

RESPONSES

THE RHETORICS OF POWER

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

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The first problem I have is: *to what should I effectively respond?* I find it difficult to recognize the theory I developed in the text, so often is my position distorted by means of an entire bag of rhetorical tricks:

—thoroughly distorting paraphrases of my line of argumentation (for example, “Thus, resistance to the ‘formal’ law of Judaism works as the enactment of the divine Law constituted by the ‘real’ content of Christianity” [85]—*where* do I speak of the “divine Law constituted by the ‘real’ content of Christianity”?), up to simple inventions inserted to render the critique more piquant by making me appear antifeminist, and so forth (for example, “At the same time, ‘woman’s’ ‘naked’ body functions as a spectacle doubtlessly deserving the philosopher’s lust” [88]—*where* do I claim anything resembling this?).

—the artifice of rendering my position in a falsified way, which makes it an easy target of criticism, *and then dismissing the fact that this is NOT my position either as secondary attempts to answer (Judith Butler’s) criticism or as its inconsistency.* Perhaps the best example of this procedure is the short footnote 9:

As a response to Butler’s criticism, Žižek stresses today that this Real is nonetheless “a symbolic determination” [FA 121], but he keeps insisting on its (retroactively installed) foundational status as a traumatic “ahistorical” kernel [112; Žižek’s quotation marks]. [78, my emphasis—SZ]

Unfortunately, the features that I allegedly stress as a response to Butler’s criticism (the Real, far from being a substantial starting point and reference/guarantee, emerges as the retroactive effect of the failure of the symbolic process itself, and so forth) are systematically developed in my *Sublime Object of Ideology*, which, published in 1989, precedes Butler’s criticism [see 169–73]. (Incidentally, Butler herself accuses me of inconsistency when I characterize the Capital as the Real of our epoch, claiming that I thereby contradict my own definition of the Real—surely the easiest way to avoid confronting the inadequacy of her own notion of the Real: “I claim the notion of the Real in the criticized author means X—the criticized author says things that do not fit X—no problem, it is not my notion that is wrong, *he* is inconsistent with himself . . .”).

—finally, attributions of theoretical propositions that *directly contradict* my theses:

for example, the claim that my “epistemology collapses historical difference, and the contemporary leader is modeled on the image of the ‘premodern’ king” [82]. Really? Do I not, again, already in *Sublime Object of Ideology*, develop in detail the *difference* between the traditional Master and the modern Leader [see 145–47]? Furthermore, when my critic comments on the thesis that “the emperor cannot simply be undressed,” she again imputes the very opposite of what I claim: the undressing of the king does not work not because his charisma is indestructible, but because it only destroys his personal charisma, *not the power of the symbolic place of the King*—when we undress him, we realize that “he is not truly a king” . . . *and engage in the search for a true one*. (Incidentally, Marx makes a homologous point apropos of commodity fetishism: in order to escape its grasp, it is not enough to realize that “commodity is just an object like all others.”)

Once we discard these distortions, my critic’s basic line of argumentation is simple and clear enough: my theory “does not allow for more optimistic scenarios of democratization and the diminution of nationalism in society” [73], that is, I “outline a world eternally ruled by a monstrous, earthbound Lord, a world not open to human agency and political change. Because the authoritarian shape of his [Žižek’s] vision is constitutively tied up with anti-Semitic and antifeminist phantasms, it is especially problematic” [75]. We are thus back to the old criticism elaborated by Butler, according to which the Real I evoke “remains . . . grounding a realm beyond discourse” [78]: the real kernel, that which is “in X more than X,” more than a combination of contingent symbolic determinations and, as such, exempted from any transformative grasp of a human agency. Although fantasmatic, this Real is irreducible, unshakable, charismatic, a traumatic point of reference that assumes in my work different forms (king, woman, Jew, capital). In sexual economy, this gives us Woman as Real, the ahistoric traumatic Thing; in racism, this gives us the (anti-Semitic figure of the) Jew as the traumatic point of reference of the racial imaginary; in politics proper, this gives us the King as the excess of the Real which limits the open process of democratic reinscriptions and redefinitions. . . . Again, the trouble with this line of criticism is that I find it difficult to recognize in the criticized position my own theory, in which I repeatedly claim that symbolic practice *can* transform the Real:

Precisely because of this internality of the Real to the Symbolic, it is possible to touch the Real through the Symbolic—that is the whole point of Lacan’s notion of psychoanalytic treatment; this is what the Lacanian notion of the psychoanalytic act is about—the act as a gesture which, by definition, touches the dimension of some impossible Real. [“Class Struggle” 121]

And, as if answering in advance my critic’s claim that my world is “eternally ruled by a monstrous, earthbound Lord” and, as such, not “open to human agency and political change,” I emphasize that

[a]n act does not merely redraw the contours of our public symbolic identity, it also transforms the spectral dimension that sustains this identity, the undead ghosts that haunt the living subject, the secret history of traumatic fantasies transmitted “between the lines,” through the lacks and distortions of the explicit symbolic texture of his or her identity. [“Class Struggle” 124]

Is it possible to put it in clearer terms? An act intervenes in and changes precisely that which, according to my critic, I elevate into a firm ground outside the scope of human



agency, the fantasmatic-real support of the symbolic process. So my proposal to the reader of these lines is the following one: she should read the last paragraph of my critic's essay, and then read these lines from my contribution to *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*:

In what, then, does our difference consist? Let me approach this key point via another key criticism from Butler: her point that I describe only the paradoxical mechanisms of ideology, the way an ideological edifice reproduces itself (the reversal that characterizes the effect of point de capiton, the "inherent transgression," etc.), without elaborating how one can "disturb" (resignify, displace, turn against themselves) these mechanisms; I show:

how power compels us to consent to that which constrains us, and how our very sense of freedom or resistance can be the dissimulated instrument of dominance. But what remains less clear to me is how one moves beyond such a dialectical reversal or impasse to something new. How would the new be produced from an analysis of the social field that remains restricted to inversions, aporias, and reversals that work regardless of time and place? (JB, p. 29)

In The Psychic Life of Power, Butler makes the same point apropos of Lacan himself:

The [Lacanian] imaginary [resistance] thwarts the efficacy of the symbolic law but cannot turn back upon the law, demanding or effecting its reformulation. In this sense, psychic resistance thwarts the law in its effects, but cannot redirect the law or its effects. Resistance is thus located in a domain that is virtually powerless to alter the law that it opposes. Hence, psychic resistance presumes the continuation of the law in its anterior, symbolic form and, in that sense, contributes to its status quo. In such a view, resistance appears doomed to perpetual defeat.

In contrast, Foucault formulates resistance as an effect of the very power that it is said to oppose. [. . .] For Foucault, the symbolic produces the possibility of its own subversions, and these subversions are unanticipated effects of symbolic interpellations. [98–99]

My response to this is triple. First, on the level of exegesis, Foucault is much more ambivalent on this point: his thesis on the immanence of resistance to power can also be read as asserting that every resistance is caught in advance in the game of the power it opposes. Second, my notion of "inherent transgression," far from playing another variation on this theme (resistance reproduces that to which it resists), makes the power edifice even more vulnerable: insofar as power relies on its "inherent transgression," then—sometimes, at least—overidentifying with the explicit power discourse—ignoring this inherent obscene underside and simply taking the power discourse at its (public) word, acting as if it really means what it explicitly says (and promises)—can be the most effective way of disturbing its smooth functioning. Third, and most important: far from constraining the subject to a resistance doomed to perpetual defeat, Lacan allows for a much more radical subjective intervention than Butler: what the Lacanian notion of "act" aims at is not a mere displacement/

resignification of the symbolic coordinates that confer on the subject his or her identity, but the radical transformation of the very universal structuring “principle” of the existing symbolic order. Or—to put it in more psychoanalytic terms—the Lacanian act, in its dimension of “traversing the fundamental fantasy” aims radically to disturb the very “passionate attachment” that forms, for Butler, the ultimately ineluctable background of the process of resignification. So, far from being more “radical” in the sense of thorough historicization, Butler is in fact very close to the Lacan of the early 1950s, who found his ultimate expression in the rapport de Rome on “The Function and the Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis” (1953)—to the Lacan of the permanent process of retroactive historicization or resymbolization of social reality, to the Lacan who emphasized again and again how there is no directly accessible “raw” reality, how what we perceive as “reality” is overdetermined by the symbolic texture within which it appears.

Along these lines, Lacan triumphantly rewrites the Freudian “stages” (oral, anal, phallic . . .) not as biologically determined stages in libidinal evolution, but as different modes of the dialectical subjectivization of the child’s position within the network of his or her family: what matters in, say, the anal stage is not the function of defecation as such, but the subjective stance it involves (complying with the Other’s demand to do it in an orderly way, asserting one’s defiance and/or self-control . . .). What is crucial here is that it is this Lacan of radical and unlimited resignification who is at the same time the Lacan of the paternal Law (Name-of-the-Father) as the unquestionable horizon of the subject’s integration into the symbolic order. Consequently, the shift from this early “Lacan of unlimited resignification” to the later “Lacan of the Real” is not the shift from the unconstrained play of resignification towards the assertion of some ahistorical limit of the process of symbolization: it is the very focus on the notion of Real as impossible that reveals the ultimate contingency, fragility (and thus changeability) of every **symbolic** constellation that pretends to serve as the a priori horizon of the process of symbolization.

No wonder Lacan’s shift of focus towards the Real is strictly correlative to the devaluation of the paternal function (and of the central place of the Oedipus complex itself)—to the introduction of the notion that paternal authority is ultimately an imposture, one among the possible “sinthoms,” which allow us temporarily to stabilize and coordinate the inconsistent/nonexistent “big Other.” So Lacan’s point in unearthing the “ahistorical” limit of historicization/resignification is thus not that we have to accept this limit in a resigned way, but that every historical figuration of this limit is itself contingent and, as such, susceptible to a radical overhaul. So my basic answer to Butler—no doubt paradoxical for those who have been fully involved in recent debates—is that, with all the talk about Lacan’s clinging to an ahistorical bar, and so on, it is Butler herself who, on a more radical level, is not historicist enough: it is Butler who limits the subject’s intervention to multiple resignifications/displacements of the basic “passionate attachment,” which therefore persists as the very limit/condition of subjectivity. Consequently, I am tempted to supplement Butler’s series in her rhetorical question quoted above: “How would the new be produced from an analysis of the social field that remains restricted to inversions, aporias, reversals, and performative displacements or resignifications . . . ?” [“Da Capo senza Fine” 219–21]

Enough of self-quoting, since, I hope, I have made my point: after reading these lines

(and my critic *has* read them, since she often quotes from the book from which they are taken), in which I denounce symbolic authority as an imposture, in which I directly and emphatically state that one *can* undermine unconscious fantasies, how can someone write that I claim the exact opposite?

How, then? I think the answer is double. First, what is the level my critic finds problematic in my work—the level of traumatic fantasies which persist and insist beneath the multitude of symbolic games, thwarting our acts, dominating us behind our backs, sabotaging our “resignifications”—if not *the Freudian unconscious*? Let us make the point clear: what lurks in the position of my critic is simply *the disavowal of psychoanalysis*. In the field from which she speaks, there is no place for the Freudian unconscious—it is as simple as that.

The second answer is best approached by way of quoting the very last sentence of my critic’s essay: “Thus, we might want to reconsider his [Žižek’s] royal status in the realm of theory” [88]. The ridicule of this statement cannot but strike the eye: here we have a critic who speaks on behalf of (“we”) one of the hegemonic trends of today’s academia, denouncing as racist/anti-Semitic/authoritarian, and so on, a Lacanian approach that is quite marginalized, almost completely powerless from the standpoint of the distribution of power in Anglo-Saxon academia (one can count Lacanians in the US universities on the fingers of two hands—not even one department is dominated by them—and in Germany the situation is, if anything, even worse). This, then, is the level on which things “really happen”: politics in the academic Ideological State Apparatuses. The unpleasant fact is that the position of my critics is far from marginal or repressed—it is not the Antigonian voice of those who are excluded from the academic public space, who live in the shadows of this space, but the voice of those who dominate this space. To proclaim that I possess any kind of “royal status in the realm of theory” from which I should be deposed is a cruel mockery of those who *effectively occupy this status*. It is not I who am to be deposed; it is they who fear their own deposition. However, in order not to end in this purely polemical mood, let me conclude with a clarification concerning three features of my work that appear most problematic to my critic: my problematizing of democracy; the notion of the Real; my reference to Christianity.

Today, when everyone is “anticapitalist”—even Hollywood “sociocritical” conspiracy movies (from *The Pelican Brief* to *The Insider*) in which the enemies are big corporations with their ruthless pursuit of profit—the signifier “anticapitalism” has lost its subversive sting. What one should problematize is rather the self-evident opposite of this “anticapitalism”: trust that the democratic substance of honest Americans is able to break up the conspiracy. *This* is the hard kernel of today’s global capitalist universe, its true Master-Signifier: democracy.

The limit of democracy is the State: in the democratic electoral process, the social body is symbolically dissolved, reduced to a pure numerical multitude. The electoral body is precisely not a body, a structured whole, but a formless abstract multitude, a multitude without a State (in both Badiouian senses of this term: the state as the represented unity of the multitude, and the State with its apparatuses). The point is thus not that democracy is inherent to the State, sustained by its apparatuses, but that it structurally *ignores* this dependency. When Alain Badiou says that the State is always in excess with regard to the multitude it represents, this means that it is precisely this excess which is structurally overlooked by democracy: the illusion is that the democratic process can control this excess of the State [Badiou 37].

Which is why the antiglobalization movement is not enough: at some point, one will *have* to problematize the self-evident reference to “freedom and democracy.” Therein resides the ultimate “Leninist” lesson for today: paradoxically, it is only in this way, by problematizing democracy—by making it clear how liberal democracy *a priori*, in its

very notion (as Hegel would have put it), cannot survive without capitalist private property—that we can become effectively anticapitalist. Did the disintegration of Communism in 1990 not provide ultimate confirmation of the most “vulgar” Marxist thesis that the actual economic base of political democracy is the private ownership of the means of production, that is, capitalism with its class distinctions? The big urge after the introduction of political democracy was “privatization,” the frantic effort to find—at any price, in whatever way—*new owners*, who can be the descendants of the old owners whose property was nationalized when the Communists took power, ex-Communist apparatchiks, mafiosi . . . whoever, simply in order to establish a “base” of democracy. The ultimate tragic irony is that this is all taking place too late—at exactly the moment when, in First World “postindustrial” societies, private ownership has begun to lose its central regulating role.

The battle to be fought is thus twofold: first, yes, anticapitalism. However, anticapitalism without problematizing capitalism’s *political* form (liberal parliamentary democracy) is not sufficient, no matter how “radical” it is. Perhaps *the* lure today is the belief that one can undermine capitalism without effectively problematizing the liberal-democratic legacy which—as some Leftists claim—although engendered by capitalism, has acquired autonomy and can serve to criticize capitalism. This lure is strictly correlative to its apparent opposite, to the pseudo-Deleuzian love-hate fascinating/fascinated poetic depiction of Capital as a rhizomatic monster/vampire that deterritorializes and swallows all, indomitable, dynamic, ever-rising from the dead, each crisis making it stronger, Dionysos-Phoenix reborn. . . . It is in this poetic (anti)capitalist reference to Marx that Marx is *really dead*: appropriated when deprived of his political sting.

The problem with democracy is that, the moment it is established as a positive formal system regulating the way a multitude of political subjects compete for power, it has to exclude some options as “nondemocratic,” and *this exclusion, this founding decision about who is included in and who is excluded from the field of democratic options, is not democratic*. We are not simply playing formal-logical games here with the paradoxes of metalanguage, since, at this precise point, Marx’s old insight remains fully valid: this inclusion/exclusion is overdetermined by fundamental social antagonism (“class struggle”), which, for this very reason, cannot ever be adequately translated into the form of democratic competition. The ultimate democratic illusion—and, simultaneously, the point at which the limitation of democracy becomes directly palpable—is that one can accomplish social revolution painlessly, through “peaceful means,” simply by winning elections. This illusion is *formalist* in the strictest sense of the term: it abstracts from the concrete framework of social relations within which the democratic form is operative. Consequently, although there is no profit in ridiculing political democracy, one should nonetheless insist on the Marxist lesson, confirmed by the post-Socialist craving for privatization, that political democracy has to rely on private property. In short, the problem with democracy is not that it is a democracy but—to use the phrase introduced apropos of the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia—in its “collateral damage,” in the fact that it is a form of State Power involving certain relations of production.

Concerning the Real, one should always bear in mind the complex interconnection of the Lacanian triad Real-Imaginary-Symbolic: the entire triad reflects itself within each of its three elements. There are three modalities of the Real: the “real Real” (the horrifying Thing, the primordial object, from Irma’s throat to the Alien), the “imaginary Real” (the mysterious *je ne sais quoi*, the unfathomable “something” on account of which the sublime dimension shines through an ordinary object), and the “symbolic Real” (the real as consistency: the signifier reduced to a senseless formula, like the quantum physics formulas which can no longer be translated back into—or related to—the everyday experience of our life-world). The Real is thus effectively all three dimen-

sions at the same time: the abyssal vortex which ruins every consistent structure; the mathematized consistent structure of reality; the fragile pure appearance. And, in a strictly homologous way, there are three modalities of the Symbolic (the real—the signifier reduced to a senseless formula; the imaginary—the Jungian “symbols”; and the symbolic—speech, meaningful language) and three modalities of the Imaginary (the real—fantasy, which is precisely an imaginary scenario occupying the place of the Real; the imaginary—image as such in its fundamental function of a decoy; and the symbolic—again, the Jungian “symbols” or New Age archetypes). The triad of the Real-Imaginary-Symbolic also determines the three modes of the subject’s decenterment: the Real (of which neurobiology speaks: the neuronal network as the objective reality of our illusive psychic self-experience); the Imaginary (the fundamental fantasy itself, the decentered imaginary scenario inaccessible to my psychic experience); and the Symbolic (the symbolic order as the Other Scene by whom I am spoken, which effectively pulls the strings).

What this means is that the Real is *not* the hard kernel of reality that resists virtualization. Hubert Dreyfus is right to identify the fundamental feature of today’s virtualization of our life-experience as a reflective distance which prevents any full engagement: as in the sexual games on the internet, you are never fully committed, since, as one usually puts it, “when the thing doesn’t work out, you can always leave!” When you reach an impasse, you can say “OK, I am leaving the game, I step out! Let’s start over with a different game!”; but the very fact of this withdrawal implies that, from the beginning, I was somehow aware that I can leave the game, which means that I was not fully committed [see Dreyfus]. In this way, we never get really burned, fatally hurt, since a commitment is always open to being revoked; but in an existential commitment without reservations, if we make a mistake we lose it all—there is no way out, no “OK, let’s start the game again!” We miss what Kierkegaard and others mean by a full existential engagement when we perceive it as a risky voluntarist jump into a dogmatic stance, as if, instead of persisting in fully justified skepticism, we as it were lose our nerve and fully commit ourselves; what he has in mind are precisely situations when we are absolutely cornered and *cannot* step back and judge the situation from a distance—we do not have a choice to choose or not to choose, since the withdrawal from choice is already the (bad) choice.

However, from the Freudian standpoint, the first thing to do is to radically question the opposition, on which Dreyfus relies here, between human being as a fully embodied agent, thrown into his/her life-world, acting against the impenetrable background of preunderstanding, which can never be objectified/explicated into a set of rules, and the human being operating in an artificial digital universe that is thoroughly rule-regulated and thus lacks the background density of the life-world. What if our location in a life-world is not the ultimate fact? The Freudian notion of “death drive” points precisely toward a dimension of human subjectivity that resists its full immersion into its life-world: it designates a blind insistence that follows its course with utter disregard for the requirements of our concrete life-world. In Tarkovsky’s *Mirror*, his father Arseny Tarkovsky recites his own lines: “A soul is sinful without a body, / like a body without clothes”—with no project, no aim, a riddle without answer—“death drive” is this dislocated soul without body, a pure insistence ignoring the constraints of reality. Gnosticism is thus simultaneously right and wrong: right, insofar as it claims that the human subject is not truly “at home” in our reality; wrong, insofar as it draws the conclusion that, therefore, there should be another (astral, etheric . . .) universe that is our true home, and from which we “fell” into this inert material reality. This is also where all the postmodern-deconstructionist-poststructuralist variations on how the subject is always-already displaced, decentered, pluralized . . . somehow misses the central point: that the subject is “as such” the name for a certain radical displacement, a certain “wound, cut,

in the texture of the universe,” and all its identifications are ultimately just so many failed attempts to heal this wound. This displacement which in itself portends entire universes, is best rendered by the first lines of Fernando Pessoa’s “Tobacco Shop”: “I am nothing. / I will never be anything. / I cannot desire to be nothing. / Moreover, I carry in me all the dreams of the world.”

Within the space of the opposition on which Dreyfus relies, the Real equals the inertia of material bodily reality which cannot be reduced to another digital construct. However, what one should introduce here is the good old Lacanian distinction between reality and the Real: in the opposition between reality and spectral illusion, the Real appears precisely as “irreal,” as a spectral illusion for which there is no space in our (symbolically constructed) reality. Therein, in this “symbolic construction of (what we perceive as our social) reality,” lies the catch: the inert remainder foreclosed from (what we experience as) reality returns in the Real of spectral apparitions. What is so uncanny about animals like shellfishes, snails, and tortoises? The true object of horror is not the shell without the slimy body in it, but the “naked” body without the shell. That is to say, is it not that we always tend to perceive the shell as too large, too heavy, too thick, with regard to the living body it houses? The body never fully fits its shell. Furthermore, this body possesses no inner skeleton which would confer upon it the minimum of stability and firmness: deprived of its shell, the body is an almost formless spongy entity. It is as if, in these cases, the fundamental vulnerability, the need for a safe haven of a housing specific to humans, is projected back into nature, into the animal kingdom—in other words, it is as if these animals are effectively humans who carry their houses along with them. Is this squishy body not the perfect figure of the Real? The shell without the living body within would be like the famous vase evoked by Heidegger: the symbolic frame which delineates the contours of the Real Thing, the void in its middle—the uncanny thing is that nonetheless “something instead of nothing” is within the shell, although not an adequate something, but always a defective, vulnerable, ridiculously inadequate body, the remainder of the lost Thing. The Real is thus not the prereflexive reality of our immediate immersion in our life-world but, precisely, that which gets lost, that which the subject has to renounce in order to become immersed in his/her life-world—and, consequently, that which then returns in the guise of spectral apparitions.

In short, the Real is the “almost nothing” that sustains the gap that separates a thing from itself. The dimension we are trying to discern can best be formulated with regard to the thorough ambiguity of the relationship between reality and the Real. The standard “Lacanian” notion is that of reality as a grimace of the Real: the Real is the unattainable traumatic kernel-Void, the blinding Sun impossible to sustain in a face-to-face look, perceptible only if one looks at it awry, from the side, in a perspectival distortion—if we look at it directly, we get “burnt by the sun.” The Real is thus structured/distorted into the “grimace” we call reality through the pacifying symbolic network, something like the Kantian *Ding-an-sich* structured into what we experience as objective reality through the transcendental network. However, if one draws out all the consequences of the Lacanian notion of the Real, one is compelled to invert the above-quoted formula: the Real itself is nothing but a grimace of reality, something that is nothing but a perspectival distortion of reality, something that only shines through such a distortion, since it is “in itself” thoroughly without substance. This Real is a stain in what we perceive “face to face,” like the devil’s face appearing in the tornado clouds in the cover photo of *News of the World*, the obstacle (the proverbial “bone in the throat”) that forever distorts our perception of reality, introducing anamorphic stains in it. The Real is the appearance as appearance: it not only appears *within* appearances, but it is also *nothing but* its own appearance. It is only a certain *grimace* of reality, a certain imperceptible, unfathomable, ultimately illusory feature that accounts for the absolute difference within the

identity. This Real is not the inaccessible Beyond of phenomena, but only their doublure, the gap between two inconsistent phenomena, a perspectival shift. This, then, is how one should answer the “obvious” theological counterargument (or, more simply, reading) of Lacan: the Real does stand for the intervention of another dimension in the order of our reality—and why should this other dimension not be the Divine Thing? From the materialist standpoint, the Thing is a specter that emerges in the interstices of reality, insofar as reality is never homogeneous/consistent, but always afflicted by the cut of self-doubling.

Most of Rachel Whiteread’s sculptural work consists of variations on one and the same motif: that of directly giving body to the Void of the Thing. When, taking a created object (a closet, a room, a house . . .), she first fills in the empty space, the void in the middle, and then removes that which encircled and thus delineated this central void—what we get is a massive object that directly gives body to the void itself. The standard relationship between the void and the crust/armor/shell that created this void is thus inverted: instead of the vase embodying the central void, this void itself is directly materialized. The uncanny effect of these objects resides in the ways they palpably demonstrate the ontological incompleteness of reality: such objects by definition stick out, they are ontologically superfluous, not at the same level of reality as “normal” objects.

This doublure is never symmetrical. In a well-known psychological experiment, two psychiatrists were engaged in a conversation after each was told that the other is not really a psychiatrist, but a dangerous lunatic living under the illusion that he is a psychiatrist. Afterwards, each was asked to write a professional report on his partner, and each described in detail the other’s dangerous symptoms. Does this experiment not realize Escher’s famous picture of the two hands drawing each other? One should nonetheless insist that, as with Escher’s drawing, the perfect symmetry is an illusion that “cannot happen in reality”—the two persons cannot both be just an entity in the other’s dream. The asymmetry at work here is clearly discernible in another similar case, that of the relationship between God and man in the tradition of German mysticism (Meister Eckhart): man is created-born by God, yet God is born in man, that is, man gives birth to what created him. The relationship is not symmetrical here, but—to put it in Hegelese—that of “positing the presuppositions”: God is, of course, the impenetrable/abyssal Ground out of which man emerges; however, it is only through man that God actualizes himself, that he “becomes what he always-already was.” What was before the creation of man an impersonal substantial force becomes through man the divine person.

We have thus returned to the difference between idealism and materialism: perhaps its ultimate figure is that between these two forms of the Real. Religion is the Real as the impossible Thing beyond phenomena, the Thing that “shines through” phenomena in sublime experiences; atheism is the Real as grimace of reality, as the gap, the inconsistency, of reality. This is why the standard religious reproach to atheists (“But you cannot really understand what it is to believe!”) has to be turned around: our “natural” state is to believe; the truly difficult thing to grasp is the atheist position. Here one should move against the Derridean/Levinasian assertion of the kernel of religion as the belief in the impossible Real of a spectral Otherness that can leave its traces in our reality—the belief that this reality of ours is not the Ultimate Reality. Atheism is *not* the position of believing only in the positive (ontologically fully constituted, sutured, closed) reality; the most succinct *rien n’aura eu lieu que le lieu* definition of atheism is precisely “religion without religion”—the assertion of the *void* of the Real deprived of any positive content, prior to any content, the assertion that any content is a semblance which fills in the void. “Religion without religion” is the place of religion deprived of its content, like Mallarmé’s—*this* is atheism’s true formula—“nothing takes place but

the place itself.” Although this may sound similar to the Derridean/Levinasian “Messianic Otherness,” it is its exact opposite: it is *not* “the inner messianic Truth of religion minus religion’s external institutional apparatuses” but, rather, the *form* of religion deprived of its content, in contrast to the Derridean/Levinasian reference to a spectral Otherness, which does not offer the form, but the empty content of religion. Not only do both religion and atheism insist on the Void, on the fact that our reality is not ultimate and closed—the experience of this Void is the original *materialist* experience, and religion, unable to endure it, *fills it in* with religious content.

And is this shift not also the shift from Kant to Hegel? From tension between phenomena and Thing to an inconsistency/gap between phenomena themselves? The standard notion of reality is that of a hard kernel that resists the conceptual grasp. What Hegel does is simply to take this notion of reality *more literally*: nonconceptual reality is something that *emerges* when the notional self-development gets caught in an inconsistency and becomes nontransparent to itself. In short, the limit is transposed from exterior to interior: Reality exists because and insofar as the Notion is inconsistent, doesn’t coincide with itself. The multiple perspectival inconsistencies between phenomena are not an effect of the impact of the transcendent Thing—on the contrary, Thing is nothing but the ontologization of the inconsistency between phenomena. The logic of this reversal is ultimately the same as the passage from the special to the general theory of relativity in Einstein. While the special theory already introduces the notion of curved space, it conceives of this curvature as the effect of matter: it is the presence of matter that curves the space; that is, only an empty space would have been noncurved. With the passage to the general theory, the causality is reversed: far from *causing* the curvature of the space, matter is its *effect*. In the same way, the Lacanian Real—the Thing—is not so much the inert presence that “curves” the symbolic space (introducing gaps and inconsistencies in it) but, rather, the effect of these gaps and inconsistencies.

There are two fundamentally different ways to relate to the Void, best captured by the paradox of Achilles and the tortoise: while Achilles can easily overtake the tortoise, he can never reach her. We posit the Void as the impossible-real Limit of human experience which we can only indefinitely approach, the absolute Thing toward which we have to maintain a proper distance—if we get too close to it, we get burned by the sun. Our attitude toward the Void is thus thoroughly ambiguous, marked by simultaneous attraction and repulsion. Or we posit it as that through which we should (and, in a way, even always-already have) pass(ed). Therein lies the gist of the Hegelian notion of “tarrying with the negative,” which Lacan rendered in his notion of the deep connection between the death drive and creative sublimation: in order for (symbolic) creation to take place, the death drive (the Hegelian self-relating absolute negativity) has to accomplish its work of, precisely, emptying the place and thus making it ready for creation. Instead of the old topic of phenomenal objects disappearing/dissolving in the vortex of the Thing, we get objects which are nothing but the Void of the Thing embodied, or, in Hegelese, objects in which negativity assumes positive existence.

And this brings me to Christianity: in religious terms, this passage from the Impossible-Real One (Thing), refracted/reflected in the multitude of its appearances, to the Twosome is the very passage from Judaism to Christianity—the Jewish God is the Real Thing of Beyond, while the divine dimension of Christ is just a tiny grimace, an imperceptible shade, which differentiates him from other (ordinary) humans. Christ is not “sublime” in the sense of an “object elevated to the dignity of a Thing”: he is not a stand-in for the impossible Thing-God; he is rather “the Thing itself,” or, more accurately, “the Thing itself” is nothing but the rupture/gap that makes Christ not fully human. Christ is thus what Nietzsche, this ultimate and self-professed anti-Christ, called “Midday”: the thin *edge* between Before and After, the Old and the New, the Real and

the Symbolic, between God-Father-Thing and the community of the Spirit. As such, he is both at the same time: the extreme point of the Old (the culmination of the logic of sacrifice, himself standing for the extreme sacrifice, for the self-relating exchange in which we no longer pay God, but God pays for us himself and thus involves us in debt indefinitely) and its overcoming (the shift of perspective) into the New. It is a tiny nuance, an almost imperceptible shift in perspective, that distinguishes Christ's sacrifice from the atheist assertion of life that needs no sacrifice.

The key to Christ is provided by the figure of Job, whose suffering prefigures that of Christ. The almost unbearable impact of the Book of Job resides not so much in its narrative frame (the Devil appears in it as a conversational partner of God, and the two engage in a rather cruel experiment in order to test Job's faith), but in its final outcome. Far from providing a satisfactory account of Job's undeserved suffering, God's appearance at the end ultimately amounts to pure boasting, a horror show with elements of farcical spectacle—a pure argument of authority grounded in breathtaking display of power: “You see all that I can do? Can you do this? Who are you then to complain?” So what we get is neither the good God letting Job know that his suffering is just an ordeal destined to test his faith, nor a dark God beyond Law, the God of pure caprice, but rather a God who acts like someone caught in a moment of impotence, weakness at least, who tries to escape his predicament by empty boasting. What we get at the end is a kind of cheap Hollywood horror show with lots of special effects—no wonder many commentators tend to dismiss Job's story as a remainder of pagan mythology that should have been excluded from the Bible.

Against this temptation, one should precisely locate the true greatness of Job: contrary to the usual notion of Job, he is *not* a patient sufferer, enduring his ordeal with firm faith in God. On the contrary, he complains all the time, rejecting his fate (like Oedipus at Colonus, who is also usually misperceived as a patient victim resigned to his fate). When the three theologian friends visit him, their line of argumentation is the standard ideological sophistry (if you suffer, by definition you *must have* done something wrong, since God is just). However, their argumentation is not limited to the claim that Job must somehow be guilty: what is at stake at a more radical level is the meaning(lessness) of Job's suffering. Like Oedipus at Colonus, Job insists on the utter *meaninglessness* of his suffering. As the title of Job 27 says: “Job Maintains His Integrity.” As such, the Book of Job provides what is perhaps the first exemplary case of the critique of ideology in human history, laying bare the basic discursive strategies of legitimizing suffering: Job's properly ethical dignity resides in his persistent rejection of the notion that his suffering can have any meaning, either as punishment for his past sins or as a trial of his faith, against the three theologians who bombard him with possible meanings. Surprisingly, God takes his side at the end, claiming that every word Job has spoken was true, while every word of the three theologians was false.

It is with regard to this assertion of the meaninglessness of Job's suffering that one should insist on the parallel between Job and Christ, on Job's suffering announcing the Way of the Cross: Christ's suffering is *also* meaningless, not an act of meaningful exchange. The difference, of course, is that, in the case of Christ, the gap that separates the suffering, desperate man (Job) from God is transposed onto God himself, as His own radical splitting or, rather, self-abandonment. What this means is that one should risk a much more radical than usual reading of Christ's “Father, why did you forsake me?”: since we are dealing here not with the gap between man and God, but with the split in God himself, the solution cannot be for God to (re)appear in all his majesty, revealing to Christ the deeper meaning of his suffering (that he was the Innocent sacrificed to redeem humanity). Christ's “Father, why did you forsake me?” is not the complaint to the *omnipotent*, capricious God-Father whose ways are indecipherable to us mortal hu-

mans, but the complaint which hints at the *impotent* God: it is rather like the child who, after believing in his father's powerfulness, with horror discovers that his father cannot help him. (To evoke an example from recent history: at the moment of Christ's crucifixion, God-the-Father is in a position somewhat similar to that of the Bosnian father made to witness the gang rape of his own daughter, and to endure the ultimate trauma of her compassionate-reproaching gaze: "Father, why did you forsake me?"). In short, with this "Father, why did you forsake me?," it is God-the-Father who effectively dies, revealing his utter impotence, and thereupon rises from the dead in the guise of the Holy Ghost. The passage from Judaism to Christianity is thus again the passage from purification to subtraction: from the deadly fascination with the transcendent God-Thing to the minimal difference that makes Christ-man divine.

What one should emphasize is that this reading of Christianity is strictly *materialist*. In our politically correct times, it is always advisable to start with the set of unwritten prohibitions that define the positions one is allowed to assume. The first thing to note with regard to religious matters is that reference to "deep spirituality" is again in, and direct materialism is out; one is rather solicited to harbor openness toward a radical Otherness beyond the onto-theological God. Consequently, when, today, one directly asks an academic, "OK, let's go to the basic fact: *do you believe in some form of the divine or not?*," the first answer is an embarrassed withdrawal, as if the question is too intimate, too probing; this withdrawal is then usually explicated in more "theoretical" terms: "*It is the wrong question to ask! It is not simply a matter of believing or not but, rather, a matter of certain radical experience, of the ability to open oneself to certain unheard-of dimensions, of the way our openness to the radical Otherness allows us to adopt a specific ethical stance, to participate in certain unique social practices, to experience a shattering form of enjoyment. . . .*" Against this, one should insist more than ever that the "vulgar" question "Do you *really* believe or not?" *matters*—more than ever, perhaps.

What one sees today is a kind of "suspended" belief, a belief that can thrive only as not fully (publicly) admitted, as a private obscene secret. This suspended status of our beliefs accounts for the predominant "antidogmatic" stance: one should modestly accept that all our positions are relative, conditioned by contingent historical constellations, so that no one has definitive Solutions, just pragmatic temporary solutions. . . . The falsity of this stance was denounced by Gilbert Keith Chesterton: "At any street corner we may meet a man who utters the frantic and blasphemous statement that he may be wrong. Every day one comes across somebody who says that of course his view may not be the right one. Of course his view must be the right one, or it is not his view" [37]. Is the same falsity not clearly discernible in the rhetoric of many a postmodern deconstructionist? Is their apparently modest relativization of their own position not the mode of appearance of its very opposite, of privileging their own position of enunciation, so that one can effectively claim that the self-relativizing stance is a key ingredient of today's rhetorics of power? Compare the struggle and pain of the "fundamentalist" with the serene peace of the liberal democrat who, from a safe subjective position, ironically dismisses every fully pledged engagement, every "dogmatic" taking sides. Consequently, yes, I plead guilty: in this choice, I without hesitation opt for the "fundamentalist."

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