is tested against the possibility of its (linguistic) expression and is found wanting.

Hegelian dialectic (and even as an illuminating clue to his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the most difficult book in the philosophical canon – I am aware that this is stretching it); and at the same time it can serve as a clue to our modern, postmodern, or post-post- condition, where we are all put in the double position of being applicants (for jobs, for funding) and app users. Application offers an inner trajectory where the spirit (of application as self-othering) as if meets the bone (of anything but dialectical inconsequentiality of the present habitus).<sup>21</sup> But can one instill dialectic into their relation?

It may seem that in our contemporary role of applicants we are in a subordinate position of entreaty, a plea, imploring the unfathomable Other for pity or mercy (or at least for favor) in an inscrutable world, while as app users we are in the active position of touchscreen scrollers, where everything is at our disposal, literally at our fingertips (and there has never been so much information and possibilities at our disposal in the whole history of mankind, all thanks to apps). But it's clear that this is a false opposition. As apps users we are as much serving the unfathomable Other and voluntarily catering for the accumulation of surplus value (as “cloud-serfs,” to use the expression promoted by Varoufakis), subservient to the twin conglomerate of informational and financial capital.<sup>22</sup> Our constant free and willing use of apps is the token of our serfdom (hence Varoufakis proposed the term techno-feudalism to encapsulate our predicament).<sup>23</sup> If application is essentially a relation to an other, to alterity (“bringing some-

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<sup>21</sup> Here is a further very illuminating reflection by Simon Hajdini, concerning the Marxist analysis of commodity universe: “Primitive accumulation can be seen as preparing the ground for capitalist application; if the former is a process of separating the capacity for labor from the means of its realization, then capitalist production is a process by which labor meets the means of production as the means of application (of labor). The idea also fits your point regarding the retroactive constitution of the (supposedly initial) “something” brought to bear on “something else”: in the process of capitalist application, the initial purely abstract and hence empty capacity for labor is retroactively re-constituted as labor-power to be applied in the production process, etc. Here, too, application has clear ontological priority.” (Quoted from personal correspondence.)

<sup>22</sup> See Joseph Vogl, *Capital and Ressentiment*.

<sup>23</sup> See Yannis Varoufakis, *Techno-feudalism*.

thing to bear on something else”), then the term itself raises the question about the nature of the other that is involved, enfolded/out-folded, with the application. Which other? What is the “eliveness” of something else? We saw that application can be conceived as a formidable tool whereby an entity can espouse otherness in order to be itself, a dialectical move that can hopefully break the circle of the reproduction of the same and enable the experience of alterity at the core of any self.<sup>24</sup> But the evolution of the meaning of the term application testifies to a new predicament, spelling out two forms of submission: the experience of a radically opaque Other beyond our reach, which we try to sway as applicants (in the third sense), and on the other hand the Other which we (willingly) serve as app users. The Other of the market, the Other of the global financial order, the Other to which we send our applications or which we serve with our apps – in either case this is not the Other with which we could dialectically interfold to be ourselves.

If there is this inscrutable Other which now presides over the sense of application, there is on the other hand also the prevailing sense that we cannot make an experience of alterity any longer. Any heterogeneity is being homogenized, made computable,<sup>25</sup> subsumed in the universe of universal commodification which reaches deep into our intimacy. There is a paradox: there is both an omnipresent radical Other beyond our reach, and the absent other that we can no longer experience. Is there too much otherness, is there a lack of otherness? The Other is lacking, but fatefully not in the sense in which Lacan speaks about the lack in the Other. It is as if there is too much Other, to the point of it being unbearable, and there is too much sameness, to the point of it being unbearable. In the universe of universal application, what seems to be missing is precisely the proper

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<sup>24</sup> Experience etymologically stems from *peras*, “border” – it is essentially the experience of engaging with the border, crossing the border, going beyond the border. The German *Erfahrung* evokes *Gefahr*, “danger,” and *fahren*, “a trajectory.”

<sup>25</sup> Maybe there is something wrong with this image of the world of total computation. One can argue that everything can be computed except the computation itself, which provides a structural loophole in any closed totalized universe and can have practical consequences. A line to be developed. See, e.g., McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto*.

application. Is there a way in which we could reinvent application, restore proper application, imagine another kind of application? This is a task that requires a lot of application in the second sense (devotion, commitment), and I can't quite find a better way than a re-engagement with the resources of, say, Hegel and Lacan, persevering on their path.

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TADEJ TROHA

# The Latest, the Last, and the Least: Freud, Salomé, and the Freudian Method

## The Question of Metapsychology

Some questions are impossible to pose directly. Or rather: some questions can be posed directly only retroactively, only at the moment when, by way of detours and various more or less fabricated points of entry, we have produced an answer that is relatively independent of the question itself. One such question is: what is metapsychology – Freud's metapsychology?

The concept as such is indeterminate and elusive, yet it readily invites a certain theoretical grandiloquence, both in Freud and in later psychoanalytic literature. As a result, its content and its scope oscillate between almost everything and almost nothing. Where, then, are we to look for it at all, and how are we to delineate the field within which it is to be sought? Can metapsychology *in actu* be delimited to the unfinished, or partially destroyed, 1915 mega-study *Zur Vorbereitung einer Metapsychologie*, of which only five published papers remain, along with a draft of a sixth text discovered much later? Should this corpus be expanded to include at least those few theoretically decisive texts from the period 1911–1914, in which Freud, contrary to his customary restraint, allows the speculative tendency a certain latitude, and which function as an actual *Vor-bereitung*, a pre-preparation, so to speak, for the more systematically conceived studies of the unconscious, repression, the drive, melancholia, and dreams?

Should we also include those writings Freud published several years later, after he had already abandoned the project of a systematic metapsychology, from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) to *Fetishism* (1927)?<sup>1</sup> Should we reach even further back, to the beginnings, to *The Interpretation of Dreams*, or perhaps even to the *Project for a Scientific Psychology*? Should we, on the other hand, also designate as metapsychological, or at least meta-psychological, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, *The Future of an Illusion*, and *Moses and Monotheism*, that is, those texts that are hardly psychoanalytic any longer and are the product of a “regressive development,” when Freud’s interest, “after a lifelong detour through the natural sciences, medicine and psychotherapy, returned to the cultural which had fascinated ... a youth scarcely old enough for thinking,” as he himself wrote in the 1935 Postscript to *An Autobiographical Study*?<sup>2</sup> In other words, was metapsychology also being produced after the shift in focus from psychoanalysis to the problem of culture, in a period when Freud himself claims that he “made no further decisive contributions” to psychoanalysis and that most of what he wrote was “either unessential or would soon have been supplied by someone else”? And if we move onto more strictly conceptual ground: is metapsychology really nothing more than a “psychology of the unconscious,” as Freud suggests in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*?<sup>3</sup> If so, which concept of the unconscious is actually at stake here? And if not, what, then, is its proper object?

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- 1 Freud himself understands these studies as a displaced, unsystematic continuation of a project that he gradually abandoned: “What has happened to my *Metapsychology*? In the first place it has not yet been written. The systematic working through of material is not possible for me; the fragmentary nature of my experiences and the sporadic character of my insights do not permit it. But if I still have ten years to live and remain capable of work in this period, do not die of starvation, or meet a violent end, nor am too severely afflicted by the misery of my family or of the world around me – a bit too much to ask – then I promise to make further contributions to it. A first example of this will be found in an essay of mine titled *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.” Sigmund Freud and Lou Andreas-Salomé, *Letters*, 95.
  - 2 Sigmund Freud, “An Autobiographical Study,” in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 20, 72.
  - 3 See Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 6, 258–59.

There is, to be sure, a fairly elegant and almost self-evident way out: to equate metapsychology with psychoanalytic theory as such and, precisely because it encompasses “the whole” of psychoanalytic theory, to reduce it to the “nothing” of a concept. In this case, metapsychology becomes an optional signifier that can occasionally add flavor to our discussions but disappears as a problem. This solution is not entirely misguided, however: if one proceeds in the manner of Richard Boothby in his *Freud as Philosopher*, where the equation between psychoanalytic theory and metapsychology is posited as an almost-equation, where identity is described as “virtual,” it is also possible to construct a rather good provisional framework:

Metapsychology thus refers to the assumption of the unconscious itself, as well as to the structures that condition its relations with consciousness. It comprises the distinction of primary and secondary processes, the tripartite division of ego, id, and superego, and the activities of defense, repression, resistance, and symptom formation. Metapsychology is therefore the most comprehensive and all-encompassing viewpoint, one that seeks to coordinate the battery of psychoanalytic concepts into an integrated theoretical architecture. ... The question of metapsychology is nothing less than the question of psychoanalytic theory itself.<sup>4</sup>

In short, rather than positing an identity between metapsychology and psychoanalytic theory at the level of the concept, we should locate their relation at the level of the question that guides our inquiry. More precisely, metapsychology can be defined as the point from which it becomes possible to pose an adequate and sufficiently radical form of the question of psychoanalytic theory. And yet, once the first step has been taken, once one rehearses the practically unavoidable anecdotal passages from the letters to Fliess, in which metapsychology appears surprisingly early, almost as if projected into a future in which it will, or perhaps will not, acquire adequate content, the initial impetus quickly comes to a halt. If one does not wish to abandon the search altogether, this is the point of choice, namely

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Boothby, *Freud as Philosopher: Metapsychology after Lacan*, 3.

the choice of the most productive possible detour, even if it cannot be absolutely grounded.

Recently, I have tentatively attempted to think metapsychology on the model of Freud's major case studies; granted, not simply as a meta- or auto-case, but rather as a search for orientation in the universal, one burdened by the concreteness of a subjective disposition. Given the markedly ambivalent relation Freud maintains toward the concept of metapsychology, which in practical use is always accompanied by a certain discomfort and by an excessive proximity to philosophical as well as paranoid speculation, it is probably not entirely unproductive to approach metapsychology as one would a clinical case. The case of metapsychology, too, has its own prehistory, its distinct developmental phases that cannot be entirely eliminated and that exist alongside one another, its fantasies, its symptoms, its moments of fetishistic disavowal, its compromises, its contingency and its necessity, and a multitude of figures involved in the formation of its disposition – whereby those who appear, at first glance, to be the most essential figures prove to be marginal, and vice versa.

At a practical level, this approach entails the following: although there is no doubt that Freud's metapsychology, whatever it may designate, is primarily inscribed in his published writings, reconstructing its framework and guarding against a slide into pre-given reductive schemata requires that other sources also be brought into the discussion. Metapsychology, too, has its "original notes," and in them, even more than in the official case record, a very specific figure comes to dominate, one who entered the story largely by chance and from the side, yet nevertheless left an indelible impression. This figure is the person whom Freud described in a letter to Ferenczi as a "woman of dangerous intelligence,"<sup>5</sup> and whom, in a letter addressed to her, he described as an "understander par excellence," who "understands more and better than what was presented to her," or whose comments, as the English translation renders this passage, are "an amplification and improvement of the original."<sup>6</sup> Her name is Lou Andreas-Salomé.

<sup>5</sup> Sigmund Freud and Sándor Ferenczi, *The Correspondence of Sigmund Freud and Sándor Ferenczi*, Vol. 1, 422.

<sup>6</sup> Freud and Andreas-Salomé, *Letters*, 45; see also Sigmund Freud and Lou Andreas-Salomé, *Briefwechsel*, 50.

Salomé came into contact with psychoanalysis relatively late, but she clearly found in it a terrain on which she could activate, in a new way, a theoretical disposition that had already been largely developed. She and Freud first met at the congress in Weimar in September 1911, which she attended together with her then partner, the psychiatrist Poul Bjerre, a Swedish outpost of the psychoanalytic movement toward which Freud harbored certain reservations. By the end of the following summer, however, she arrived in Vienna, where she was a regular presence at the Wednesday meetings of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society. In addition to the extensive correspondence that she maintained with Freud until her death, she also demonstrated understanding, in the strong sense of the word to which Freud refers, in her diary entries, in which she mostly recorded her reflections on the discussions and practices of the Freudian circle. It is precisely an account of one of the first sessions she attended that we shall take in the next section as the starting point for yet another detour, one that may lead us back to the question of metapsychology.

As stated, I have approached metapsychology as a case, but metapsychology itself also has its own case. It has its object, one that is concrete, present in a specific way within particular empirical material, yet at the same time necessarily universal, implicated in every human being. Within the framework of Freudian psychoanalysis, I argue, the object of metapsychology can only be one and the same, equally concrete, equally universal, and equally elusive as metapsychology itself, namely the psychic apparatus, the soul entirely marked by reason, translated into a material and dynamic structure, one that cannot exist without the unconscious.

Yet for metapsychology to be meaningful not merely as a systematic descriptive edifice but as a theoretical practice, two further conditions must be met. On the one hand, metapsychology must conceptualize the psychic apparatus at the level of generality, that is, it must be able to grasp the shared properties of every psychic apparatus; on the other hand, it must open up space for its maximal capacity, that is, it must be able to grasp every expression of any psychic apparatus, including its most extreme forms. In short, if this speculative practice specific to psychoanalysis is not to remain merely an abstraction disguised in wild concreteness,

it is necessary to delineate its method, a method that, in its essential features, will be nothing other than a speculative intensification of the general psychoanalytic method. And it is precisely the question of Freud's general method that will be approached through the detour opened up by Lou Andreas-Salomé.

## The Method of Psychoanalysis

In her report on the meeting of October 30, 1912, Salomé writes:

Freud seated me at his side and made a very sweet remark. He gave the paper. During the discussion we talked quietly together on various matters. I was surprised how readily he acquiesced to a view of neurosis as a conflict between libido and ego instead of proceeding unilaterally from the libido. When I commented that it read otherwise in his books he said, "My latest formulation." And that corresponds with my general impression: that the theory is by no means hidebound [*festgenagelt*], but is adjusted to further findings [*sich weiter nach den Erfahrungen regelt*], and, further, that this man is great simply in that he is the man of research advancing quietly and working tirelessly. Perhaps the "dogmatism" with which he is reproached derives from the necessity to establish guidelines in the course of his tireless advance, if only for the sake of his fellow-workers.<sup>7</sup>

Let us begin with the final observation. The orientational markers that Freud stakes out in order to assist his collaborators and followers have a primarily negative function. On the basis of abstract postulates, such as the unconscious, infantile sexuality, or the so-called fundamental rule of analytic technique, namely the rule of free association, it is not possible to construct a psychoanalytic system. As soon as these postulates are understood as foundational stones, as building blocks of a standard theoretical system, rather than as markers that provide rough orientation and prevent

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<sup>7</sup> Lou Andreas-Salomé, *The Freud Journal*, 37.

the most obvious deviations from the psychoanalytic trajectory, they are transformed into dogmatism, into self-sufficient idealist axioms. Taken as true in advance, they are, at best, resistant to possible corrections arising from experience and bring further research to a halt; at worst, they are hyper-applied to experience and begin to designate virtually anything.

Yet, as Salomé recognizes, the charge of dogmatism is unfounded, precisely because (positive) dogmatism runs counter to Freud's basic stance, namely that of a consistent and, consequently, at times counterintuitive empiricism.<sup>8</sup> In Freud's work, theoretical premises are, as is characteristic of empiricism more generally, in principle flexible and subordinated to experience. As we shall see in what follows, however, his specificity lies in the fact that this subordination to experience is extended, as it were, to theory itself. In other words, it is not merely the case that priority is always given to the latest observation, that is, to the empirical finding that comes into contradiction with the theoretical articulation of a given problem up to that point; the same holds for the latest theorization, the latest formulation. Even if it may be less well-grounded and perhaps less durable than one of the earlier formulations was, and perhaps will again be, Freud adopts it with full confidence, with full confidence in the provisional.

Freud's method can be articulated in terms of three relatively autonomous moves, or three distinct attitudes toward the material.

First, *the affirmation of provisionality*, which entails a principled openness to the temporary suspension of the truth of past judgements, inter-

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<sup>8</sup> The best example is probably to be found in the lecture on dreams and occultism from the *New Introductory Lectures*: "We are faced by a question of fact: is what the occultists tell us true or not? It must, after all, be possible to decide this by observation. At bottom we have cause for gratitude to the occultists. ... Not every case, of course, is equally convincing and in not every case is it equally possible to exclude more rational explanations; but, taking them as a whole, there remains a strong balance of probability in favour of thought-transference as a fact. ... No doubt you would like me to hold fast to a moderate theism and show myself relentless in my rejection of everything occult. But I am incapable of currying favour and I must urge you to have kindlier thoughts on the objective possibility of thought-transference and at the same time of telepathy as well." Sigmund Freud, "New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis," in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 22, 34, 42–43, 54.

pretations, or theoretical constructs upon the emergence of a new observation, insight, or a new recombination of existing material, provided that this emergence produces in the observing subject a sense of greater certainty. For Freud, the version of the object of observation or thought that appears most recently as true is, provisionally and, as it were, for a limited time, released from the usual pressure to be harmonized with or distinguished from earlier positions. What presents itself as true at the latest stage is provisionally treated as more true in relation to earlier positions, indeed as the only true one. Yet because provisionality itself is affirmed, the subject remains open to the emergence of an even more recent position, as well as to the possible rehabilitation of one of the earlier positions or to their different synthesis.

Second, *the affirmation of definitiveness*, that is, the affirmation of the possibility that what initially appears as provisionally true may, at a certain moment, assume the status of the last in the strict sense, that is, of something final, optimal, irreplaceable, and non-revisable. Put differently, although Freud in principle continuously develops his thinking and remains open to new observations, he does not foreclose the possibility that certain formulations or conceptualizations may at some point become something final in this strict sense.

Third, *the minimalism of speculation*, through which Freud expresses modesty, even humility, in relation to the material of observation. Speculation in Freud is always forced; he consents to it only in rare moments, when he is compelled to do so. "I have learned how to tame speculative tendencies and to follow the unforgettable advice of my teacher Charcot: to look at the same things again and again until they speak for themselves,"<sup>9</sup> he writes in *The History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement*, precisely the text in which, in 1914, he draws a line under his break with Jung and Adler, and which can be read as a clearing of the ground on which Freud can, and almost must, explicate his own, that is, genuinely psychoanalytic metapsychology. Genuine psychoanalytic speculation is not a replacement for

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<sup>9</sup> Sigmund Freud, "On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement," in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 14, 22.

observation; rather, it is the opening up of the full potential of observation, its extreme point, at which things begin to speak for themselves, in a language that is no longer “our” language and which, moreover, is not even a language that could ever be “understood” in the standard sense.

In principle, then, all three moves of Freud’s method are committed to empiricism, to a specific type of empiricism. And it is here, of course, that the core of Freud’s reserve, even his resistance, toward philosophy is to be found, including, or above all, toward that particular kind of philosophy that insinuates itself into psychoanalysis. For psychoanalysis, this philosophical tendency represents a constant danger that, as a science, it will slide into a worldview heterogeneous to itself – a reproach that Freud, incidentally, also directs at Adler and Jung.<sup>10</sup>

As he writes a good decade later in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*:

I must confess that I am not at all partial to the fabrication of Weltanschauungen. Such activities may be left to philosophers, who avowedly find it impossible to make their journey through life without a Baedeker of that kind to give them information on every subject. Let us humbly accept the contempt with which they look down on us from the vantage-ground of their superior needs. But since we cannot forgo our narcissistic pride either, we will draw comfort from the reflection that such “Handbooks to Life” soon grow out of date and that it is precisely our short-sighted, narrow and finicky work which obliges them to appear in new editions, and that even the most up-to-date of them are nothing but attempts to find a substitute for the ancient, useful and all-sufficient Church Catechism.<sup>11</sup>

And yet, the difficulty lies in the fact that the philosophical tendency is not merely an occasional subjective caprice that would leave the object of psychoanalytic science untouched by simply adding a further layer of reflection. On the contrary, speculation is something that Freud, precisely as an absolutely consistent empiricist, must from time to time recognize

<sup>10</sup> Freud, “On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement,” 58, 60.

<sup>11</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety,” in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 20, 96.

as an immanent necessity, one that on the one hand emerges from observation and on the other hand makes its continuation possible in the first place. The real question, therefore, is not whether speculation should be admitted or rejected, but whether there exists a form of speculation proper to psychoanalysis, a non-philosophical, or if one prefers, anti-philosophical speculation, one that precisely preserves the threefold structure of the method outlined above. Or must psychoanalysis, on the contrary, at a certain point recognize its own limitation, even its inadequacy in relation to the surplus of reality, and withdraw in favor of philosophy, or indeed transform itself into philosophy? Is there something in psychoanalytic experience that can compel psychoanalysis to become something other than itself, even if only temporarily, to split itself off from itself and, even if only temporarily, allow itself to be guided by a logic that is not its own?

### Lou Salomé and the *Grenzbegriff*

In order for psychoanalysis to remain psychoanalysis and to preserve its own distinctive type of speculation, one that is essentially determined by the principle of non-redundancy, it nevertheless had, as a first step, to borrow at least one concept from philosophy, namely the concept of the *Grenzbegriff*, the concept of the limit concept. When Freud employs the term in *Instincts and Their Vicissitudes*, where he defines the drive as “a concept on the frontier [*ein Grenzbegriff*] between the mental and the somatic,”<sup>12</sup> it is spontaneously understood as a concept situated at the boundary between two sciences, biology and psychology, as a concept that belongs to both and yet to neither. This understanding of the limit concept may well be the end of the story for Freud – though with Freud one can never be quite sure – but it certainly does not exhaust the full potential that this concept is capable of opening up in its own right.

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<sup>12</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Instincts and their Vicissitudes,” in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 14, 121–22.

And here we encounter once again the point at which Lou Andreas-Salomé intervenes. In a diary entry dated November 2, 1912, she activates the potential inherent in Freud's basic understanding of the limit concept:

Apropos of the concept of instinct [*Trieb*], Freud made use of the customary definition that it “rests on the organic.” As long as the instinct theory remains merely something that physiologists and psychologists toss back and forth between themselves, no further enlightenment can emerge from it, even with Freud. It remains a mere crutch, an unwilling inconsistency in our knowledge of nature and of mind. Perhaps it is to this predicament that one may attribute the fact that Adler ultimately could classify instinctual life among the other symbolic forms of his “psychic rules of the game.” For if “instinct” is only, so to speak, a limiting concept [*Grenzbegriff*] viewed from two aspects, then a specific property can be attributed to it only by means of a bilateral optical illusion. Once again, however, it is a mark of greatness in Freud that, untroubled by such philosophical worries, he simply proceeds to action in the face of such questions. Thus he was able to sketch out a map of an entire country on the basis of this border region, before anyone even knew whose land he was entering, with the sole aid of a few straggling trespassers driven by necessity to disregard border regulations. In mental illness, he seized life by the coat-tails, precisely there where it appears to us squeezed helplessly into a cleft, unable to escape into the organic alone (the organic into which everything escapes and becomes “physical” when we are unable to understand it in psychological terms), and there he put it to the question.<sup>13</sup>

A few months later, following a debate on the problem of narcissism, Salomé goes one step further by using the term *Grenzbegriff* in a much more standard philosophical sense. In doing so – and she is, after all, an “understander par excellence” – she draws on Freud in two distinct ways. At the beginning of her entry, she first summarizes Freud, emphasizing that narcissism must be understood as a “vestigial phenomenon [*Restphänomen*] ...

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<sup>13</sup> Salomé, *The Freud Journal*, 39–40.

which for the time being will remain just that,"<sup>14</sup> and that "one must avoid attempting to use it as a key to unlock a great many things that still remain undisclosed."<sup>15</sup> She then continues:

Narcissism in its creative form is no longer just a stage to be transcended; it is rather the persistent accompaniment of all our deeper experience, always present, yet still far beyond any possibility of hewing its way from consciousness into the unconscious. In narcissism the Ucs. still exists only *en bloc*, the primordial form not simply of a foundation but of the all-inclusive. Freud is perfectly right in speaking of it, as he now does, as a limiting concept [*Grenzbegriff*], which serves as a receptacle for what remains unsolved and not a key to its solution.<sup>16</sup>

This formulation is repeated almost verbatim in a letter from early 1915, in which she comments on Freud's then already published essay. Especially the first type, i. e., primary narcissism, she writes,

cannot be pursued further empirically, and indeed at this point analysis comes to a halt altogether – exactly as you say in words which you repeated in conversation: "The concept of narcissism is a borderline concept [*Grenzbegriff*], which should not be used indiscriminately as a key to everything, but should remain a reservoir for residual problems, as yet unsolved and perhaps insoluble." Certainly, it is very important not to turn it into something mysterious, for it does after all designate a fact which is accessible; and in my view, it is this concept which in the last resort really differentiates the Freudian "unconscious" in its essential nature from those elements of it which are utilized here and there by Adler ("fiction") and Jung (*his* "symbolic").<sup>17</sup>

The core of the Freudian concept of narcissism – which, in the broadest sense, denotes the ego's inability ever to be libidinally absolutely unin-

<sup>14</sup> Salomé, *The Freud Journal*, 108.

<sup>15</sup> Salomé, *The Freud Journal*, 108.

<sup>16</sup> Salomé, *The Freud Journal*, 110.

<sup>17</sup> Salomé and Freud, *Letters*, 24.

vested, that is, its inability to be autonomous with respect to libido and to manage it at will – is identified by Salomé in this letter in the fact that the ego “as a product of development ... is first differentiated from that subject-object uniform life, which we then rediscover as ‘libido’ in the self-developing ego.”<sup>18</sup> But as she points out in her diary entry of March 1913, it is absolutely essential that the construction of primary narcissism serve us not as an answer, not as a key, but, once again, as a *Grenzbegriff*, and more precisely as *the limit concept of psychology*, that is, as a concept in which psychology, on the one hand, presses up against biology and, on the other hand, against philosophy:

Unquestionably, this point will come to be a burning issue, and it can only be settled philosophically. It is precisely here where Adler’s organ concept begins, his leap from the psychological into another realm of knowledge requiring other methods. To hold fast instead to Freud’s present concept of narcissism means, in effect, to hold fast to psychology’s right to its own media and methods no matter what. And that means to be allowed to write with appropriate obscurity, its personal mark of X, even there where the psychic organization eludes it, instead of defecting into the alien clarity belonging to another side of existence called the “physical.” It means to take seriously the principle stating that psychic and physical *stand for each other ... but neither determine nor explain* the other and hence cannot substitute for each other. ... The right to an *obscurity of its own* is very important: only the eye turned toward it can find even the tiniest ray of illumination, not the eye diverted to an alien light. So it has come to Freud, here and there; for this reason, too, the greatest emphasis must remain on the direction of discovery, and the purpose of philosophic argument would be to secure its place and its justification. In Freud’s cause, philosophy can and ought to be merely ancillary to practical matters; but in them, it has now become essential and is no longer to be circumvented.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Salomé and Freud, *Letters*, 24.

<sup>19</sup> Salomé, *The Freud Journal*, 110–11.

For psychology (and thus for psychoanalysis), narcissism as a *Grenzbegriff* functions as a provisional concept that simultaneously loosens and reinforces the boundary. By means of this concept, psychology manages, as it were, to step with the very tip of its nose into a field that is unintelligible to it, yet in such a way that it preserves its own perspective and gazes into an *almost* absolute darkness.

And here the decision is fundamentally an ethical one: although psychology is almost completely blind in this field, it must, as a science, insist on its right to remain active and recognized despite this near-total limitation. Yet this is not merely a matter of rights grounded in past merits, nor of the sheer academic caprice of psychologists who insist on probing inaccessible terrains; nor is it simply a matter of psychology, or psychoanalysis, claiming the right, on the basis of its previous achievements in a field where other sciences are entirely blind, to make occasional visits to the edge of foreign territory armed with its own Baedeker.

Two further ethical elements are at stake here. First, there is the question of perseverance, of a given science's decision not to withdraw in a situation in which it becomes aware of its present, and quite possibly also its future, inadequate equipment in a yet unexplored field. This decision is made not out of fixed ideas or arrogance, but in the name of, and for the benefit of, science in general. Even though it itself gropes about under conditions of near-total blindness, other sciences – even those that will one day illuminate this field with spotlights – are at this moment even more impaired, at an even lower level of preparedness than psychology itself. Thus, for example, Freud, in a clear echo of Lou Andreas-Salomé's considerations, reflects in "On Narcissism" (1914):

Since we cannot wait for another science to present us with the final conclusions on the theory of the instincts, it is far more to the purpose that we should try to see what light may be thrown upon this basic problem of biology by a synthesis of the psychological phenomena. Let us face the possibility of error, but let us not be deterred from pursuing the logical implications of the hypothesis we first adopted of an antithesis between ego-instincts and sexual instincts (a hypothesis to which we were forcibly led by analysis of the

transference neuroses), and from seeing whether it turns out to be without contradictions and fruitful, and whether it can be applied to other disorders as well, such as schizophrenia.<sup>20</sup>

The third ethical element – Freud is an empiricist, after all – concerns fidelity to the material, that is, the responsibility to keep its representation as minimally distorted as possible. As Freud writes in a letter of 30 January 1915, in response to Salomé’s reflections that led her to speak of a “right to obscurity,” the problem with moving too quickly into another science or into philosophical speculation is that such a move never proceeds without further distortion:

I do not interpret your remarks on narcissism as objections, but rather as a stimulus to attempt a further conceptual and factual clarification of the subject. I am in agreement with what you say without being able to solve the problems you have raised. I even acknowledge that Adler has an advantage over me in this matter; it is the advantage of someone imposing a system of thought upon things, compared with someone who observes them and is anxiously concerned to do them justice. I comfort myself with the thought that it is not the task of science to simplify the world, or at least not its first task.<sup>21</sup>

Narcissism, conceived as a *Grenzbegriff*, fulfils a dual function in Freudian psychoanalysis. On the one hand, it prevents psychoanalysis, at the very moment it oversteps the boundaries of its native field, from being immediately absorbed by another science; on the other hand, it nevertheless marks the inescapable fact that psychoanalysis has at this point effectively reached its own limit – a limit that it can loosen, but not erase. Once the psychoanalyst becomes aware of having arrived at a boundary at which standard methods no longer hold, it is precisely in virtue of his or her commitment to empiricism (an empiricism that has critically

<sup>20</sup> Sigmund Freud, “On Narcissism: An Introduction,” in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 14, 79.

<sup>21</sup> Salomé and Freud, *Letters*, 26.

detected its own limit) that a shift in approach becomes necessary: a shift from observation to provisional, temporary speculation. In this sense, narcissism is a concept that is not merely a *Grenzbegriff* of psychology, but one that, at a certain moment, also assumes the status of a provisional – and I emphasize: provisional – *Grundbegriff*, a foundational concept of metapsychology.

On the subject itself I would like to observe that my account of narcissism is in the first place what I shall one day describe as “metapsychological,” i. e., purely conditioned by “topographical-dynamic” factors without relation to the conscious processes. The cases in which you are interested refer pre-eminently to conditions where this process becomes conscious, which cannot apply to genuine and naive narcissism. Warning voices, by which I am always guided, have restrained me from pursuing these problems further, until light has been shed in other dark places. The disregarding of conscious conditions and the acceptance of the metapsychological way of thought are as difficult as they are indispensable.<sup>22</sup>

At the point at which Freud, after more than a decade, reactivates the very term *metapsychology* and acknowledges, perhaps more clearly than ever before, its inevitability, it may be useful to take a step back. Let us recall the first quotation from Lou Andreas-Salomé, in which she cites Freud's remark about his latest formulation and comments on the misguided charge of dogmatism. As a corollary to this observation, one may turn to Freud's own words in a letter dated 7 July 1914. In this letter, Freud first offers a few personal remarks about Adler – describing him as a person of “specific venomousness” and as a “loathsome individual” – before continuing in a more general vein:

I have never objected to differences of opinion among members of the psycho-analytic circle, especially as I myself usually have several views on a matter, until, that is to say, I have expressed one of them in print. But one

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<sup>22</sup> Salomé and Freud, *Letters*, 27.

must stick to the fundamental core [*an der Einheitlichkeit des Kerns muss man aber festhalten*]; otherwise it becomes something else.<sup>23</sup>

Freud emphasizes that he does not take issue with a plurality of opinions, primarily because he himself is undecided with respect to certain details – at least until the latest formulation prevails, that is, the formulation which, at the moment of its articulation, to a certain degree emancipates itself and comes to dominate the others. There is, in short, no automatism whatsoever in the interpretation of phenomena: an individual problem in external reality does not find a direct reflection in thought but rather generates a series of approximations that the observer weighs against one another.

At another level, however, there exists a single, unified, indivisible, and uncontested core that must be followed if one wishes to remain within psychoanalysis. A clear distinction must therefore be drawn between opinions – one of which becomes temporarily the last and temporarily prevails over the others – and a core which, once constituted, acquires perhaps not a comprehensive, but certainly a definitive, truly last form. This form cannot be altered unless one wishes – and this is Freud's entire point – to exit psychoanalysis by one's own volition.

### Formulation of the Core

But what does this core actually look like? Is it composed of those orientational markers that are mistakenly taken for Freud's dogmatism? Is the core made up of fundamental concepts and their interrelations? Is a refined familiarity with the conceptual architecture already a sufficient condition for remaining on the trajectory of psychoanalysis? How is this core formed at all?

I would argue that in psychoanalysis this core is not formed but *formulated*. There are formulas that were produced at a certain point and

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<sup>23</sup> Salomé and Freud, *Letters*, 19.

that will remain within psychoanalysis forever. And it is not merely that they cannot be entirely eliminated or forgotten; as formulas, they are also inaccessible to critique, even to the critique of their own author. This is most evident in Lacanian psychoanalysis. It is impossible to imagine Lacan saying: “I’ve thought about it and done some research, and I’ve come to realize that I no longer believe that the big Other does not exist”; or: “I’m beginning to think that the signifier is not really what represents the subject for another signifier”; or, again: “It has just occurred to me that I was in the wrong all along ... there is a sexual relation.” And clearly, it is just as difficult to imagine a Lacanian daring to discard any specific formula as such. A Lacanian may endlessly work through the content and meaning of a formula, seek out its context, even pursue its most counterintuitive and contradictory interpretations – but it would never occur to them to deny and discard the formula itself as entirely invalid or worthless. In psychoanalysis, formulas are strictly irrefutable.

As I have already shown some years ago, Freud at a certain point himself produced this stance, this disposition – namely when he decided to act as a faithful Freudian and to persist in a particular formula, even though it would have been far easier to abandon it or to relax its scope. The fundamental formula of psychoanalysis, the one that introduced the very logic of the formula, was invented in *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

Briefly put, *The Interpretation of Dreams* is built on two hypotheses. The first holds that (every) dream has a meaning. With this hypothesis, Freud situates the problem of dreams within the basic framework of the then-emerging psychoanalysis, which follows the guiding principle that nothing can be declared neutral or irrelevant in advance. On the basis of this principle, Freud decides to attend to every element of the dream report and to avoid any prior ranking among its elements. Every dream, and every element of every dream, can be included within the field of meaning (including the manner in which they are presented in the analytic situation).

And yet, this hypothesis constitutes a necessary, but still insufficient condition. For Freud to have written *The Interpretation of Dreams* in the way he did – and its crucial components include the speculative, perhaps even metapsychological chapters on dream-work and on the psychology

of dream processes – a second hypothesis was required, namely the one he formulates at the conclusion of the interpretation of the dream of Irma's injection: *dreams are the fulfilment of a wish*.

It is more difficult to persist in this hypothesis, this formulation, this formula. When confronted with dreams that obviously, or so it seems, do not function as wish-fulfilments, two temptations arise. The first impulse is to negate its generality; the second is to supplement or refine the formula itself, to translate it into a more elaborated version – namely, into the formula that dreams are the fulfilment of an unconscious wish. While yielding to the first impulse unleashes an avalanche of description and classification, yielding to the second carries the risk of reducing the very concept of the unconscious (of wish), which thus, as it were, closes in on itself and acquires the status of a second reality entirely cut off from consciousness – in short, the status of the subconscious. As a result, precisely the apparently simplest and most direct cases of wish-fulfilment drop out of consideration.

If we attend closely, this formula contains all three moves of Freud's method outlined above. First, Freud relies fully on the formulation that appears to him last, even though it is less consolidated and, at this embryonic stage, also less convincing than the competing hypothesis that every dream has a meaning. Second, in this specific sense the formula is last – final, irreplaceable – and yet, precisely as such, still active. Third, as a formula it is, by its very nature, reduced to a minimum, and it persists at this minimum.

And yet, this formula is not yet metapsychological in the proper sense; it is not formulated “without relation to conscious processes.” Its greatest strength – namely, the fact that it was posited as a universalization of a feature that presents itself as obvious in the simplest dreams, those closest to consciousness – is at the same time its limitation. “Dreams are the fulfilment of a wish” is a formula modelled on a standard conscious judgement, and it acquires its unconscious dimension only retrospectively. In a certain sense, this formula produces Freud; it produces the theoretical disposition of psychoanalysis, but it is itself not yet grounded in a metapsychological perspective. Such a perspective is, once again, “without relation to

conscious processes,” yet not simply in the sense that the observer would be wholly situated within the field of the unconscious as opposed to consciousness, but because the observer is placed in a field in which the very distinction itself is suspended – and with it the entire logic of uncovering.

### **A Metapsychological Insight**

An example of a genuine metapsychological insight – an insight which, without Freud yet being aware of it, is already metapsychological, already “without relation to conscious processes,” and which, once recognized as such, calls for an effort of speculation – is to be found in the essay to which I have already referred, namely in the treatise on narcissism, more precisely in its third section, where Freud introduces the notion of the ego ideal (which at that moment he does not yet distinguish from the ideal ego):

This ego ideal is now the target of the self-love which was enjoyed in childhood by the actual ego. The subject’s narcissism makes its appearance displaced on to this new ego ideal, which, like the infantile ego, finds itself possessed of every perfection that is of value. As always where the libido is concerned, man has here again shown himself incapable of giving up a satisfaction he has once enjoyed. He is not willing to forgo the narcissistic perfection of his childhood; and when, as he grows up, he is disturbed by the admonitions of others and by the awakening of his own critical judgement, so that he can no longer retain that perfection, he seeks to recover it in a new form, that of an ego ideal. What he projects before him as his ideal is the substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood, in which he was his own ideal.<sup>24</sup>

Primary narcissism, which in the subject’s prehistory appeared as a form of perfection, resists withdrawal – and under conditions in which perfection is “disturbed by the admonitions of others and by the awakening of one’s own judgement,” it finds a substitute that enables its continued

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<sup>24</sup> Freud, “On Narcissism,” 94.

survival. Yet when the ego attempts to outwit external reality and to take control of its own satisfaction, control is, quite literally, surrendered to it: "It would not surprise us if we were to find a special psychological agency which performs the task of seeing that narcissistic satisfaction from the ego ideal is ensured and which, with this end in view, constantly watches the actual ego and measures it by that ideal."<sup>25</sup>

It is precisely the anticipation of what will soon come to be known as the superego that, I would argue, constitutes an example of a genuinely metapsychological insight, an insight that is "without any regard for conscious processes." An instance of this kind cannot be discovered; it is not a matter of *Entdeckung*, of removing a surface in order to reveal a hidden content. Rather, it can only be recognized, as Freud puts it, seen as something that we have long known, but have not, until this point, recognized as the manifestation of a specific, autonomized psychic instance. The verb Freud uses in the original is *agnoszieren*, which denotes an assertion in which emphasis is placed on exteriority, on the surface character of perception and of the act of recognition – for example, when, on the basis of dentition, we recognize, identify a corpse, connect it to a person, yet in the strict sense say nothing else about them than that this corpse is indeed that person.<sup>26</sup>

In short, we have always known of the instance we call conscience; we have always known that conscience exists in some way. Yet we have never recognized it as merely one of the expressions of an instance that stands above it; we have never recognized it in its pure form; we have never seen its formal condition, the existence of the pure possibility of being seen, of being observed, of being compelled to do something that presents itself as our own choice (even if only as the choice to yield to pressure). This instance, which will come to bear the name of the superego, is without any regard for our conscious processes – and is in fact indifferent to what

<sup>25</sup> Freud, "On Narcissism," 95.

<sup>26</sup> The fact that Freud uses this very term in the title of the concluding section of the essay "The Unconscious," where it designates a shift from standard psychoanalytic theory to a logic that can be described only as metapsychological, will be addressed elsewhere. See Sigmund Freud, "The Unconscious," in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 14, 196–204.

we want. And what is perhaps even more crucial: this act of recognition is, in a certain sense, more universal than the instance of the superego that is derived from it. Freud continues that

recognition of this agency enables us [also] to understand the so-called “delusions of being noticed” or more correctly, of being watched, which are such striking symptoms in paranoid diseases and which may also occur as an isolated form of illness, or intercalated in a transference neurosis. Patients of this sort complain that all their thoughts are known and their actions watched and supervised; they are informed of the functioning of this agency by voices which characteristically speak to them in the third person (“Now she’s thinking of that again,” “now he’s going out”). This complaint is justified; it describes the truth. A power of this kind, watching, discovering, and criticizing all our intentions, does really exist. Indeed, it exists in every one of us in normal life.<sup>27</sup>

This act of recognition, this *Agnoszierung* of the self-observing instance, is, once again, an example of a genuinely metapsychological insight – one that, contrary to the schema we have followed so far, captures all three moves in a maximally reduced temporality. What appears last is the barest, least subjective observation, one that is so certain that, in its very appearance, it is already inevitably last, final, irrefutable, and irreversible – and, as such, a minimal speculation. What we observe is almost nothing new: merely a bare form that imposes itself upon us against our will and speaks for itself, in the language of the very instance that we can do no more than name. Nothing of what has been said, will be said, or could be said about the superego in the future can surpass the effect of this formal inscription of the presence of that instance.

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<sup>27</sup> Freud, “On Narcissism,” 95.

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# Abstracts

Slavoj Žižek

## Solidarity, Theology, and Materialism

Rowan Williams' *Solidarity* is read here as a major intervention for a renewed Left, one that implicitly resonates with Lacanian psychoanalysis: solidarity begins from the shared disorientation of subjects thrown into a symbolic field where the "big Other" does not exist, and where one's own desire is constitutively opaque. Against sentimental identification and other forms of false solidarity, Williams argues that authentic solidarity requires a double displacement: recognizing the irreducible specificity of the other's suffering while allowing this encounter to unsettle the coordinates of one's own. At the same time, the essay presses Williams on two points: the limits of a liberal injunction to "hear the enemy's story," and the underemphasized role of structural antagonisms (state power, exploitation) that cannot be resolved by openness alone. The final movement rethinks the theological dimension of solidarity through a materialist qualification: collective rituals and "necessary fictions" sustain social consistency even when recognized as fictions, allowing the figure of God to be read not as an external guarantee but as an immanent operator of imagining – an enabling supplement to fragile, imperfect practices of solidarity.

**Keywords:** fictions, God, Other, religion, solidarity, subject

\* \* \*

*Dan Nădășan*

## **Hegel and The Knots of the Understanding**

The understanding (*Verstand*) occupies a central spot in Hegel's philosophy and yet it rarely steps into the interpretative spotlight. When it nevertheless does catch a glimpse of this spotlight, it is usually accompanied by a hermeneutical hypersensitivity and a splitting reactivity that hints towards its place as a shadowy symptomatic knot in the contemporary reception of Hegel: the understanding is either very bad or very good; either a force to be cherished or the very indication of ideological reification and narrow-minded thinking; either a preparatory stage to be transcended by conceptual thought or the very power of transcendence itself. Or, more radically, it is implied that Hegel's conflicting account of the knotty understanding is the ultimate indication for the greater inconsistency of Hegelian dialectics as such. In this essay, I seek to bring out the understanding from its shadows and to account for the very possibility of this shadow itself, by showing how Hegel identifies a repressed sensible moment at the very origin of the understanding's seemingly insensible abstract thinking. This serves as an introduction to Hegel's account of the origin of the dualisms between sense and thought, immediacy and mediacy, abstraction and concretion, which permeate not only what Hegel refers to as the pre-Kantian "metaphysics of the understanding," but much of the contemporary 'non-metaphysical' or 'postmetaphysical' philosophical terrain.

**Keywords:** Enlightenment, Hegel, Kant, sensibility, transcendence, understanding, Žižek

\* \* \*

*Jure Simoniti*

## **Why Are Truths Counterintuitive?**

The article takes as its departing point the epistemological rupture between the nineteenth century – when we supposedly still lived in an intuitively comprehensible world – and the twentieth, when we found ourselves in a rationally and imaginatively unintelligible universe of the theory of relativity and quantum

mechanics. To overcome this false divide, it shows that truth has always already been counterintuitive, since all major insights in the history of knowledge are distinguished precisely by the collapse of our conceptual presuppositions. From the epistemological fact that truth is *a priori* counterintuitive, the article finally derives the ontological thesis that only such a truth can coincide with the real of the world, which takes place on the surface of phenomena only insofar as it possesses no eternal truth at its core.

**Keywords:** concept, counterintuitiveness, intuitiveness, reality, representation, truth

\* \* \*

Alenka Zupančič

### **Politics on the Couch**

This article mobilizes psychoanalytic theory to analyze a contemporary form of authoritarianism that is gaining momentum across the globe. Drawing primarily on Freudian and Lacanian concepts, it proposes the notion of *paranoid power* – or more precisely, *perverse paranoia* – to describe a political configuration in which paranoia is structurally articulated with power and inflected by perverse logics of enjoyment. It examines how contemporary authoritarian discourse frames social and political antagonisms through the rhetoric of “castration,” how symbolic authority is displaced by the accumulation of real force, and how inconsistency itself becomes fetishized in this political strategy. The article further explores the exhibitionist dimension of this power, in which enjoyment circulates through the provocation of outrage in the Other, implicating supporters, opponents, and spectators alike.

**Keywords:** castration, enjoyment, paranoia, perversion, politics, power

\* \* \*

Lidija Šumah

### From Turn to Affect to Return to Freud

While philosophy is often depicted as a succession of conceptual turns, psychoanalysis resists such periodization. If psychoanalysis constitutes a turn at all, it is the radical decentering inaugurated by Freud's discovery of the unconscious, famously condensed in the claim that the ego is not master in its own house. This article argues, following Lacan, that psychoanalysis advances not through new turns but through a return to Freud. Lacan's return to Freud functions both as a methodological project and a polemical intervention against postwar ego psychology. Central to this project is the concept of extimacy (*extimité*), introduced by Lacan to name a structure of subjectivity in which the most intimate core of the subject is irreducibly external. Far from an idiosyncratic neologism, extimacy condenses Lacan's rereading of Freud's theory of the unconscious as neither inside nor outside the subject but lodged at its core as Other – hence Lacan's claim that “the unconscious is the discourse of the Other.” The article proposes Lacan's theory of the symbolic and the notion of extimacy as a conceptual response to the dilemmas of contemporary affect theory, preserving Freud's decentering of the subject while translating it into a structural and linguistic framework. The analysis underscores that any engagement between affect and language must account for the non-representational, symbolic, or structural dimensions of the sign, rather than treating it as a transparent conduit for meaning and intention. As such, the analysis challenges contemporary dominant accounts of affect (Jameson, Lyotard, Deleuze, Guattari, Massumi) and unsettles the presumed divide between modernism and postmodernism.

**Keywords:** affect theory, Deleuze, extimacy, Jameson, Lacan, language, Massumi, poststructuralism

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Alejandro Cerda-Rueda

### On Anxiety and Other Tales of Truth

The concept of anxiety remains a controversial term in Freudian theory. Not only does Freud establish two distinct theories in different moments of his career,

but the concept itself is left cryptic for other psychoanalytical schools to further expand on its definition. Both clinically and theoretically, anxiety is presented in various forms, starting from somatic discomfort up to psychological distress. The purpose of this article is to understand the relevance of this concept to psychoanalysis, given the rise of an anxiety epidemic in contemporary culture. If, according to Lacan, anxiety is an affect that deceives not, perhaps the presence of such phenomena may be taken as another form of thinking through sexuality and the core of trauma beyond the inhibitions it performs. While allowing a theoretical and clinical space for anxiety to embody psychical struggles, the place of anxiety is to be considered also as the aperture for truth.

**Keywords:** anxiety, Freudian metapsychology, psychoanalysis, thinking, sexuality, truth

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*Simon Hajdini*

### **Psychoanalysis and Fate**

The text explores the Lacanian-Kierkegaardian concept of repetition, linking it to fate, subjectivity, and the unconscious. Taking its cue from Freud's concept of the compulsion of destiny as it relates to Lacan's radical reinterpretation of the Aristotelian couple of *automaton* and *tyche*, the article examines the idea of successful failure in psychoanalysis and its connection to fatalistic freedom. The latter challenges traditional notions of freedom as choice and embraces a more contingent and unpredictable understanding of fate.

**Keywords:** Aristotle, causality, contingency, destiny, fatalism, fate, freedom, Freud, Lacan

\* \* \*

Gregor Moder

## Alienation in Yugoslavia: The Praxis Journal and the Problem of Anti-Humanism

For the circle of Yugoslav philosophers gathered around the journal *Praxis* (1964-1974) and the Korčula Summer School (1963-1974), the most decisive notion was that of alienation, which they adopted from Marx's *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. With the help of this concept, Gajo Petrović, Milan Kangrga, Zagorka Golubović and others presented their vision of an authentic humanist socialism as a space of free human creativity and criticized the doctrine of dialectical materialism as was characteristic of the Soviet Union, but still also of Yugoslavia. In the second part, the article addresses the question of why the Praxis group so firmly rejected Louis Althusser's influential intervention in classical Marxism, especially since their rejection was fraught with misunderstandings. Althusser's theses were inspired by structuralism and psychoanalysis, he explicitly advocated Marx as an anti-humanist, and his conception of ideology fell on fertile ground early on with the next generation of philosophers and sociologists in Ljubljana. The author argues that the humanist turn in Yugoslavia, which came about precisely through the work of the Praxis philosophers, eventually became part of the official Yugoslav doctrine and even a ubiquitous commonplace, which is why, during the heyday of the early "Ljubljana Lacanian School" in the 1980s, Althusser's anti-humanism could acquire the status of a battle cry that left no one unperturbed.

**Keywords:** alienation, Althusser, antihumanism, humanism, Marxism, Praxis, Yugoslavia

\* \* \*

Jela Krečič

## Hamlet, Love, and Reasonable Doubt

Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, one of the most debated works in literary history, also presents a compelling depiction of love between the protagonist and Ophelia.

This article approaches the interpretation of the play and its portrayal of love through the lens of doubt. In doing so, it draws on both Descartes' *Meditations* and Lacan's development of the concepts of thinking and being. Using these conceptual frameworks, we can see how Hamlet's relentless pursuit of knowledge beyond doubt transforms him into a toxic figure and a gaslighter, contributing to Ophelia's tragic demise. While *Hamlet* exposes the deadly side of love, a turn toward Hollywood comedy allows us to explore how a loving couple might navigate corrosive doubt – and what comic love could look like as a result.

**Keywords:** being, comedy, doubt, Hamlet, love, Ophelia, thinking

\* \* \*

Anthony Curtis Adler

**Unmusical: The Politics of Music in Grillparzer's "Der arme Spielmann" and Kafka's "Josefine"**

Taking its departure from Kafka's own admission, in a letter to Milena Jesenská, of his "unmusicality," the paper argues that this unmusicality, an incapacity for understanding grounded in the immediacy and reciprocal presence of speech, though standing in the way of ordinary communication, and hence blocking the project of "aesthetic education" as conceived by Schiller, nevertheless also makes possible a more radical form of understanding – the understanding of understanding itself – and hence allows for the thinking of a different kind of politics, a different kind of community. Crucial in this connection is Kafka's enthusiasm for Grillparzer's "The Poor Musician," which offers a powerful exploration of the political function of unmusicality. While deeply struck by Grillparzer's story, Kafka also recognizes that its perspective is fundamentally Christian; in just this way, his own "Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse-Folk" can be understood as reformulating "The Poor Musician" from a Jewish perspective, in which the unmusical one is not a lonely outsider, but the entire people is characterized by unmusicality.

**Keywords:** aesthetic education, Judaism, musicality, politics, unmusicality

\* \* \*

Frank Ruda

### **Kafka's Proof: The Impossibility to Live**

The article examines an early text by Franz Kafka. It is a text that contains a "proof" and the article elaborates what a literary proof could be by showing that it is a proof of something that is impossible to prove. It is a proof that directly concerns the very possibility of living a life.

**Keywords:** Fat Man, impossibility, Kafka, proof

\* \* \*

Mladen Dolar

### **On Application**

The paper deals with the notion of application and its multiple layers. Following the etymology and the history of the term it singles out four meanings of application: (1) application as "bringing something to bear on something else," referring to conditions of abstract relationality; (2) application as devotion, commitment, diligence; (3) application for a job or for funding; and (4) a computer program or "app" designed to be used on smartphones. The four meanings can be conceived as a narrative connecting high philosophical abstraction with the triviality of the contemporary job market and digital technology. The paper then considers the philosophical implications of the term and argues that there is no such thing as a simple application, since the entity that is applied gets transformed through the process of application and thereby loses its alleged ontological precedence. Even more, one can argue that the entity that is applied, i.e., "brought to bear on something else," is ultimately retroactively constituted through the process of its application. If conceived in this way, application would shed new light on the basic workings of the Hegelian dialectic, of what Hegel called "self-othering." In conclusion the paper raises the question of how to apply this dialectical notion of application to the non-dialectical all-pervasive uses of application in the job market and the digital world. What seems to be missing in the present universe

of omnipresent applications is precisely a proper application which would have to be reinvented.

**Keywords:** alterity, app, application, dialectic, Hegel, job application

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*Tadej Troha*

### **The Latest, the Last, and the Least: Freud, Salomé, and the Freudian Method**

This article is part of a broader investigation into the origins, development, and concept of Freudian metapsychology. Freud was always reticent about metapsychological speculation, opting for it only when it proved to be an inevitable complement to the standard empiricist approach. In this paper, we show that there is a clear continuity between Freud the empiricist and Freud the metapsychologist; that is, the metapsychological approach is merely a speculative amplification of the standard Freudian method. The latter, we argue, consists of three key features: the affirmation of provisionality, i. e., the unwavering activation of what was last revealed as certain; the affirmation of definiteness, i. e., the willingness to accept what had last been revealed as certain as a final, definitive, and absolutely valid proposition; and the minimalism of speculation, which allows for speculation but views it as an intrinsic requirement of empiricism. Drawing on some of Freud's texts, the diary entries of Lou Andreas-Salomé, and their correspondence, we show the crucial role of the notion of narcissism, understood as the *Grenzbegriff* of psychoanalysis, in the formulation of metapsychology. We conclude with an example of a genuine metapsychological insight, wherein Freud reveals the agency of the ego ideal, and subsequently, of the superego – an insight which, in an extremely reduced temporality, captures all three features of Freud's method.

**Keywords:** Freud, Lou Andreas-Salomé, psychoanalysis, metapsychology, narcissism, superego



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Academic 2020), *Ideas and Idealism in Philosophy* (co-edited with Gregor Kroupa, De-Gruyter 2023), *Indirectness: A Plea for Truth in Times of Post-Truth* (co-edited with Jela Krečič, Edinburgh University Press 2026), and *The Contingent Universality: A New Ontology* (Bloomsbury 2026).

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