Introduction:
“Certainly There Is a Bone Here”

In Chapter 5 of his Materialism and Empirio-Criticism, invoking Engels’ claim that materialism has to change its form with each new scientific discovery, Lenin applies the point to Engels himself:

Engels says explicitly that “with each epoch making discovery even in the sphere of natural science [not to speak of the history of mankind], materialism has to change its form.” Hence, a revision of the “form” of Engels’ materialism, a revision of his natural-philosophical propositions, is not only not “revisionism,” in the accepted meaning of the term, but, on the contrary, is demanded by Marxism.1

Today, in turn, we should apply this motto to Lenin himself: if his Materialism and Empirio-Criticism clearly failed the task of raising philosophical materialism to the level of relativity theory and quantum physics, neither can it help us grasp other breakthroughs such as Freudian psychoanalysis, not to mention the failures of twentieth-century communism. The present book is an attempt to contribute to this task by way of proposing a new foundation for dialectical materialism. We should read the term “dialectics” in the Greek sense of dialektika (like semeiotika or politika): not as a universal notion, but as “dialectical [semiotic, political] matters,” as an inconsistent (non-All) mixture. Which is why this book contains chapters in—not on—dialectical materialism: dialectical materialism is not the book’s topic; it is, rather, practiced within these pages.

The book’s title refers to the expression absoluter Gegenstoss, which Hegel uses only once, but at a crucial point in his logic of reflection, to designate the speculative coincidence of opposites in the movement by which a thing emerges out of its own loss. The most concise poetic formula of absolute recoil was provided by Shakespeare (no surprise here), in his uncanny Troilus and Cressida (Act 5, Scene 2):

O madness of discourse,
That cause sets up with and against itself!
Bi-fold authority! where reason can revolt
Without perdition, and loss assume all reason
Without revolt.
In the context of the play, these lines refer to Troilus’ self-contradicting argumentation when he learns of Cressida’s infidelity: he enumerates arguments for and against what he wants to demonstrate; his reasoning rebels against its own line of argument without seeming to undo itself; and his unreasonableness assumes the appearance of rationality without seeming to contradict itself. A cause that acts against itself, a reason that coincides with the revolt (against itself) ... Although these lines refer to feminine inconsistency, they can also be taken as a comment on the secret alliance between the dignity of the Law and its obscene transgression. Recall Shakespeare’s standard procedure, in his royal chronicles, of supplementing the “big” royal scenes staged in a dignified way with scenes figuring common people who introduce a comic perspective. In the royal chronicles, these comic interludes strengthen the noble scenes by way of contrast; in Troilus, however, everyone, even the noblest of warriors, is “contaminated” by the ridiculing perspective, which invites us to see every character as either blind and pathetic or as involved in ruthless intrigues.

The “operator” of this de-tragicization, the single agent whose interventions systematically undermine tragic pathos, is Ulysses. This may sound surprising in view of Ulysses’ first intervention, at the war council in Act 1, when the Greek (or “Grecian,” as Shakespeare put it in what now may be called Bush mode) generals try to account for their failure to occupy and destroy Troy after eight years of fighting. Ulysses takes a traditional “old values” position, locating the cause of the Greeks’ failure in their neglect of the centralized hierarchical order in which every individual has their proper place. What, then, causes this disintegration which leads to the democratic horror of everyone participating in power? Later in the play (Act 3, Scene 3), when Ulysses tries to convince Achilles to rejoin the battle, he mobilizes the metaphor of time as a destructive force that gradually undermines the natural hierarchical order: with the passing years, your heroic deeds will soon be forgotten, your reputation will be eclipsed by the new heroes—so if you want your warrior glory to continue to shine, you must rejoin the battle:

Time hath, my lord, a wallet at his back,

Wherein he puts alms for oblivion,

A great-sized monster of ingratiations:

Those scraps are good deeds past; which are devour’d

As fast as they are made, forgot as soon

As done. Perseverance, dear my lord,

Keeps honour bright: to have done is to hang

Quite out of fashion, like a rusty mail

In monumental mockery ...

O, let not virtue seek
Remuneration for the thing it was;

For beauty, wit,

High birth, vigour of bone, desert in service,

Love, friendship, charity, are subjects all

To envious and calumniating time.

Ulysses’ strategy here is profoundly ambiguous. In a first approach, he merely restates his argument about the necessity of “degrees” (ordered social hierarchy), and portrays time as a corrosive force which undermines the old true values—an arch-conservative motif. However, on a closer reading, it becomes clear that Ulysses gives his argument a singular cynical twist: how are we to fight against time, to keep the old values alive? Not by directly sticking to them, but by supplementing them with the obscene Realpolitik of cruel manipulation, of cheating, of playing one hero off against the other. Only this dirty underside, this hidden disharmony, can sustain harmony. Ulysses plays with Achilles’ envy—with the very attitudes that work to destabilize the hierarchical order, since they signal that one is not satisfied with one’s subordinate place within the social body. This secret manipulation of envy—in violation of the very rules and values Ulysses celebrates in his first speech—is needed to counteract the effects of time and sustain the hierarchical order of “degrees.” This would be Ulysses’ version of Hamlet’s famous “The time is out of joint; O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!”—the only way to “set it right” is to counteract the transgression of Old Order with its inherent transgression, with a crime secretly made to serve the Order. The price to be paid is that the Order which survives is a mockery of itself, a blasphemous imitation of Order.

Hegel uses the term “absolute recoil” in his explanation of the category of “ground/reason (Grund),” where he resorts to one of his famous wordplays, connecting Grund (ground/reason) and zu Grunde gehen (to fall apart, literally “to go to one’s ground”):

The reflected determination, in falling to the ground, acquires its true meaning, namely, to be within itself the absolute recoil upon itself, that is to say, the positedness that belongs to essence is only a sublated positedness, and conversely, only self-sublating positedness is the positedness of essence. Essence, in determining itself as ground, is determined as the non-determined; its determining is only the sublating of its being determined. Essence, in being determined thus as self-sublating, has not proceeded from another, but is, in its negativity, self-identical essence.2

While these lines may sound obscure, their underlying logic is clear: in a relationship of reflection, every term (every determination) is posited (mediated) by another (its opposite), identity by difference, appearance by essence, and so on—in this sense, it “proceeds from another.” When positedness is self-sublated, an essence is no longer directly determined by an external Other, by its complex set of relations to its otherness, to the environment into which it emerged. Rather, it determines itself, it is
“within itself the absolute recoil upon itself”—the gap, or discord, that introduces dynamism into it is absolutely immanent.

To put it in traditional terms, the present work endeavors to elevate the speculative notion of absolute recoil into a universal ontological principle. Its axiom is that dialectical materialism is the only true philosophical inheritor of what Hegel designates as the speculative attitude of the thought towards objectivity. All other forms of materialism, including the late Althusser’s “materialism of the encounter,” scientific naturalism, and neo-Deleuzian “New Materialism,” fail in this goal. The consequences of this axiom are systematically deployed in three steps: 1) the move from Kant’s transcendentalism to Hegel’s dialectics, that is, from transcendental “correlationism” (Quentin Meillassoux) to the thought of the Absolute; 2) dialectics proper: absolute reflection, coincidence of the opposites; 3) the Hegelian move beyond Hegel to the materialism of “less than nothing.”

Part I begins with a critical analysis of two representative nontranscendental materialist theories of subjectivity (Althusser, Badiou). The second chapter deals with the transcendental dimension and describes the move from the Kantian transcendental subject to the Hegelian subject as the “disparity” in the heart of Substance. The third chapter provides an extended commentary on Hegel’s basic axiom according to which the Spirit itself heals the wounds it inflicts on nature.

Part II deals with the Hegelian Absolute. First, it describes the thoroughly evental nature of the Absolute which is nothing but the process of its own becoming. It then confronts the enigma of Hegelian Absolute Knowing: how should we interpret this notion with regard to the basic dialectical paradox of the negative relationship between being and knowing, of a being which depends on not-knowing? Finally, it considers the intricacies of the Hegelian notion of God.

Part III ventures an Hegelian expedition into the obscure terrain beyond Hegel. It begins by deploying the different, contradictory even, versions of the Hegelian negation of negation. It then passes to the crucial dialectical reversal of “there is no relationship” into “there is a non-relationship”—the passage which corresponds to the Hegelian move from dialectical to properly speculative Reason. The book concludes with some hypotheses about the different levels of antagonism that are constitutive of any order of being, delineating the basic contours of a renewed Hegelian “dentology” (the ontology of den, of “less than nothing”).

In between these steps, two interludes—on Schoenberg’s Erwartung, and on Ernst Lubitsch’s masterpieces—offer artistic exemplifications of the book’s conceptual content.

MATERIALISM, OLD AND NEW

Materialism appears today in four main versions: 1) reductionist “vulgar” materialism (cognitivism, neo-Darwinism); 2) the new wave of atheism which aggressively denounces religion (Hitchens, Dawkins, et al.); 3) whatever remains of “discursive materialism” (Foucauldian analyses of discursive material practices); 4) Deleuzian “new materialism.” Consequently, we should not be afraid to look for true materialism in what cannot but appear as (a return to German) idealism—or, as Frank Ruda put it apropos Alain Badiou, true materialism is a “materialism without materialism” in which substantial “matter” disappears in a network of purely formal/ideal relations. This paradox is grounded in the fact
that, today, it is idealism which emphasizes our bodily finitude and endeavors to demonstrate how this very finitude opens up the abyss of a transcendent divine Otherness beyond our reach (no wonder that the most spiritual of twentieth-century filmmakers, Tarkovsky, is simultaneously the one who was most obsessed with the impenetrable humid inertia of earth), while scientific materialists keep alive the techno-utopian dream of immortality, of getting rid of our bodily constraints. Along these lines, Jean-Michel Besnier has drawn attention to the fact that contemporary scientific naturalism seems to revive the most radical idealist program of Fichte and Hegel: the idea that reason can make nature totally transparent. Does not the biogenetic goal of reproducing humans scientifically through biogenetic procedures turn humanity into a self-made entity, thereby realizing Fichte’s speculative notion of a self-positing? Today’s ultimate “infinite judgment” (coincidence of opposites) thus seems to be: absolute idealism is radical naturalist reductionism.

This orientation marks a fourth stage in the development of anti-humanism: neither theocentric anti-humanism (on account of which US religious fundamentalists treat the term “humanism” as synonymous with secular culture), nor the French “theoretical anti-humanism” that accompanied the structuralist revolution in the 1960s (Althusser, Foucault, Lacan), nor the “deep-ecological” reduction of humanity to just one of the many animal species on Earth, but the one which has upset the balance of life on the planet through its hubris, and is now justifiably facing the revenge of Mother Earth. However, even this fourth stage is not without a history. In the first decade of the Soviet Union, so-called “bio-cosmism” enjoyed an extraordinary popularity—as a strange combination of vulgar materialism and Gnostic spirituality that formed the occult shadow-ideology, or obscene secret teaching, of Soviet Marxism. It is as if, today, “bio-cosmism” is reemerging in a new wave of “post-human” thought. The spectacular development of biogenetics (cloning, direct DNA interventions, etc.) is gradually dissolving the frontiers between humans and animals on the one side and between humans and machines on the other, giving rise to the idea that we are on the threshold of a new form of Intelligence, a “more-than-human” Singularity in which mind will no longer be subject to bodily constraints, including those of sexual reproduction. Out of this prospect a weird shame has emerged: a shame about our biological limitations, our mortality, the ridiculous way in which we reproduce ourselves—what Günther Anders has called “Promethean shame,” ultimately simply the shame that “we were born and not manufactured.” Nietzsche’s idea that we are the “last men” laying the ground for our own extinction and the arrival of a new Over-Man is thereby given a scientific-technological twist. However, we should not reduce this “post-human” stance to the paradigmatically modern belief in the possibility of total technological domination over nature—what we are witnessing today is an exemplary dialectical reversal: the slogan of today’s “post-human” sciences is no longer domination but surprise (contingent, non-planned emergence). Jean-Pierre Dupuy detects a weird reversal of the traditional Cartesian anthropocentric arrogance which grounded human technology, a reversal clearly discernible in today’s robotics, genetics, nanotechnology, artificial life and Artificial Intelligence research:

how are we to explain the fact that science became such a “risky” activity that, according to some top scientists, it poses today the principal threat to the survival of humanity? Some philosophers reply to this question by saying that Descartes’ dream—“to become master and possessor of nature”—has turned out bad, and that we should urgently return to the “mastery of mastery.” They understand nothing. They don’t see that the technology profiling itself at our horizon through the “convergence” of all disciplines aims precisely at non-mastery. The engineer of tomorrow will not be a sorcerer’s
apprentice because of his negligence or ignorance, but by choice. He will “give” himself complex structures or organizations and will try to learn what they are capable of by exploring their functional properties—an ascending, bottom-up, approach. He will be an explorer and experimenter at least as much as an executor. The measure of his success will be more the extent to which his own creations will surprise him than the conformity of his realization to a list of pre-established tasks.

Should we see an unexpected sign of hope in this reemergence of surprise at the very heart of the most radical naturalism? Or should we look for a way to overcome the impasses of cognitivist radical naturalism in Deleuzian “New Materialism,” whose main representative is Jane Bennett with her notion of “vibrant matter”? Fredric Jameson was correct to claim that Deleuzianism is today the predominant form of idealism: as did Deleuze, New Materialism relies on the implicit equation: matter = life = stream of agential self-awareness—no wonder New Materialism is often characterized as “weak panpsychism” or “terrestrial animism.” When New Materialists oppose the reduction of matter to a passive mixture of mechanical parts, they are, of course, asserting not an old-fashioned teleology but an aleatory dynamic immanent to matter: “emerging properties” arise out of unpredictable encounters between multiple kinds of actants (to use Bruno Latour’s term), and the agency for any particular act is distributed across a variety of kinds of bodies. Agency thereby becomes a social phenomenon, where the limits of sociality are expanded to include all material bodies participating in the relevant assemblage. For example, an ecological public is a group of bodies, some human, most not, that are subjected to harm, defined as a diminished capacity for action. The ethical implication of such a stance is that we should recognize our entanglement within larger assemblages: we should become more sensitive to the demands of these publics and the reformulated sense of self-interest that calls upon us to respond to their plight.

Materiality, usually conceived as inert substance, should be rethought as a plethora of things that form assemblages of human and non-human actors—humans are but one force in a potentially unbounded network of forces. We thereby move back to the enchanted world—no wonder Bennett’s earlier work was on enchantment in everyday life. She concludes Vibrant Matter with what she calls (in no way wholly ironically) her “Nicene Creed for would-be materialists”: I believe in one matter-energy, the maker of things seen and unseen. I believe that this pluriverse is traversed by heterogeneities that are continually doing things. I believe it is wrong to deny vitality to nonhuman bodies, forces, and forms, and that a careful course of anthropomorphization can help reveal that vitality, even though it resists full translation and exceeds my comprehensive grasp. I believe that encounters with lively matter can chasten my fantasies of human mastery, highlight the common materiality of all that is, expose a wider distribution of agency, and reshape the self and its interests.

What vibrates in vibrant matter is its immanent life force or its soul (in the precise Aristotelian sense of the active principle immanent to matter), not subjectivity. New Materialism thus refuses the radical divide matter/life and life/thought—selves or multiple agents are everywhere in different guises. A basic ambiguity nonetheless persists here: are these vital qualities of material bodies the result of our (the human observer’s) “benign anthropomorphism,” so that the vitality of matter means that “everything is, in a sense, alive,”10 or are we effectively dealing with a strong ontological claim asserting a kind of spiritualism without gods, with a way of restoring sacredness to worldliness? If “a careful course of anthropomorphization” can help reveal the vitality of material bodies, it is not clear whether that
vitality is a result of our perception being animistic or of an actual asubjective vital power—an ambiguity which is deeply Kantian.

Prior to Kant, and if we do not take into account the aleatory materialism of Democritus and Lucretius, the main opposition was that of external and internal teleology exemplified by the names of Plato and Aristotle. For Plato, the natural world is the product of a divine craftsman who looked to the world of eternal being for his model of the good and then created a natural order. The “externality” here is twofold: the agent whose goal is being achieved is external to the object, and the value is the agent’s value, not the object’s. Aristotle’s notion differs from Plato’s on both counts: the goal belongs to the organism rather than to an “external” designer, and the end to which a natural process is directed is simply the being, the life, of the natural object in question—it is not a “purpose,” neither man’s nor God’s, but the actualization of the immanent potentials of an entity.

Kant breaks with this entire tradition and introduces an irreducible gap into our perception of reality. For him, the idea of purpose is immanent to our perception of living organisms: we ineluctably perceive them “as if a concept had guided its production” (an animal has eyes, ears and a nose in order to orient itself in its environment, it has legs in order to move itself, teeth in order to make eating easier, etc.). However, such teleological thinking does not relate to the objective reality of the observed phenomena: categories of teleology are not constitutive of reality (as are categories of linear material causality), they are merely a regulative idea—a pure as if, that is, we perceive living organisms “as if” they were structured in a teleological way. While efficiently causal explanations are always best (x causes y, y is the effect of x), there “will never be a Newton for a blade of grass,” and so the organic must be explained “as if” it were constituted teleologically. Although the natural world gives an almost irresistible semblance of teleology, or adaptedness to goals, this is an anthropomorphic mode of thought, a subjective point of view under which we (have to) comprehend certain phenomena.

The gap that separates modern science from Aristotelian descriptions of nature (experienced “natural” reality) concerns the status of the Real qua impossible. The commonsensical realist ontology opposes appearance and reality: the way things merely appear to us and the way they are in themselves, independently and outside of our relating to them. However, are not things already “in themselves” embedded in an environment, related to us? Is not their “in itself” the ultimate abstraction of our mind, the result of tearing things out of their network of relations? What science distills as “objective reality” is becoming more and more an abstract formal structure relying on complex scientific and experimental work. Does this mean, however, that scientific “objective reality” is just a subjective abstraction? Not at all, since it is here that one should mobilize the distinction between (experienced) reality and the Real. Alexandre Koyré pointed out how the wager of modern physics is to approach the real by means of the impossible: the scientific Real, articulated in letters and mathematical formulae, is “impossible” (also) in the sense that it refers to something we can never encounter in the reality within which we dwell. An elementary example: based on experiments, Newton calculated how fast, with how much acceleration, an object will move in free fall in an absolute vacuum, where there are no obstacles to slow down its movement; we, of course, never encounter such a pure situation in our reality, where tiny particles in the air always slow down the free fall, which is why a nail falls much faster than a feather, while in a vacuum the velocity of their fall would be identical. This is why, for modern science, we have to begin with an impossible-Real to account for the possible: we first have to imagine a pure situation in which
stones and feathers fall with the same velocity, and only thereafter can we explain the velocity of actual objects falling as divergences or deviations due to empirical conditions. Another example: to explain the attenuation of the movement of objects in our ordinary material reality, physics takes as its starting point the “principle of inertia” (again first formulated by Newton) which postulates that an object not subject to any net external force will move at a constant velocity—an object will continue moving at its current velocity until some force causes its speed or direction to change. On the surface of the Earth, inertia is as a rule masked by the effects of friction and air resistance which attenuate the speed of moving objects (usually to the point of rest), and this observable fact misled classical theorists such as Aristotle into assuming that objects move only as long as force is applied to them.12 Lacan’s notion of the Real as impossible should be applied here, including his opposition between reality and the Real: the “principle of inertia” refers to an impossible Real, something that never happens in reality but which has nonetheless to be postulated in order to account for what goes on in reality. It is in this sense that modern science is more Platonic than Aristotelian: Aristotelian approaches begin with empirical reality, with what is possible, while modern science explains this reality with reference to an ideal order which is found nowhere in reality.

Kant thus intervenes into the field of teleology as an agent of scientific modernity: purposes are imposed onto natural objects as organizational principles by us, the observing subjects; the role of teleological concepts is not constitutive but merely regulative, we apply them to make our experience meaningful. Kant thereby opens up an irreducible gap between chaotic nature “in itself” in its meaningless reality, and the meaning, the meaningful order, the purposefulness, we impose onto it. He does not try to coerce nature into purposefulness, he doesn’t try to obliterate its part of heterogeneity or contingency. On the contrary, he introduces the notion of purposefulness as a notion which retroactively makes nature purposeful. His point is thus not to transform chaotic nature into well-ordered one: he conceives of the notion of purposefulness in such a way that it reflects the notion of nature as chaotic. Perhaps, we should recognize here a discovery which corresponds to the discovery of the notion of fantasy in Freud and even more in Lacan. We are dealing with the invention of a notion which provides a name for the retroactive arrangement of successfulness or healing in a field in which a crack is gaping.13

New Materialism takes the step back into (what can only appear to us moderns as) premodern naivety, covering up the gap that defines modernity and reasserting the purposeful vitality of nature: “a careful course of anthropomorphization can help reveal that vitality, even though it resists full translation and exceeds my comprehensive grasp.” Note the uncertainty of this statement: Bennett is not simply filling in the gap, she remains modern enough to register the naivety of her gesture, admitting that the notion of the vitality of nature is beyond our comprehension, that we are moving into an obscure area.

The move that defines New Materialism should be opposed to the properly Hegelian dialectical-materialist overcoming of the transcendental dimension or the gap that separates subject from object: New Materialism covers up this gap, reinscribing subjective agency into natural reality as its immanent agential principle, while dialectical materialism transposes back into nature not subjectivity as such but the very gap that separates subjectivity from objective reality.
If, then, New Materialism can still be considered a variant of materialism, it is materialist in the sense in which Tolkien’s Middle-earth is materialist: as an enchanted world full of magical forces, good and evil spirits, etc., but strangely without gods—there are no transcendent divine entities in Tolkien’s universe, all magic is immanent to matter, as a spiritual power that dwells in our terrestrial world. However, we should strictly distinguish the New Age topic of a deeper spiritual interconnection and unity of the universe from the materialist topic of a possible encounter with an inhuman Other with whom some kind of communication could be possible. Such an encounter would be extremely traumatic, since we would have to confront a subjectivized Other with whom no subjective identification is possible, it having no common measure with “being human.” Such an encounter is not an encounter with a deficient mode of an Other Subject, but an encounter with an Other at its purest, with the abyss of Otherness not covered up or facilitated by imaginary identifications which make the Other someone “like us,” someone we can emphatically “understand.” There are many literary and cinema works which deal with this—suffice it here to mention three.

In Frank Schatzing’s science fiction novel The Swarm (2004), scientists and journalists from across the world investigate what at first appear to be freak events related to the oceans: swimmers are driven from the coast by sharks and venomous jellyfish; commercial ships are attacked and sometimes destroyed in a variety of ways; France suffers an outbreak of an epidemic caused by contaminated lobsters, etc. When it becomes clear that all these events are related, an international task force is set up to deal with the problem. But the attacks continue: the east coast of North America is overrun by Pfiesteria-infested crabs, and the resulting epidemic causes millions of deaths and renders the affected cities uninhabitable; the Gulf Stream fails, threatening a global climate change that would destroy human civilization, and so on. During a task force meeting, a scientist offers his hypothesis: the phenomena are deliberate attacks by a hitherto unknown intelligent species from the depths of the sea; their goal is to eliminate the human race, which is devastating the Earth’s oceans. The attackers—baptized the “yrr”—are single-cell organisms that operate in swarms, controlled by a single hive-mind that may have existed for hundreds of millions of years. Although the scientists succeed in making limited contact, the attacks do not cease, until a science journalist dives deep into the ocean and releases a corpse pumped full of the yrr’s natural pheromone, hoping to trigger an “emotional” response. It works and the yrr end their attacks on humanity. The novel’s epilogue reveals that a year later mankind is still recovering from its conflict with the swarm. The knowledge that humans are not the only intelligent life form on Earth has plunged most religious groups into chaos, while parts of the world still suffer from the epidemic sent by the yrr to destroy the threat to their marine homeland. Humanity now faces the difficult task of rebuilding its society and industry without coming into conflict with the ever-watchful superpower under the sea. While the novel deals with an ecological topic (the destruction and poisoning of maritime ecosystems), its actual focus is on our inability to understand aliens, on the impact the discovery of another intelligent species on Earth might have on us.

In the film Ender’s Game (2013) an alien species called the Formics attacks Earth in the year 2086. The invasion is defeated, but the Formics continue to build up forces on their home planet. The story is about Andrew “Ender” Wiggin, a child genius trained in Battle School for the forthcoming war with the Formics. In the course of his military education, Ender trains with a computerized “mind game” in which characters that look like Formics materialize and dissolve before him. As the best student, Ender is nominated commander of the fleet and on Graduation Day leads the fleet in a battle simulation near the
Formics’ home planet. After eradicating the enemy forces he learns that the simulation was in fact a real battle and that he has destroyed the Formics in reality. Remembering his experience in the mind game, Ender realizes that the Formics had tried to communicate with him. He rushes to a mountain similar to the one he saw in the game and finds a Queen with a single Queen egg remaining. After promising the Queen that he will find a planet for the egg, he takes off in a spaceship, determined to colonize a new Formic World—a minimal ethical pact or bond is thus established between Ender and the Formic Queen.

A key feature shared by both these works is their imagining the Other as a maternal Other, as a swarm of pre-individual units subordinated to a single maternal collective Mind. In short, in both cases, the encounter is sexualized; it is the encounter of a male subject stumbling upon a feminine Other which is, as a rule, the pre-symbolic maternal Other of the psychotic closure, the absolute Other from whom no distance is tolerated, allowing no space for the subject’s desire—an Other who just uses us as an instrument of its jouissance. A materialist approach should avoid not only this “maternal” temptation of imagining the Other as a pre-Oedipal Absolute without lack, but also the opposite temptation of reducing the Other to a mirror of our own disavowed interior (“all we find in the Other is our own repressed content that we have projected into it”)—the temptation to which Tarkovsky succumbed in his cinema version of Solaris. The difference between Stanislaw Lem’s classic science fiction novel and Tarkovsky’s cinema version is crucial here. Solaris is the story of a space agency psychologist, Kelvin, sent to a half-abandoned spaceship orbiting a newly discovered planet, Solaris, where strange things have been taking place (scientists going mad, hallucinating and killing themselves). Solaris is a planet with an oceanic fluid surface that moves incessantly and, from time to time, imitates recognizable forms—not only elaborate geometric structures, but also gigantic child bodies or human buildings. All attempts to communicate with the planet have failed, but scientists entertain the hypothesis that Solaris is a gigantic brain which can somehow read human minds. Soon after his arrival, Kelvin finds his dead wife Hari at his side in bed. Years ago on Earth, Hari had killed herself after Kelvin had abandoned her. Now he is unable to shake her off, all attempts to get rid of her miserably fail as she rematerializes the next day. Analysis of her tissue reveals that she is not composed of atoms like normal human beings—past a certain micro-level, there is nothing, just a void. Finally, Kelvin grasps that Hari is a materialization of his own innermost traumatic fantasies.

Solaris, then, is a gigantic Brain that materializes in reality the innermost fantasies that support our desire, a machine that generates the ultimate fantasmatic objectal supplement or partner that we would never be ready to accept in reality, even though our entire psychic life turns around it. Read in this way, the story is really about the hero’s inner journey, about his attempt to come to terms with his own repressed truth. Or, as Tarkovsky himself put it in an interview: “Maybe, effectively, the mission of Kelvin on Solaris has only one goal: to show that love of the other is indispensable to all life. A man without love is no longer a man. The aim of the entire ‘solaristic’ is to show humanity must be love.”14 In clear contrast to this, Lem’s novel focuses on the inert external presence of the planet Solaris, of this “Thing which thinks” (to use Kant’s expression, which fits perfectly here): the point of the novel is precisely that Solaris remains an impenetrable Other with which no communication is possible—true, it returns us to our innermost disavowed fantasies, but the “Che vuoi?” behind this remains thoroughly impenetrable (Why does It do it? As a purely mechanical response? To play demonic games with us? To help us—or compel us—to confront our disavowed truth?).15 AGAINST THE DEFLATED HEGEL
At the beginning of his Encyclopaedia Logic (the “Small Logic”), Hegel deploys the three elementary “attitudes [positions, Stellungen] of thought towards objectivity.” The first attitude is that of metaphysics, i.e., of naive realism, which directly presupposes the overlapping of the determinations of thought and determinations of being: metaphysics “has no doubts and no sense of the contradiction in thought, or of the hostility of thought against itself. It entertains an unquestioning belief that reflection is the means of ascertaining the truth, and of bringing the objects before the mind as they really are.”

This first attitude of simply describing the universe in its rational structure is then undermined by the second attitude whose first form is empiricist skepticism, which doubts that we can ever form a consistent structure of what reality is out of the only thing we have access to, our dispersed and inconsistent experience, with its multiplicity of data. Empiricist skepticism is then countered by the second form of this attitude: Kant’s transcendental position. What transcendentalism shares with empiricist skepticism is that both accept the inaccessibility/unknowability of the Thing-in-itself. However, in contrast to empiricism, transcendentalism as it were turns the obstacle itself into its own solution: it elevates the very forms of our mind, of subjectivity, which (de)form our access to the in-itself and thus deny us direct access to it, into an a priori, a positive fact constitutive of our phenomenal reality.

The question here is whether the transcendental horizon is the ultimate horizon of our thinking. If we reject (as we should) any naturalist or other return to naive realism, then there are only two ways to get over (or behind/beneath) the transcendental dimension. The first form of this third attitude of thought towards objectivity is an immediate or intuitive knowing which posits a direct access to the Absolute beyond (or beneath) all discursive knowledge—Fichte’s I = I, Schelling’s Identity of Subject and Object, but also direct mystical intuition of God. The second form, of course, is Hegel’s dialectics, which does exactly the opposite with regard to intuitive knowing: instead of asserting a direct intuitive access to the Absolute, it transposes into the Thing (the Absolute) itself the gap that separates our subjectivity from it.

As Hegel points out, this last position itself has two forms, dialectical and speculative, and everything hinges here on the opposition between dialectical and speculative thinking—one might say that dialectics remains negative, while only speculation reaches the highest positive dimension. Dialectics which is not yet speculative is the vibrant domain of the tremor of reflection and reflexive reversals, the mad dance of negativity in which “all that is solid melts into air”—this is dialectics as eternal warfare, as a movement which ultimately destroys everything it gives birth to. In Marxist terms, we are dealing here with materialist dialectics and not dialectical materialism; in Hegelian terms, with determinate reflection and not reflexive determination; in Lacanian terms, with “there is no relationship” and not “there is a non-relationship.”

So, in terms of the attitudes of thought towards objectivity, taken together we have not three but six such attitudes: 1) naive realist metaphysics, 2) empiricist skepticism, 3) transcendental criticism, 4) direct intuitive knowing of the Absolute, 5) dialectical thinking, and 6) speculative thinking proper. These six positions, three of which are positive (1, 4, 6) and three negative (2, 3, 5), can be reduced in turn to three basic positions: objective-metaphysical, subjective-transcendental, dialectical-speculative. Does not this matrix continue to determine our choices even today? Scientific naturalism (from quantum cosmology to evolutionary theory and the brain sciences), relativist historicism, versions of
transcendentalism from Heidegger to Foucault, New Age intuitive knowing, “negative dialectics” from Trotskyist permanent revolution through Western Marxism (Adorno) up to today’s forms of “resistance” ... What would be the properly speculative position? Not Stalinism, since it clearly stands for the return to a naive realist metaphysics.

Can the main figure of Hegel that has emerged in recent decades—the “deflated” liberal Hegel of mutual recognition—do the job? It is crucial to see the political as well as the ontological limits of this deflated liberal Hegel—a figure who ultimately amounts to a weird Darwinian Hegel. The underlying ontological premise of Robert Pippin’s reading of Hegel (rarely explicitly stated but nonetheless clearly indicated here and there) is that, in the evolution of animal life and of human animals on Earth, the human species somehow (this indeterminacy is crucial!) began to function in the modes of normativity and mutual recognition. On Pippin’s interpretation, “spirit” thus refers neither to an extra-natural immaterial substance (along the lines of the Cartesian res cogitans opposed to the res extensa) nor to a Divine Mind or Cosmic Spirit which commandeers human agents as vehicles for the accomplishment of its own purposes. Here are some key passages from Pippin’s Hegel’s Practical Philosophy about “the capacity of some natural beings to be aware of themselves in a non-observational, but more self-determining way”:

The suggestion Hegel seems to be making is simply that at a certain level of complexity and organization, natural organisms come to be occupied with themselves and eventually to understand themselves in ways no longer appropriately explicable within the boundaries of nature or in any way the result of empirical observation.

Even though this finally achieved independence from nature is achieved only in objective spirit ... it is never to be understood as something non-natural and it is still the case that a link with and partial determination by nature is always stressed by Hegel.

It is the achievement of the sublating relation to nature that constitutes spirit; natural beings which by virtue of their natural capacities can achieve it are spiritual; having achieved it and maintaining it is being spiritual; those which cannot are not.

The last quote indicates the thin line along which Pippin is treading here: although he writes that humans are “natural beings which by virtue of their natural capacities can achieve” spiritual self-relating, he by no means endorses the Aristotelian view according to which the human being is a substantial entity among whose positive features are potentials or powers of spiritual self-relating. For Pippin (following Hegel), spirit is not a substantial entity but a purely processual one, it is the result of its own becoming, it makes itself what it is—the only substantial reality there is is nature. The distinction between nature and spirit therefore stems not from the fact that spirit is a thing of a different kind from natural things, but rather has more to do with the different sets of criteria that are required for explaining them: spirit is “a kind of norm,” “an achieved form of individual and collective mindedness, and institutionally embodied recognizable relations.” That is to say, free acts are distinguished by the reason to which a subject might appeal in justifying them, and justification is a fundamentally social practice, the practice of “giving of and asking for reasons” by participants in a set of shared institutions. Even at the individual level, expressing an intention amounts to “avowing a pledge to act, the content
and credibility of which remains (even for me), in a way, suspended until I begin to fulfill the pledge.”

It is not until my intention is recognized by others and myself as being fulfilled or realized in my deed that I can identify my act as my own. Justification thus turns out to be more retrospective than prospective, a process in which the agent’s own stance on her action is by no means authoritative. Being an agent, being able to provide reasons to others to justify one’s deeds, is thus itself an “achieved social status such as, let us say, being a citizen or being a professor, a product or result of mutually recognitive attitudes.”

Is such a reading of Hegel appropriate to our historical moment? In his “Back to Hegel?,” a critical review of my Less Than Nothing, Pippin proceeds in four systematic steps, although his criticisms are interlinked across the different levels, from basic ontological questions about the fabric of being to the viability of the Welfare State today. His argument can be condensed as a paraphrase of de Quincey’s famous passage on the “simple art of murder”: “If once a man indulges himself in looking for gaps in the fabric of being, very soon he comes to think little of the notion of an abyssal act; and from this he comes next to abandon reliance on reason in our deliberations, and from that to reject that great dream of social democrats everywhere, Sweden in the Sixties.” Pippin begins at the most basic level of ontology, problematizing my thesis on the ontological incompleteness of reality:

I do not fully understand the claims about holes in the fabric of being, and at any rate, we do not need the claim if we go in the direction I am suggesting. For if that formulation of apperception is correct, it means we are able to account for the inappropriateness of psychological or naturalist accounts of such states, all without a gappy ontology (in the sense, if not in the same way, that Frege and the early Husserl criticized psychologism without an “alternate” ontology).

Pippin correctly reads my incompleteness thesis against the background of the status of subjectivity; he is well aware that I develop the topic of ontological incompleteness in order to answer the question “How should reality be structured so that (something like) subjectivity can emerge in it?” Pippin’s solution is different: for him, Kantian transcendental apperception—the unity of awareness with self-awareness—suffices. Self-awareness means a minimal self-relating on account of which we, as humans, have to justify our acts with reasons. Pippin, of course, supplements Kant with the Hegelian account of the (transcendental, not empirical) genesis of self-awareness out of complex social relations focused on mutual recognition, or, to quote his acerbic critical remark: “‘Spirit’ emerges in this imagined social contestation, in what we come to demand of each other, not in the interstices of being.” There is no need for holes in the fabric of the universe for this. From my standpoint, the problematic nature of this account is signaled by the fact that Pippin ends up with a standard transcendental dualism:

Of course, it is possible and important that some day researchers will discover why animals with human brains can do these things and animals without human brains cannot, and some combination of astrophysics and evolutionary theory will be able to explain why humans have ended up with the brains they have. But these are not philosophical problems and they do not generate any philosophical problems.

True, but such full scientific (self-)naturalization would have consequences for philosophy: if we could fully account for our moral acts in terms of natural causes, in what sense would we still experience
ourselves as free? Kant’s notion of freedom implies a discontinuity in the texture of natural causes, that is, a free act is an act which is ultimately grounded in itself and, as such, cannot be accounted for as an effect of the preceding causal network—in this sense, a free act does imply a kind of hole in the texture of phenomenal reality, the intervention of another dimension in the order of phenomenal reality. Of course, Kant does not claim that free acts are miracles which momentarily suspend natural causality—they just happen without violating any natural laws. However, the fact of freedom indicates that natural causality does not cover all there is but only the phenomenal reality, and that the transcendental subject, the agent of freedom, cannot be reduced to a phenomenal entity. Phenomenal reality is thus incomplete, non-All, a fact confirmed by the antinomies of pure reason which arise the moment our reason tries to comprehend phenomenal reality in its totality. One should always bear in mind that this “ontological scandal” is for Kant the necessary result of his transcendental turn.

This brings us to Pippin’s second reproach: in his view, the thesis on the ontological incompleteness of reality opens up the space for abyssal acts of freedom, acts not grounded in any rational deliberation, since they are located in the interstices of being. That is to say, insofar as Spirit as a historical form of collective Reason, as a space within which rational deliberations take place, can be considered broadly synonymous with the Lacanian “big Other,” and insofar as, following (the late) Lacan, I insist that there is no big Other, our acts lose their rational and normative foundation:

The condition of modern atheism means for Žižek, in Lacanian terms, that there is and can be no longer any “big Other,” any guarantor of at least the possibility of any resolution of normative skepticism and conflicts. But no transcendent guarantor is not the same thing as no possible reliance on reason in our own deliberations and in our claims on others.

Considered outside the big Other as shared symbolic substance, acts can only be irrational interventions with no collectively binding normative foundation; that is, they can be grounded only in direct brutal power, in the agent’s resolve and will: “And if the act is ‘abyssal,’ then ‘politics’ simply means ‘power,’ power backed by nothing but resolve and will, likely met with nothing but resolve and will.” I consider this a total misreading of my position: the fact that there is no big Other in no way implies that humans can operate outside the thick texture of symbolic coordinates. Lacan is more than aware of the weight of this texture—just recall his endless variations on decentered subjectivity, on the retroactive effect of meaning, on how a human being does not speak but is spoken, and so on. Lacan’s point is just that the big Other is inconsistent, self-contradictory, thwarted, traversed by antagonisms, without any guarantee (“there is no Other of Other”), with no ultimate norm or rule totalizing it—in short, the big Other is not some kind of substantial Master who secretly pulls the strings but a stumbling malfunctioning machinery. In his reading of Hegel’s ethical thought Pippin himself insists on the retroactivity of meaning: the meaning of our acts is not an expression of our inner intention, it emerges later, from their social impact, which means that there is a moment of contingency in every emergence of meaning. But there is another more subtle retroactivity involved here: an act is abyssal not in the sense that it is not grounded in reasons, but in the circular sense that it retroactively posits its reasons. A truly autonomous symbolic act or intervention never occurs as the result of strategic calculation, as I go through all possible reasons and then choose the most appropriate course of action. An act is autonomous not when it applies a preexisting norm but when it creates a norm in the very act of applying it. Take the act of falling in love: I don’t fall in love when I meet a woman who meets my preestablished criteria; if it’s
true love, then I don’t love the woman for her smile, eyes, legs, etc.—I love her smile, eyes, etc. because they are hers. So it is not that I act and make choices without reasons, rather that I freely choose which set of reasons will determine me.

And this brings us to the true focal point of the debate. Pippin’s line of reasoning is that since, for me, bourgeois society is unreformable, a radical change is needed; however, since there is no big Other, this change cannot be a direct enactment of some historical necessity or teleology in the classical Marxist sense, but must be an abyssal voluntaristic act. Pippin here addresses what he sees as “the largest question of all,” the one he “found the most dissatisfyingly addressed” in my book:

[Žižek] wants to say that bourgeois society is fundamentally self-contradictory, and I take that to mean “unreformable.” We need a wholly new ethical order and that means “the Act.” That society’s pretense to being a rational form is undermined by the existence of a merely contingent particular, a figurehead at the top, the monarch. (A better question, it seems to me, is why Hegel bothers, given how purely symbolic and even pointless such a dotter of i’s and crosser of t’s turns out to be.)

Pippin immediately makes it clear in what sense bourgeois society is reformable—his reference is, as expected, “that great dream of social democrats everywhere—‘Sweden in the Sixties!’” This, he continues,

...does not seem to me something that inevitably produces its own irrational and irreconcilable Unreason, or Other. More lawyers for the poor in Texas, affordable daycare, universal health care, several fewer aircraft carriers, more worker control over their own working conditions, regulated perhaps nationalized banks, all are reasonable extensions of that bourgeois ideal itself, however sick and often even deranged modern bourgeois society has become.

As to “unreformability,” I am simply claiming that the demands in Pippin’s list may appear as a series of “reasonable extensions” of the bourgeois ideal, but this appearance is abstract in a strictly Hegelian way, and ignores the general tendency of today’s global capitalism. At a more basic level, the claim that bourgeois society is “fundamentally self-contradictory” is a consequence of Hegel’s universal thesis—it is a claim which holds for every society:

The history of a single world-historical nation contains (a) the development of its principle from its latent embryonic stage until it blossoms into the self-conscious freedom of ethical life and presses in upon world history; and (b) the period of its decline and fall, since it is its decline and fall that signalizes the emergence in it of a higher principle as the pure negative of its own.

In this simple and elementary sense, every particular form of state and society is by definition “self-contradictory” and, as such, condemned to disappear—as Pippin himself points out, the rational state articulated in Hegel’s Philosophy of Right had itself already entered into a state of decay, the proof being that Hegel was able to articulate its notional structure. This is why the most un-Hegelian thing imaginable here would be to present Hegel’s idea of the rational state as a vision which is no longer self-contradictory but which, à la Fukuyama, is in its essence the finally found optimal formula that we, Hegel’s successors, simply have to gradually improve and reform, rather than attempt to change in its
essence. Whatever Hegel stands for politically, however, it is not the gradual improvement of bourgeois society. Hegel’s vision of social development is, on the contrary, full of unexpected reversals—the promise of freedom turns into the worst nightmare, and so on. This is why Hegel would have immediately comprehended the logic of the reversal of the emancipatory promise of the October Revolution into the Stalinist nightmare, or, today, of the rise of religious fundamentalism in the midst of consumerist permissiveness. As for reformism, the Hegelian stance would have been: yes, but with a twist—one begins with a modest reform which aims only to make the existing system more just and efficient, and one triggers an avalanche which sweeps away the very order of deliberation which led us to propose the modest reform in the first place.

With regard to Pippin’s vision of the gradual progress of bourgeois society, let us also not forget that Hegel concludes his Philosophy of Right not with an idealized vision of a modern peaceful corporate state, but with the necessity of war as the moment in which a state is “most supremely its own”—war is a supreme dialectical example of how a negative relation to oneself appears as a contingent external obstacle or threat. The “truth” of the external enemy which, for accidental reasons, poses a threat to a state is the state’s self-related negativity, the assertion of the state in its pure essence, in contrast to all its particular moments (individual destinies, property relations, etc.):

This negative relation of the state to itself is embodied in the world as the relation of one state to another and as if the negative were something external. In the world of existence, therefore, this negative relation has the shape of a happening and an entanglement with chance events coming from without. But in fact this negative relation is that moment in the state which is most supremely its own, the state’s actual infinity as the ideality of everything finite within it. It is the moment wherein the substance of the state—i.e. its absolute power against everything individual and particular, against life, property, and their rights, even against societies and associations—makes the nullity of these finite things an accomplished fact and brings it home to consciousness.

Pippin dismisses my “idea of ‘pure’ drives (or ‘pure’ anything)” as something that “belongs in the Hegelian zoo,” i.e., something that is definitely superseded, rendered philosophically obsolete, by Hegel’s philosophical achievement. But is not war, the way Hegel conceptualizes it, precisely the (re)assertion of the “pure” essence of the state in contrast to its particular content? In this sense, is not the push-towards-war an exemplary case of the “pure” death drive (pure negativity)? One can, of course, argue that war is today more threatening due to the catastrophic potential of new technologies, but this in no way renders Hegel’s point outdated; it just compels us to reinvent it for contemporary conditions. For example, today the split between First World and Third World appears, in effect, increasingly like an opposition between leading a long, satisfying life full of material and cultural wealth, and dedicating one’s life to some transcendent Cause. Two philosophical references immediately impose themselves apropos this ideological antagonism between the Western consumerist way of life and Islamist radicalism: Hegel and Nietzsche. Is not this antagonism the one between what Nietzsche called “passive” and “active” nihilism? We in the West are the Nietzschean Last Men, immersed in our stupid daily pleasures, while the Muslim radicals are ready to risk everything, engaged in the struggle to the point of their self-destruction. Furthermore, viewing this opposition through the lens of the Hegelian struggle between Master and Servant, one cannot avoid noting the paradox: although we in the West are perceived as the exploitative masters, it is we who occupy the position of the Servant who, in
clinging to life and its pleasures, is unable to risk his life (recall Colin Powell’s notion of a high-tech war with no human casualties), while the poor Islamist radicals are the Masters ready to risk their lives. But are they really? Deep within themselves, the terrorist fundamentalists lack true conviction—and their violent outbursts are proof of this. How fragile must the belief of a jihadist be if he feels threatened by a stupid caricature in a low-circulation Danish newspaper? Fundamentalist Islamist terror is not grounded in the terrorists’ conviction of their superiority and desire to safeguard their cultural-religious identity from the onslaught of global consumerist civilization. The fundamentalists’ problem is not that we consider them inferior to us, but that they themselves secretly consider themselves inferior. This is why our condescending politically correct assurances that we feel no superiority towards them only makes them more furious and feeds their resentment. The problem is not cultural difference (their effort to preserve their identity) but, on the contrary, the fact that they are already like us, that, secretly, they have already internalized our standards and measure themselves by them.

A further reproach might be that Hegel’s account of war is too abstract: wars are always the result of concrete social and political conditions. But this also misses Hegel’s point: he fully recognizes the external contingency of the causes of conflict, but his point is precisely that, in the case of war, “irrational” contingency and innermost (abstract) notional necessity coincide. A devastating war can explode out of a trifling conflict about some ridiculous point of honor, but this is not what war is really about.

Returning to the topic of bourgeois society: Pippin thinks that, for me, since bourgeois society cannot be reformed to keep its self-destructive tendencies in check, the only way out lies in the imposition of a new ethical order. If this imposition entails radical social change, inclusive of some kind of Cultural Revolution, then I have no problem subscribing to it. But how should this change be brought about? Here again we encounter my abyssal irrational act. Where Pippin totally misses the point is in his reading of my notion of the self-contradictory nature of bourgeois society—the passage is worth quoting again: “Its pretense to being a rational form is undermined by the existence of a merely contingent particular, a figurehead at the top, the monarch. (A better question, it seems to me, is why Hegel bothers, given how purely symbolic and even pointless such a dotter of i’s and cresser of t’s turns out to be.)” I absolutely in no way claim or imply that having a contingent figurehead limits the rationality of a state—what I claim, following Hegel, is that only through the addition of such a figurehead does the totality of a rational state become actual. The act of the King, his decision, “reabsorbs all particularity into its single self, cuts short the weighing of pros and cons between which it lets itself oscillate perpetually now this way and now that, and by saying ‘I will’ makes its decision and so inaugurates all activity and actuality.” Hegel emphasizes this apartness of the monarch already when he states that the “ultimate self-determination” can “fall within the sphere of human freedom only in so far as it has the position of a pinnacle, explicitly distinct from, and raised above, all that is particular and conditional, for only so is it actual in a way adequate to its concept.”29 This is why “the conception of the monarch” is of all conceptions the hardest for ratiocination, i.e. for the method of reflection employed by the Understanding. This method refuses to move beyond isolated categories and hence here again knows only raisonnement, finite points of view, and deductive argumentation. Consequently it exhibits the dignity of the monarch as something deduced, not only in its form, but in its essence. The truth is,
however, that to be something not deduced but purely self-originating is precisely the conception of monarchy.

The speculative moment that the Understanding cannot grasp is “the transition of the concept of pure self-determination into the immediacy of being and so into the realm of nature.” Here politics joins ontology: 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. The idea of a thoroughly rational totality with no need for such a contingent suturing point is one of the supreme examples of abstract Understanding. This is why, for Hegel, the function of the monarch, while purely symbolic, is definitely not pointless: it is, on the contrary, the point itself, the immediate/contingent element needed to suture or totalize a rational totality. The core of the dialectic of contingency and necessity lies in revealing not a deeper notional necessity expressing itself through contingent empirical reality, but the contingency at the very heart of necessity—not only the necessity of contingency, but the contingency of necessity itself.

THE DISPARITY

The interest of Pippin’s reading of Hegel is nonetheless obvious, even if a key dimension of Hegel’s thought gets lost along the way: by ditching the ridiculous metaphysical baggage (Spirit as a mega-Subject pulling the strings, manipulating individual subjects in the mode of the “Cunning of Reason”), one produces a Hegel fully compatible with the modern secular post-metaphysical world-view as well as with today’s liberal “anti-totalitarian” sensibility. Nevertheless, the ontological problem persists in the background. Pippin seems to imply that the normative structure of recognition and discursive justification can ultimately be incorporated into a global natural history of humanity as a peculiar feature of one animal species, so that, even if the normative dimension remains irreducible to the empirical reality, it somehow emerged out of it de facto. This emergence is, however, never explicitly developed, since this would amount to a full naturalization of the normative-discursive dimension. Although Pippin is critical of Habermas, it would be easy to prove that Habermas’ neo-Kantian avoidance of ontological commitment is necessarily ambiguous in a homologous way: while naturalism functions as the obscene secret not to be revealed in public (“of course man developed from nature, of course Darwin was right …”), this obscure secret is a lie, covering up the idealist form of thought (the a priori transcendental of communication which cannot be deduced from natural being). The truth here is in the form: as with Marx’s example of royalists in republican form, while the Habermasians secretly think they are really materialists, the truth lies in the idealist form of their thinking.

Ray Brassier confronts this problem head-on when, in his interpretation of Wilfrid Sellars, he defines materialism with the Marxist-sounding notion of “determination in the last instance,” which should be opposed to the similar notion of overdetermination: “determination-in-the-last-instance is the causality which renders it universally possible for any object X to determine its own ‘real’ cognition, but only in the last instance.” Overdetermination is transcendental, that is, the point of transcendentalism is that I cannot ever fully “objectivize” myself, reduce myself to a part of the “objective reality” in front of me, since such reality is always already transcendently constituted by subjectivity: no matter to what extent I succeed in accounting for myself as a phenomenon within the “great chain of being,” as a result determined by a network of natural (or supernatural) reasons, this causal image is always already overdetermined by the transcendental horizon which structures my approach to reality. To this
transcendental overdetermination Brassier opposes the naturalist determination in the last instance: a serious materialist has to presume that every subjective horizon within which reality appears, every subjective constitution or mediation of reality, has to be ultimately determined by its place in objective reality, that is, it has to be conceived as part of the all-encompassing natural process. The contrast is clear here: overdetermination refers not to the way an all-encompassing whole determines the interplay of its parts, but, on the contrary, to the way a part of the whole emerges as a self-relating One which over-determines the network of its relations with others. In this precise sense, the elementary form of overdetermination is life: a living being is part of the world, but it relates to its environs as a function of its self-relating (the simplest example: an organism relates to food because it needs food to survive). Overdetermination is a name for this paradoxical reversal by means of which a moment subsumes under itself the whole out of which it grew (or, in Hegelese, posits its presuppositions). Such a relationship between overdetermination and determination in the last instance is antagonistic, since overdetermination makes any direct conceptualization of determination in the last instance impossible. Alternatively: at the level of temporality, the structure of overdetermination is that of retroactivity, of an effect which retroactively posits (over-determines) the very causes by which it is determined in the last instance; to reduce overdetermination to the determination in the last instance is to succeed in transposing retroactive causality back into the linear causal network. Why, then, does (symbolic-retroactive) overdetermination emerge at all? Is it ultimately an illusion, albeit a spontaneous and necessary one?

The only way to avoid this conclusion is to break the closure of the linear determinist chain and assert the ontological openness of reality: overdetermination is not illusory insofar as it retroactively fills in the gaps in the chain of causality. The solution is thus not to establish a grand evolutionary narrative explaining or describing how higher modes of being emerge out of lower modes (life out of the chemistry of “dead” matter, spirit out of life), but to approach head-on the question of how the prehuman real has to be structured so as to allow for the emergence of the symbolic/normative dimension. It is here that the most radical dimension of Hegel’s thought, the dimension overlooked by Pippin, comes into view. In a well-known passage from the Foreword to his Phenomenology of Spirit Hegel provides the most elementary formula for what it means to conceive Substance also as Subject:

The disparity which exists in consciousness between the I and the substance which is its object is the distinction between them, the negative in general. This can be regarded as the defect of both, though it is their soul, or that which moves them. That is why some of the ancients conceived the void as the principle of motion, for they rightly saw the moving principle as the negative, though they did not as yet grasp that the negative is the self. Now, although this negative appears at first as a disparity between the I and its object, it is just as much a disparity of the substance with itself. Thus what seems to happen outside of it, to be an activity directed against it, is really its own doing, and substance shows itself to be essentially subject.32

The final reversal is crucial: the disparity between subject and substance is simultaneously the disparity of substance with itself. This reversal takes place at all levels: subjectivity emerges when substance cannot achieve full identity with itself, when substance is in itself “barred,” traversed by an immanent impossibility or antagonism; the subject’s epistemological ignorance, its failure to fully grasp the opposed substantial content, simultaneously indicates a limitation, failure, or lack in the substantial
content itself; the believer’s experience of abandonment by God is simultaneously a gap that separates God from the believer, an indication of the “unfinished” nature of the divine identity, and so on. Applied to Pippin’s ontological ambiguity, this means that the gap separating the normative from the factual should be simultaneously conceived as a gap immanent to the factual itself. Or, to put it in a slightly different way, while everything is to be mediated/ posited by the self-relating void of subjectivity, this void itself emerges out of the Substance through its self-alienation. We thus encounter here the same ambiguity that characterizes the Lacanian Real: everything is subjectively mediated, but the subject does not come first—it emerges through the self-alienation of the Substance. In other words, while we have no direct access to the substantial pre-subjective Real, we also cannot get rid of it.

The subject does not come first: it is a predicate-becoming-subject, a passive screen asserting itself as a First Principle, i.e., something posited which retroactively posits its presuppositions.33 It is in this sense that, for Marx, Capital is a subject: capital is money which becomes a subject, money which not only mediates between commodities as their general equivalent but also becomes the active agent of this mediation, so that the entire movement of the exchange of commodities becomes the self-movement of Capital. And the paradox is that what Hegel was not able to see was this very “Hegelian” dimension of the emerging capitalist order: the limit of the return to Hegel is simply Capital itself, for Hegel was not able to grasp the capitalist dynamic proper. Fredric Jameson is right to draw attention to the fact that “despite his familiarity with Adam Smith and emergent economic doctrine, Hegel’s conception of work and labor—I have specifically characterized it as a handicraft ideology—betrays no anticipation of the originalities of industrial production or the factory system.”34

In short, Hegel’s analyses of work and production cannot be “transferred to the new industrial situation.”35 There is a series of interconnected reasons for this limitation, all grounded in the constraints of the historical experience at Hegel’s disposal. First, Hegel’s notion of industrial revolution was that of Adam Smith-type manufacturing where the work process was still one of combined individuals using tools, not yet the factory system in which the machinery sets the rhythm and individual workers are de facto reduced to organs or appendices serving the machinery. Second, Hegel could not yet imagine the way that abstraction works in developed capitalism: when Marx describes the mad self-enhancing circulation of capital, whose solipsistic path of self-fecundation finds its apogee in today’s meta-reflexive speculations on futures, it is far too simplistic to claim that the specter of this self-engendering monster pursuing its ends regardless of any human or environmental concern is an ideological abstraction, and to insist that one should never forget that, behind this abstraction, lie real people and natural objects on whose productive capacities and resources capital’s circulation is based and on which it feeds like a gigantic parasite. The problem is that this “abstraction” is not only in our (financial speculator’s) misperception of social reality, but is also “real” in the precise sense of determining the structure of very material social processes: the fate of whole swathes of society and sometimes of whole countries can be decided by the speculative dance of Capital, which pursues its goal of profitability with a blessed indifference to how its movements will affect social reality. Therein resides the fundamental systemic violence of capitalism, much more uncanny than direct pre-capitalist socio-ideological violence: its violence is no longer attributable to concrete individuals with their “evil” intentions, but is purely “objective”, systemic, anonymous—quite literally a conceptual violence, the violence of a Concept whose self-deployment rules and regulates social reality. This is why Hegelian references abound in Marx’s deployment of the notion of Capital: in capitalism, value is not a mere
abstract “mute” universality, a substantial link between the multiplicity of commodities; from being a passive medium of exchange it turns into the “active factor” of the entire process. Instead of merely passively assuming the two different forms of its actual existence (money/commodity), it appears as a subject “endowed with a motion of its own, passing through a life-process of its own”: it differentiates itself from itself, positing its otherness, and then again overcomes this difference—the entire movement is its own movement. In this precise sense, “instead of simply representing the relations of commodities, it enters … into private relations with itself”: the “truth” of its relating to its otherness is its self-relating, i.e., in its self-movement, capital retroactively “sublates” its own material conditions, turning them into subordinate moments of its own “spontaneous expansion”—in pure Hegelese, it posits its own presuppositions.

The irony is not difficult to miss here: the fact that Marx needed Hegel to formulate the logic of capital (the crucial breakthrough in Marx’s work occurred in the mid-1850s, when, after the failure of the 1848 revolutions, he began to read Hegel’s Logic again) means that what Hegel was not able to see was not some post-Hegelian or post-idealist reality but rather the properly Hegelian aspect of the capitalist economy. Here, paradoxically, Hegel was not idealist enough, for what he failed to see was the properly speculative content of the capitalist speculative economy, the way financial capital functions as a purely virtual notion processing “real people.” Which brings us back to the paradox formulated by Ruda: the only way to be a true materialist today is to push idealism to its limit.

This greatest paradox of contemporary materialism was sometimes missed by Lacan himself. In his seminar on anxiety (1962), Lacan boastfully claimed that “if there is anyone, I think, who does not mistake what the Phenomenology of Spirit brings us, it is myself.” But is it really the case? In his reference to the Hegelian Beautiful Soul, Lacan makes a deeply significant mistake by condensing two different “figures of consciousness”: he speaks of the Beautiful Soul who, in the name of its Law of the Heart, rebels against the injustices of the world. With Hegel, however, the “Beautiful Soul” and the “Law of the Heart” are two quite distinct figures: the first designates the hysterical attitude of deploring the wicked ways of the world while actively participating in their reproduction (Lacan is quite justified in applying it to Dora, Freud’s exemplary case of hysteria); the “Law of the Heart and the Frenzy of Self-Conceit,” on the other hand, clearly refer to a psychotic attitude—that of a self-proclaimed Savior who imagines his inner Law to be the Law for everybody and is therefore compelled, in order to explain why the “world” does not follow his precepts, to resort to paranoid constructions, to the plotting of dark forces (like the Enlightened rebel who blames the reactionary clergy’s propagation of superstition for his failure to win the support of the people). Lacan’s slip is all the more mysterious for the fact that this difference between Beautiful Soul and Law of the Heart can be perfectly formulated in categories elaborated by Lacan himself: the hysterical Beautiful Soul clearly locates itself within the big Other, and functions as a demand to the Other within an intersubjective field, whereas the psychotic clinging to the Law of the Heart involves precisely a rejection, a suspension, of what Hegel referred to as the “spiritual substance.” Similarly, in his key text on the subversion of the subject and the dialectic of desire, Lacan repeats the standard argument against philosophical speculation, and specifically against Hegel, making the old and rather boring point about the “bone” which cannot be dissolved in the circle of dialectical speculation, about the “gap” which all thought has avoided:
Certainly there is a bone here. Since it is precisely what I am claiming—namely, what structures the subject—it essentially constitutes in the subject the gap that all thought has avoided, skipped over, circumvented, or stopped up whenever thought apparently succeeds in sustaining itself circularly, whether the thought be dialectical or mathematical.

But is not this the very bone mentioned by Hegel in his Phenomenology, the bone of the infinite judgment “The Spirit is a bone”? And is not the notion of a “bone-in-the-throat” remainder, which is simultaneously the condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility of the dialectical process, at the very core of the Hegelian dialectic? What happens in the concluding reversal of that process is not the magical dissolution/reintegration of the “bone” into the circle of dialectical movement, but merely a shift of perspective which makes us see how the “bone” is not merely an obstacle which cannot be sublated but, precisely as such, a positive condition of the movement of sublation—the obstacle retroactively engenders what it is an obstacle to.

Might we not say, then, that the true “bone” of the philosophical discourse of the last two centuries is Hegel himself? Is not Hegel’s thought the traumatic point which is resisted by the entire post-Hegelian tradition, where this resistance takes the form of all possible negations, from outright psychotic foreclosure (Deleuze) to immanent overcoming (Marx)? In order to see this, however, we should not try simply to return to Hegel “the way he was,” but to read Hegel through Freud (as reconceptualized by Lacan).

DIALECTICAL HISTORICITY

A properly Hegelian reading of Freud should not be constrained by the rather obvious objection: “but can we really understand Freud through a Hegelian approach? Does not Hegel’s speculative idealism belong to a different epoch in which there is no place for the Freudian unconscious with its contingent mechanisms?” A Hegelian reading of Freud means reading Freud in the same way Hegel approaches great names from the history of philosophy: first isolating Freud’s key breakthrough (the unconscious); then “deconstructing” Freud, analyzing his necessary inconsistency to demonstrate how he necessarily missed the key dimension of his own discovery; finally, showing how, in order to do justice to his key breakthrough, one has to move beyond Freud—Lacan achieved this in his “return to Freud,” which designates a radical revolutionizing of the entire Freudian edifice. In this sense, Lacan’s return to Freud is homologous to Luther’s return to Christ, to original Christianity, a return which produced a radically new form of Christianity.

The same goes for a Freudian reading of Hegel: such a reading should not in any sense “psychoanalyze” Hegel, discerning in his system traces of his personal psychopathologies; neither, following some of Freud’s own unfortunate remarks, should it denounce Hegel’s system as the climax of philosophical paranoia, as a kind of ontologized psychopathic conspiracy theory. The point is rather to read Hegel in a Freudian way, the way Freud reads the formations of the unconscious: to focus on the symptoms, the symptomal exceptions in Hegel’s text, on what is “repressed” in his theory, and what can only be retroactively reconstructed through its distorted traces in the explicit text. (For example, one might argue that a purely repetitive “death drive” is the repressed focal point of the Hegelian notion of negativity.) And, of course, we should not shrink from applying each approach to its author: to engage in a Hegelian reading of Hegel himself, as well as a Freudian reading of Freud. What characterizes a really
great thinker is that they misrecognize the basic dimension of their own breakthrough. (Plato, for instance, misrecognized the evental nature of encountering an Idea.) So the point is not that we can access what remains unthought in Freud through a Hegelian reading, or what remains unthought in Hegel through a Freudian reading; such a procedure should culminate in the self-reflexive move of thinking with Freud against Freud, or with Hegel against Hegel. But is not such an approach too formal—not only in the sense of trying to isolate abstract formal models of the dialectical process, but above all in the sense of missing the ultimate Marxist critical-materialist reversal of Hegel, namely the manner in which dialectical formal models are always mediated by concrete historical content, expressing a certain historical matrix? This case has been made by Peter Osborne:

As for the “materialist reversal” from Marx back to Hegel, it actually happens within Marx’s own texts, specifically in Capital, where the ontological peculiarity of the value-form is shown to enact just such a process. However, it is ontologically particular to capital—that is its materialism: in Žižek’s terms, the contingent historical specificity of its necessity. Such dialectical logical necessity cannot be a feature of a general metaphysics without being precisely what it is in Hegel—idealism—because it lacks the capacity for sufficiently determinate significant (that is, practically relevant) differentiation. Simply calling it “materialism,” on the basis of its difference from an ancient philosophical logic of “the One,” does not stop it being idealism in a broader sense.

What Osborne proposes here is the old thesis of the Hegel-Capital school (Helmut Reichelt et al.): the Marxian logic of commodities is the contingent historical secret of Hegelian speculation. However, it is not enough to say this. First, there is the fundamental ambiguity of the Marxist reference to Hegel which begins already in Marx himself, and goes on in Lukács and Adorno: is the Hegelian dialectical process the mystified/idealist expression of the process of liberation, or the mystified/idealist expression of capitalist self-reproduction? Second, Marx is not only historicizing universals: he not only analyzes how a universality is always colored by a specific historical context, he also shows how there is a specific epoch in which a universality that is formally valid for all epochs appears as such—for example, the universality of labor only appears, or comes to exist, in capitalist reality. Finally, from Marx to Adorno, there is always a set of propositions which are presented as trans-historical universals. In his 1859 “Preface to the Critique of Political Economy,” Marx summarizes “the guiding principle of my studies”: “In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production.”

These lines are clearly meant as trans-historical social-ontological universals. When, in his Negative Dialectics, Adorno talks about the “priority of the objective,” when he asserts the non-identical, and so on, such statements are definitely meant to be taken as universal ontological principles whose truth is not limited to specific historical conditions.

Next there is another properly Marxist aspect: not only the historical mediation of universal philosophical categories, but the “practical” status of philosophy itself. As Althusser put it in his Lenin and Philosophy, philosophy is “class struggle in theory,” by definition it involves taking sides, a practical engagement. The young Lukács said the same thing in a different way when he emphasized that historical materialism is not a new world-view, but a practical engaged stance. Osborne’s reproach is that this dimension is lost when I define materialism in formal opposition to the idealist assertion of the One, as the assertion of abyssal multiplicity against the background of the Void, but within the same
contemplative world-view. But are things as clear as this? My reading of Hegel is historically located or mediated in a very specific way: Hegel is to be repeated today because his and our epochs are both epochs of passage from the Old to the New. A certain epoch is coming to an end (for Hegel premodern society, for us capitalism), but the failure of the Marxist revolutions makes it clear that we can no longer rely on the eschatology of the New-to-come—the future is open.

From the standpoint of emancipatory struggle, it is thus crucial to take into account how, in the process of the actualization of a Notion, the Notion itself changes (into its opposite). And the purer this Notion is, the more brutal the reversal. This is why Marx is “too (pseudo-)Hegelian,” he really counts on the “synthesis” of communism as the overcoming of all history hitherto. At a general formal level, let us imagine a dialectical process which points towards its future resolution—the exemplary case would be Marx’s vision of history in the Grundrisse, where the progress goes from substance to alienated subjectivity, i.e., subjectivity separated from the objective conditions of its labor. This development reaches its apogee in capitalism, in the figure of proletariat as substanceless subjectivity; however, this point of extreme alienation is in itself already a resolution, for it opens up the perspective of its own overcoming, of the collective subjectivity reappropriating its objective conditions—this time not by being substantially immersed in them, but by asserting itself as the subject of the entire process. From a strict Hegelian standpoint, a teleological process like this will always go wrong, and the intended goal will turn into its opposite (as confirmed by the reversal of revolutionary emancipation into Stalinist nightmare). The standard Marxist counter-argument here would have to be that such a reversal is precisely the basic feature of an “alienated” history in which individuals are the playthings of an impenetrable substantial process. For Hegel, however, the self-transformation of the goal during the process of its actualization is not an effect of the “alienated” character of a substantial process in which subjects are caught up—on the contrary, the idea that the process is dominated by a substantial big Other is in itself an ideological illusion. The Hegelian matrix of the dialectical process is thus that one must first fail in reaching the goal, as the intended reconciliation turns into its opposite, and only then, in a second moment, will the true reconciliation come, when one recognizes this failure itself as the form of success.

In this regard, where are we today? Radical historical self-reflection (a philosophy has to account for its own possibility, for how it fits into its own historical constellation) remains a necessity—as Foucault put it, every thought, even a reflection on the ancient past (like his own analysis of Ancient Greek ethics) is ultimately an “ontology of the present.” However, our self-reflection can no longer be that of the revolutionary Marxism exemplified in Lukács’s History and Class Consciousness (the practical self-awareness of the engaged revolutionary subject). Our moment is more of a Hegelian one: not the moment of highest tension when the teleological (re)solution seems near, but the moment after, when the (re)solution is accomplished, but misses its goal and turns into nightmare. At this moment, the Hegelian problem is that of how to remain faithful to the original goal of the (re)solution and refuse to revert to a conservative position, how to discern the (re)solution in and through the very failure of the first attempt to actualize it. Hegel, of course, refers to the French Revolution, with its attempt to realize freedom that ended in revolutionary Terror, but his entire effort goes into demonstrating how, through this very failure, a new order emerged in which the revolutionary ideals became actuality. Today, we find ourselves in a strictly homologous Hegelian moment: how to actualize the communist project after the failure of its first attempt at realization in the twentieth century? What this impenetrability of the
future—this impossibility of the agent’s taking into account the consequences of its own act—implies is that, from the Hegelian standpoint, a revolution also has to be repeated: for immanent conceptual reasons, its first strike has to end in fiasco, the outcome must turn out to be the opposite of what was intended, but this fiasco is necessary since it creates the conditions for its overcoming.

Every historical situation harbors its own unique utopian perspective, an immanent vision of what is wrong with it, an ideal representation of how, with the necessary changes, the situation could be rendered much better. When the desire for radical social change emerges, it is thus logical that it should first endeavor to actualize this immanent utopian vision—which is why it has to end in catastrophe. It is here that we can also discern Marx’s fundamental mistake: he saw how capitalism had unleashed the breathtaking dynamic of self-enhancing productivity; on the other hand, he also clearly perceived how this dynamic is propelled by its own inner obstacle or antagonism—the ultimate limit of capitalism (of self-propelling productivity) is Capital itself; the very development and revolutionizing of its own material conditions, the mad dance of its unconditional spiral of productivity, is ultimately nothing but a desperate attempt to escape its own debilitating inherent contradiction. Marx’s mistake was to conclude that a new, higher social order (communism) was possible, an order that would not only maintain but would raise to an even higher degree the potential of the dynamic of productivity which, in capitalism, on account of its inherent contradiction, is again and again thwarted by socially destructive economic crises. In short, what Marx overlooked was that the inherent antagonism as the “condition of impossibility” of the full deployment of the productive forces is simultaneously its “condition of possibility”: if we abolish the obstacle, the inherent contradiction of capitalism, then far from fully unleashing the drive to productivity, we lose precisely this dynamic that seemed to be generated and simultaneously thwarted by capitalism. If we remove the obstacle, the very potential thwarted by the obstacle dissipates (herein would reside a possible Lacanian critique of Marx, focusing on the ambiguous overlap between surplus-value and surplus-enjoyment).

The critics of communism were thus in a sense right when they claimed that Marxian communism is an impossible fantasy. What they did not perceive is that Marxian communism, this notion of a society of unleashed productivity outside the frame of Capital, was a fantasy inherent to capitalism itself, a strictly ideological fantasy of maintaining the thrust of productivity while removing the “obstacles” and antagonisms that are—as the sad experience of “really existing capitalism” demonstrates—the only possible framework for the effective material existence of a society of permanent self-enhancing productivity. This is why a revolution has to be repeated: only the experience of catastrophe can make the revolutionary agent aware of the fateful limitation of the first attempt. Marx, especially in his youthful texts, provides the basic formula of the illusion on which this fatal limitation is based in a series of implicit “instead of” theses which begin with the alleged “normal” state of things, and then go on to describe the alienated inversion of this “normal” state. Here is a long representative passage from his Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844:

So much does the labor’s realization appear as loss of realization that the worker loses realization to the point of starving to death ... So much does the appropriation of the object appear as estrangement that the more objects the worker produces the less he can possess and the more he falls under the sway of his product, capital.
All these consequences are implied in the statement that the worker is related to the product of labor as to an alien object. For on this premise it is clear that the more the worker spends himself, the more powerful becomes the alien world of objects which he creates over and against himself, the poorer he himself—his inner world—becomes, the less belongs to him as his own. It is the same in religion. The more man puts into God, the less he retains in himself. The worker puts his life into the object; but now his life no longer belongs to him but to the object. Hence, the greater this activity, the more the worker lacks objects. Whatever the product of his labor is, he is not. Therefore, the greater this product, the less is he himself ...

(According to the economic laws the estrangement of the worker in his object is expressed thus: the more the worker produces, the less he has to consume; the more value he creates, the more valueless, the more unworthy he becomes; the better formed his product, the more deformed becomes the worker; the more civilized his object, the more barbarous becomes the worker; the more powerful labor becomes, the more powerless becomes the worker; the more ingenious labor becomes, the less ingenious becomes the worker and the more he becomes nature’s slave.) ...

As a result, therefore, man (the worker) only feels himself freely active in his animal functions—eating, drinking, procreating, or at most in his dwelling and in dressing-up, etc.; and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal. What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal.42

It would be easy to rephrase this passage in explicit “instead of” terms: instead of being the realization of the worker, labor appears as the loss of his realization; instead of appearing as what it is, the appropriation of the object through labor appears as its estrangement; instead of possessing what he produces, the more the worker produces the less he possesses; instead of civilized himself through producing civilized objects, the more civilized his object, the more barbarous the worker becomes; and so on and so forth. Although the mature Marx, returning to Hegel to articulate his critique of political economy, generally leaves this rhetorical figure behind, it returns from time to time, as in the following passage from Capital:

This inversion (Verkehrung) by which the sensibly-concrete counts only as the form of appearance of the abstractly general and not, on the contrary, the abstractly general as property of the concrete, characterizes the expression of value. At the same time, it makes understanding it difficult. If I say: Roman Law and German Law are both laws, that is obvious. But if I say: Law (Das Recht), this abstraction (Abstraktum), realizes itself in Roman Law and in German Law, in these concrete laws, the interconnection becomes mystical.43

In this case, however, we should be careful: Marx is not simply criticizing the “inversion” that characterizes Hegelian idealism (in the style of his youthful writings, especially The German Ideology)—his point is not that, while “effectively” Roman Law and German Law are two kinds of law, in idealist dialectics the Law itself is the active agent—the subject of the entire process—which “realizes itself” in Roman Law and German Law. Rather, Marx’s thesis is that this “inversion” characterizes capitalist social reality itself. But the crucial point lies elsewhere: both positions—the alienated inversion as well as the presupposed “normal” state of things—belong to the space of ideological mystification. That is to say,
the “normal” character of the state of things in which Roman Law and German Law are both laws (or in which the worker becomes more powerful the more powerful his labor becomes, or more civilized the more civilized his object becomes, etc.) is effectively the everyday form of appearance of the alienated society, the “normal” form of appearance of its speculative truth. The desire to fully actualize this “normal” state is therefore ideology at its purest and cannot but end in catastrophe.44 In order to see this, we have to draw another key distinction: between the “alienated” situation in which we, as living subjects, are under the control of a virtual Monster/Master (Capital), and a more elementary “alienated” situation in which, to put it in a somewhat simplified way, no one is in control: not only us, but the “objective” process itself is also “decentered,” inconsistent—or, to repeat Hegel’s formula, the secrets of the Egyptians are also secrets for the Egyptians themselves.

Of what help can Hegel be here? There is definitely more than meets the eye in his famous dismissal of the “desire to teach the world what it ought to be” from the Preface to his Philosophy of Right:

For such a purpose philosophy at least always comes too late. Philosophy, as the thought of the world, does not appear until reality has completed its formative process, and made itself ready ... When philosophy paints its grey in grey, one form of life has become old, and by means of grey it cannot be rejuvenated, but only known. The owl of Minerva takes its flight only when the shades of night are gathering.45

As Pippin notes, if Hegel is minimally consistent, this has to apply also to the notion of the State deployed in his own Philosophy of Right: the fact that Hegel was able to deploy this concept means that “the shades of night are gathering” on what readers of Hegel usually take as a normative description of a model rational state. But does this mean that there are no signs from the future in Hegel, no hints about looming prospects? Perhaps we should apply to Hegel the approach advocated by Leo Strauss in his famous Persecution and the Art of Writing (1952). Relying on Strauss in his reading of Spinoza, Jean-Claude Milner employs the notion of “brachylogia,” referring to formulations of excessive brevity, with words omitted, etc. In such cases, the expression to be decoded has to be read as a fragment, an incomplete phrase whose missing part is the crucial one, although cannot be pronounced publicly—recall Agatha Christie’s title By the Pricking of my Thumbs, which assumes that an educated reader will recognize it as a fragment of a two-liner from Shakespeare’s Macbeth: “By the pricking of my thumbs / Something wicked this way comes.” Milner decodes in this way Spinoza’s motto “caute” (I proceed with caution, discreetly, prudently) as part of the old Latin formula “si non caste, tamen caute” (“if you cannot be chaste, at least be discreet”), originally a piece of eleventh-century advice to monks and priests on how to act under the conditions of the newly imposed celibacy.46 The critical edge here is intentional and well deserved since, as Milner points out: “In the same way that, in another time, writing on history was reduced to eulogies to Rome, today it seems that, in certain countries, philosophy reduces itself to a perpetual eulogy to Spinoza. I do not know anything that would have been more infantile.”47

A variation on the same Straussian procedure is to read two fragments which appear at different places in a work together, as if they were parts of a single sentence. For example, Wagner’s musical motif of “renunciation” is first heard in Scene 1 of Das Rheingold, when, answering Alberich’s query, Woglinde discloses that “nur wer der Minne Macht versagt” (“only the one who renounces the power of love”)
can take possession of the gold; its next most noticeable appearance occurs towards the end of Act 1 of Walkure, at the moment of the most triumphant assertion of love between Sieglinde and Siegmund—just prior to his pulling the sword out of the tree trunk, Siegmund sings it to the words: “Heiligster Minne hoechste Not” (“holiest love’s highest need”). How are we to read these two occurrences together? What if one treats them as two fragments of a complete sentence that has been distorted by “dreamwork,” that is, rendered unreadable by being split in two? The solution is then to reconstitute the complete proposition: “Love’s highest need is to renounce its own power.” This is what Lacan calls “symbolic castration”: if one is to remain faithful to one’s love, then one should not make it the direct focus of one’s life, one must renounce its centrality. And what if we approach Hegel in this way? Let us begin with his account of the “right of distress [Notrecht]”:48

The particularity of the interests of the natural will, taken in their entirety as a single whole, is personal existence or life. In extreme danger and in conflict with the rightful property of someone else, this life may claim (as a right, not a mercy) a right of distress [Notrecht], because in such a situation there is on the one hand an infinite injury to a man’s existence and the consequent loss of rights altogether, and on the other hand only an injury to a single restricted embodiment of freedom, and this implies a recognition both of right as such and also of the injured man’s capacity for rights, because the injury affects only this property of his.

Remark: The right of distress is the basis of beneficium competentiae whereby a debtor is allowed to retain of his tools, farming implements, clothes, or, in short, of his resources, i.e. of his creditor’s property, so much as is regarded as indispensable if he is to continue to support life—to support it, of course, on his own social level.

Addition: Life as the sum of ends has a right against abstract right. If for example it is only by stealing bread that the wolf can be kept from the door, the action is of course an encroachment on someone’s property, but it would be wrong to treat this action as an ordinary theft. To refuse to allow a man in jeopardy of his life to take such steps for self-preservation would be to stigmatize him as without rights, and since he would be deprived of his life, his freedom would be annulled altogether …

This distress reveals the finitude and therefore the contingency of both right and welfare of right as the abstract embodiment of freedom without embodying the particular person, and of welfare as the sphere of the particular will without the universality of right.49

Hegel does not talk here about humanitarian considerations which should temper our legalistic zeal (if an impoverished father steals bread to feed his starving child, we should show mercy and understanding even though he broke the law …). The partisans of such an approach, which limits its zeal to combating suffering while leaving intact the economico-legal edifice within which that suffering takes place, “only demonstrate that, for all their bloodthirsty, mock-humanist yelping, they regard the social conditions in which the bourgeoisie is dominant as the final product, the non plus ultra of history”50—Marx’s old complaint which applies perfectly to contemporary humanitarians such as Bill Gates. What Hegel is referring to is a basic legal right, a right which is as a right superior to other particular legal rights. In other words, we are dealing not simply with a conflict between the demands of life and the constraints of the legal system of rights, but with a right (to life) that overcomes all formal rights, that is, with a
conflict inherent to the sphere of rights, a conflict which is unavoidable and necessary insofar as it serves as an indication of the finitude, inconsistency, and “abstract” character of the system of legal rights as such. “To refuse to allow a man in jeopardy of his life to take such steps for self-preservation [like stealing the food necessary for his survival] would be to stigmatize him as without rights”—so, again, the point is not that the punishment for justified stealing would deprive the subject of his life, but that it would exclude him from the domain of rights, that it would reduce him to bare life outside of the domain of law or the legal order. In other words, this refusal deprives the subject of his very right to have rights. Furthermore, the quoted Remark applies this logic to the situation of a debtor, claiming that he should be allowed to retain of his resources as much as is indispensable for him to continue with his life not just at the level of bare survival, but “on his own social level”—a claim that is today highly relevant to the situation of the impoverished majority in indebted states like Greece.

Here comes the “brachylogical” move: Hegel, of course, does not do this explicitly, but—and it does not matter whether we follow his secret intention here or not—what if we were to read this right of distress together with Hegel’s description of the “rabble” as a group or class whose exclusion from the domain of social recognition is systematic? “Against nature man can claim no right, but once society is established, poverty immediately takes the form of a wrong done to one class by another.”51 In such a situation, in which a whole class of people is systematically pushed beneath the level of dignified survival, to refuse to allow them to take “steps for self-preservation” (which, in this case, can only mean open rebellion against the established legal order) is to stigmatize them as without rights. Are we then not justified in universalizing this “right of distress,” extending it to an entire social class and its acts against the property of another class? Although Hegel does not directly address this question, a positive answer imposes itself if, in a Straussian way, we reconstruct Hegel’s secret syllogism:

First premise: an individual’s “right of distress” to violate the law when his or her life is in danger or his or her normal survival is not possible.

Second premise: there is, in a modern society, a whole class of people, systematically created by the existing social order, whose normal survival is not possible.

Conclusion: so that class, even more so than an individual, should possess the “right of distress” and rebel against the existing legal order.

In short, what we get with such a reading of Hegel is nothing less than a Maoist Hegel, a Hegel who tells us what Mao told the young at the outset of the Cultural Revolution: “It is right to rebel!” Therein lies the lesson of a true Master: a true Master is not an agent of discipline and prohibition, his message is not “You cannot!”, and not “You have to ...!”, but a releasing “You can!”—what? Do the impossible, namely what appears impossible within the coordinates of the existing constellation—and today, this means something very precise: you can think beyond capitalism and liberal democracy as the ultimate framework of our lives. A Master is a vanishing mediator who gives you back to yourself, who delivers you to the abyss of your freedom: when we listen to a true leader, we discover what we want (or, rather, what we always already wanted without knowing it). A Master is needed because we cannot accede to our freedom directly—to gain this access we have to be pushed from outside, since our “natural state” is one of inert hedonism, of what Badiou calls the “human animal.” The underlying
paradox here is that the more we live as “free individuals with no Master,” the more we are effectively non-free, caught within the existing frame of possibilities—we have to be impelled or disturbed into freedom by a Master.

This paradox thoroughly pervades the form of subjectivity that characterizes “permissive” liberal society. Since permissiveness and free choice are elevated into a supreme value, social control and domination can no longer appear as infringing on subjects’ freedom: they have to appear as (and be sustained by) individuals experiencing themselves as free. There is a multitude of forms of this appearing of unfreedom in the guise of its opposite: in being deprived of universal healthcare, we are told that we are being given a new freedom of choice (to choose our healthcare provider); when we can no longer rely on long-term employment and are compelled to search for a new precarious job every couple of years, we are told that we are being given the opportunity to reinvent ourselves and discover our creative potential; when we have to pay for the education of our children, we are told that we are now able to become “entrepreneurs of the self,” acting like a capitalist freely choosing how to invest the resources he possesses (or has borrowed). In education, health, travel ... we are constantly bombarded by imposed “free choices”: forced to make decisions for which we are mostly not qualified (or do not possess enough information), we increasingly experience our freedom as a burden that causes unbearable anxiety. Unable to break out of this vicious cycle alone, as isolated individuals—since the more we act freely the more we become enslaved by the system—we need to be “awakened” from this “dogmatic slumber” of fake freedom from outside, by the push of a Master figure.

There was a trace of this authentic Master’s call even in Obama’s slogan from his first presidential campaign: “Yes, we can!” A new possibility was thereby opened up—but, one might object, did not Hitler also do something formally similar? Was his message to the German people not “Yes, we can ...”—kill the Jews, crush democracy, attack other nations? A closer analysis immediately brings out the difference: far from being an authentic Master, Hitler was a populist demagogue who carefully played upon people’s obscure desires. It may seem that in doing so he was following Steve Jobs’ infamous motto: “A lot of times, people don’t know what they want until you show it to them.” However, in spite of all there is to criticize about Jobs, in his own understanding of the motto he was close to the authentic Master position. When asked how much research Apple undertakes into what its customers want, he snapped back: “None. It’s not the customers’ job to know what they want ... we figure out what we want.”52 Note the surprising turn of this argumentation: after denying that customers know what they want, Jobs does not go on with the expected direct reversal “it is our task (the task of creative capitalists) to figure out what they want and then ‘show it to them’ on the market.” Instead, he says: “we figure out what we want”—this is how a true Master works: he does not try to guess what people want; he simply obeys his own desire and leaves it up to others to decide if they want to follow him. In other words, his power stems from his fidelity to his desire, from refusing to compromise on it. Therein lies the difference between a true Master and, say, the fascist or Stalinist leader who pretends to know (better than the people themselves) what people really want (what is really good for them), and is then ready to enforce it on them even against their will.

In Udi Aloni’s documentary Art/Violence, a tribute to Juliano MerKhamis, the founder of the Jenin Freedom Theatre, a young Palestinian actress describes what Juliano meant to her and her colleagues: he gave them their freedom, he made them aware of what they could do, he opened up a new
possibility for them, homeless kids from a refugee camp. This is the role of an authentic Master: when we are afraid of something (and fear of death is the ultimate fear that makes us slaves), a true friend will say something like: “Don’t be afraid, look, I’ll do it, this thing you’re so afraid of, and I’ll do it for free—not because I have to, but out of my love for you; I’m not afraid!” In doing so he sets us free, demonstrating in actu that it can be done, and that we can do it too, that we are not slaves. Let us recall, from Ayn Rand’s The Fountainhead, the description of the impact Howard Roark makes on the audience in the courtroom where he stands on trial:

Roark stood before them as each man stands in the innocence of his own mind. But Roark stood like that before a hostile crowd—and they knew suddenly that no hatred was possible to him. For the flash of an instant, they grasped the manner of his consciousness. Each asked himself: do I need anyone’s approval?—does it matter?—am I tied?—And for that instant, each man was free—free enough to feel benevolence for every other man in the room. It was only a moment; the moment of silence when Roark was about to speak.53

This is the way Christ brings freedom: confronting him, we become aware of our own freedom. Such a Master is not a subject supposed to know, but also not simply a subject supposed to be free—in short, he is not a subject of transference, which is why it is also wrong to see his position as equivalent to that of the analyst in the analytic social link. The obvious question to be raised here is: why does a subject need a Master to assume his or her freedom? Does not such an assumption amount to a kind of pragmatic paradox wherein the very form (a Master gives me freedom) undermines the content (my freedom)? Should we not rather follow the well-known motto of all emancipatory movements: freedom cannot be handed down to us by a benevolent master but has to be won through hard struggle?

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1V. I. Lenin, Materialism and Empirio-Criticism, available at marxists.org.


3A decade or so ago, the Catholic Church condemned a woman who had a child in her early sixties for giving birth in an unnatural way, thereby elevating into an inviolable norm a fact of our biological nature.


5We of course ignore here the fact that, on a closer look, an irreducible gap separates the dialectical “positing of presuppositions” from the scientific program of self-production.


7See Jean-Pierre Dupuy’s contribution to Le Débat, No. 129 (March–April 2004), quoted in Besnier, Demain les posthumains, p. 195.
8. We can think of Auschwitz as an assemblage—in which the agents were not just the Nazi executioners but also the Jews, the complex network of trains, the gas ovens, the logistics of feeding the prisoners, separating and distributing clothes, extracting the gold teeth, collecting the hair and ashes and so on.


10. Ibid., p. 117.

11. Darwin could be described precisely as “a Newton for a blade of grass”: the goal of his theory of evolution is to account for the phenomena of life in a non-teleological way. Although the notions he uses (“fitness,” “selection,” “struggle for existence,” “survival of the fittest”) have a plainly purposive character, natural selection provides design without the need for an intelligent designer: there is no inherent direction or teleology to evolution, all teleology in nature is an illusion.


17. Ibid., p. 31.


19. Ibid., pp. 46, 48, 53.

20. Ibid., p. 51.

21. Ibid., p. 52.

22. Note the radical implication of Pippin’s position: the subject is constitutively decentered in Lacan’s sense, its innermost status as a free agent is decided outside itself, in social recognition, and retroactively, with a delay, or after the (f)act.

23. Ibid., p. 52.

25Apropos Sweden in the 1960s, perhaps Pippin should read a Mankell or Larson detective novel to get an idea of what Sweden is like today, and how far it has been counter-reformed since the mythical ’60s.

26Hegel, Philosophy of Right, Third Part: Ethical Life, iii: The State, Remark to § 343, available at marxists.org.

27It is in this way that we should read Hegel’s last published text, a ferocious polemic against the British Reform Bill which moved in the direction of universal voting rights, by-passing the mediating role of corporate structures: Hegel reacted in such a panic because the Bill clearly signaled the outdated character of his idea of the state.

28Ibid., § 323.

29Ibid., Remark to § 279. For a more detailed reading of Hegel’s concept of the Monarch, see Interlude 3 in Slavoj Žižek, Less Than Nothing, London: Verso 2012.

30Ibid., Remark to § 279.


33Does this not hold even for the cognitivist view of subjectivity? Subjective self-awareness emerges late, as a medium registering what goes on in the organism and its environs. But once it is there, it tends to assert itself as the active agent regulating and coordinating the subject’s entire action and interaction with its others.


35Ibid.


38Ibid., p. 695.


41. Mladen Dolar (in private conversation) raised a simple question here: did philosophers before Marx really only interpret the world instead of changing it? Did they not all, starting with Plato, propose some project for radically changing the world? Recall Plato’s trip to Syracuse, where he tried to convince the local tyrant Dionysius to implement his reforms. It is perhaps only Hegel who was a truly contemplative philosopher, renouncing all projects for a future and limiting his thought to painting “grey on grey” in the present—and the paradox is that it was precisely Hegel’s thought which, for that very reason, grounded the most radical attempts to change the world.


44. One form this catastrophic reversal can take is the unexpected practical interpretation of the communist ideal which turns its realization into a nightmare. During the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s, Chinese communists decided that China should by-pass socialism and directly embrace communism. They referred to Marx’s famous communist formula: “From everyone according to his abilities, to everyone according to his needs!” The catch was the reading given to this slogan to legitimize the total militarization of life in the agricultural communes: the Party cadre in charge of a commune knows what each farmer is capable of, so he sets the plan and specifies individuals’ obligations according to their abilities; he also knows what each farmer really needs for survival and so organizes the distribution of food and other provisions accordingly. The condition of militarized extreme poverty thereby becomes the actualization of communism. It is not sufficient to claim that such a reading falsifies a noble idea—we should rather indicate how it lies dormant in it as a possibility.


47. Ibid., p. 9.


51. Hegel, Philosophy of Right, Third Part: Ethical Life, § 244, Addition.

52. In India, thousands of impoverished intellectual workers are employed in what are ironically called “like-farms”: they are (miserably) paid to spend the whole day in front of a computer screen endlessly clicking “like” buttons on pages requesting visitors to “like” or “dislike” a specific product. In this way, a
product can be made to appear very popular and thereby seduce ignorant prospective customers into buying it (or at least checking it out), following the logic of “there must be something in it if so many customers are so satisfied!” So much for the reliability of customer reactions ... (I owe this information to Saroj Giri, New Delhi).