Series Foreword

A short circuit occurs when there is a faulty connection in the network—faulty, of course, from the standpoint of the network's smooth functioning. Is not the shock of short-circuiting, therefore, one of the best metaphors for a critical reading? Is not one of the most effective critical procedures to cross wires that do not usually touch: to take a major classic (text, author, notion), and read it in a short-circuiting way, through the lens of a "minor" author, text, or conceptual apparatus ("minor" should be understood here in Deleuze's sense: not "of lesser quality," but marginalized, disavowed by the hegemonic ideology, or dealing with a "lower," less dignified topic)? If the minor reference is well chosen, such a procedure can lead to insights which completely shatter and undermine our common perceptions. This is what Marx, among others, did with philosophy and religion (short-circuiting philosophical speculation through the lens of political economy, that is to say, economic speculation); this is what Freud and Nietzsche did with morality (short-circuiting the highest ethical notions through the lens of the unconscious libidinal economy). What such a reading achieves is not a simple "desublimation," a reduction of the higher intellectual content to its lower economic or libidinal cause; the aim of such an approach is, rather, the inherent decentering of the interpreted text,

which brings to light its "unthought," its disavowed presuppositions and consequences.

And this is what "Short Circuits" wants to do, again and again. The underlying premise of the series is that Lacanian psychoanalysis is a privileged instrument of such an approach, whose purpose is to illuminate a standard text or ideological formation, making it readable in a totally new way—the long history of Lacanian interventions in philosophy, religion, the arts (from the visual arts to the cinema, music, and literature), ideology, and politics justifies this premise. This, then, is not a new series of books on psychoanalysis, but a series of "connections in the Freudian field"—of short Lacanian interventions in art, philosophy, theology, and ideology.

"Short Circuits" intends to revive a practice of reading which confronts a classic text, author, or notion with its own hidden presuppositions, and thus reveals its disavowed truth. The basic criterion for the texts that will be published is that they effectuate such a theoretical short circuit. After reading a book in this series, the reader should not simply have learned something new: the point is, rather, to make him or her aware of another—disturbing—side of something he or she knew all the time.

Slavoj Žižek

THE PUPPET AND THE DWARF

INTRODUCTION

THE PUPPET CALLED THEOLOGY

Today, when the historical materialist analysis is receding, practiced as it were under cover, rarely called by its proper name, while the theological dimension is given a new lease on life in the guise of the "postsecular" Messianic turn of deconstruction, the time has come to reverse Walter Benjamin's first thesis on the philosophy of history: "The puppet called 'theology' is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the service of historical materialism, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight."

One possible definition of modernity is: the social order in which religion is no longer fully integrated into and identified with a particular cultural life-form, but acquires autonomy, so that it can survive as the same religion in different cultures. This extraction enables religion to globalize itself (there are Christians, Muslims, and Buddhists everywhere today); on the other hand, the price to be paid is that religion is reduced to a secondary epiphenomenon with regard to the secular functioning of the social totality. In this new global order, religion has two possible roles: *therapeutic* or *critical*. It either helps individuals to function better in the existing order, or it tries to assert itself as a critical agency articulating what is wrong with this order as such, a space for the voices of discontent—in this second case, religion as such tends toward assuming the role of a heresy. The contours of this deadlock were outlined by Hegel; sometimes, we find in his work something I am tempted to call a "downward synthesis": after the two opposed positions, the third one, the *Aufhebung* of the two, is not a higher synthesis bringing together what is worth maintaining in the other two, but a kind of negative synthesis, the lowest point. Here are three outstanding examples:

- In the "logic of judgment," the first triad of the "judgment of existence" (positive-negative-infinite judgment) culminates in the "infinite judgment": God is not red, a rose is not an elephant, understanding is not a table—these judgments are, as Hegel puts it, "accurate or true, as one calls them, but nonsensical and in bad taste."[1]
- Twice in *Phenomenology of Spirit*. First apropos of phrenology, in which the whole dialectic of the "observing Reason" culminates in the infinite judgment "the Spirit is a bone."[2]

- Then, at the end of the chapter on Reason, in the passage to Spirit as history, where we have the triad of the "law-giving Reason," the "law-testing Reason," and the Reason that accepts its impenetrable foundation. It is only by accepting the positivity of the law as its ultimate given background that we pass to history proper. The passage to history proper occurs when we assume the failure of Reason reflectively to ground the laws that regulate the life of a people.[3]

And it seems that the three modes of religion with which *Glauben und Wissen* and other early theological writings deal[4] form the same triad:

- The "*people's religion* [*Volksreligion*]"—in Ancient Greece, religion was intrinsically bound up with a particular people, its life and customs. It required no special reflexive act of faith: it was simply accepted.
- The "*positive religion*"—imposed dogmas, rituals, rules, to be accepted because they are prescribed by an earthly and/or divine authority (Judaism, Catholicism).
- The "*religion of Reason*"—what survives of religion when positive religion is submitted to the rational critique of Enlightenment. There are two modes: Reason or Heart—either the Kantian dutiful moralist, or the religion of pure interior feeling (Jacobi, etc.). Both dismiss the positive religion (rituals, dogmas) as superficial historically conditioned ballast. Crucial here is the inherent reversal of Kant into Jacobi, of universalist moralism into pure irrational contingence of feeling—that is to say, this immediate coincidence of opposites, this direct reversal of reason into irrational belief.

Again, the passage from one moment to the next is clear: first, (the people's) religion loses its organic *Naturwüchsigkeit*, it changes into a set of "alienated"—externally imposed and contingent—rules; then, logically, the authority of these rules is to be questioned by our Reason. . . . What, however, would constitute the step further that would break the deadlock of universalist moralism and abstract feeling converting directly into each other? There is no clear solution. Why do we need religion at all in our modern times? The standard answer is: rational philosophy or science is esoteric, confined to a small circle; it cannot replace religion in its function of capturing the imagination of the masses, and thus serving the purposes of moral and political order. But this solution is problematic in Hegel's own terms: the problem is that, in the modern times of Reason, religion can no longer fulfill this function of the organic binding force of social substance—today, religion has irretrievably lost this power not only for scientists and philosophers, but also for the wider circle of "ordinary" people. In his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Hegel claims that in the modern age, as much as we admire art, we no longer bend the knee before it—and the same holds for religion.

Today, we live (in) the tension designated by Hegel even more than people did in Hegel's own times. When Hegel wrote: "It is a modern folly to alter a corrupt ethical system, its constitution and legislation, without changing the religion, to have a revolution without a reformation,"[5] he announced the necessity of what Mao called the "Cultural Revolution" as the condition of a successful social revolution. Is this not what we have today: (the technological) revolution without a fundamental "revolution of mores [*Revolution der Sitten*]"? The basic tension is not so much the tension of reason versus feeling, but, rather, the tension of knowledge versus the disavowed belief embodied in external ritual—the situation often described in the terms of cynical reason whose formula, the reverse of Marx's, was proposed decades ago by Peter Sloterdijk: "I know what I am doing; nonetheless, I am doing it. . . ." This formula, however, is not as unambiguous as it may appear—it should be supplemented with: ". . . because I don't know what I believe."

In our politically correct times, it is always advisable to start with the set of unwritten prohibitions that define the positions one is allowed to adopt. The first thing to note with regard to religious matters is that reference to "deep spirituality" is in again: direct materialism is out; one is, rather, enjoined to harbor openness toward a radical Otherness beyond the ontotheological God. Consequently, when, today, one directly asks an intellectual: "OK, let's cut the crap and get down to basics: do you believe in some form of the divine or not?," the first answer is an embarrassed withdrawal, as if the question is too intimate, too probing; this withdrawal is then usually explained in more "theoretical" terms: "That is the wrong question

to ask! It is not simply a matter of believing or not, but, rather, a matter of certain radical experience, of the ability to open oneself to a certain unheard-of dimension, of the way our openness to radical Otherness allows us to adopt a specific ethical stance, to experience a shattering form of enjoyment. . . ." What we are getting today is a kind of "suspended" belief, a belief that can thrive only as not fully (publicly) admitted, as a private obscene secret. Against this attitude, one should insist even more emphatically that the "vulgar" question "Do you really believe or not?" matters—more than ever, perhaps. My claim here is not merely that I am a materialist through and through, and that the subversive kernel of Christianity is accessible also to a materialist approach; my thesis is much stronger: this kernel is accessible *only* to a materialist approach—and vice versa: to become a true dialectical materialist, one should go through the Christian experience.[6]

Was there, however, at any time in the past, an era when people directly "really believed"? As Robert Pfaller demonstrated in *Illusionen der Anderen*,[7] the direct belief in a truth that is subjectively fully assumed ("Here I stand!") is a modern phenomenon, in contrast to traditional beliefs-through-distance, like politeness or rituals. Premodern societies did not believe directly, but through distance, and this explains, for instance, why Enlightenment critics misread "primitive" myths—they first took the notion that a tribe originated from a fish or a bird as a literal direct belief, then rejected it as stupid, "fetishist," naive. They thereby imposed their own notion of belief on the "primitivized" Other. (Is this not also the paradox of Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*? Newton's wife was not a naive ("innocent") believer in her husband's fidelity—she was well aware of his passionate love for Countess Olenska, she just politely ignored it, and acted as if she believed in his fidelity. . . .) Pfaller is right to emphasize how, today, we believe more than ever: the most skeptical attitude, that of deconstruction, relies on the figure of an Other who "really believes"; the postmodern need for the permanent use of the devices of ironic distantiation (quotation marks, etc.) betrays the underlying fear that, without these devices, belief would be direct and immediate—as if, if I were to say "I love you" instead of the ironic "As the poets would have put it, I love you," this would entail a directly assumed belief that I love you—that is, as if a distance is not already operative in the direct statement "I love you" . . .

And perhaps that is where we find the stake of today's reference to "culture," of "culture" emerging as the central life-world category. When it comes to religion, for example, we no longer "really believe" today, we just follow (some) religious rituals and mores as part of respect for the "lifestyle" of the community to which we belong (nonbelieving Jews obeying kosher rules "out of respect for tradition," etc.). "I don't really believe in it, it's just part of my culture" effectively seems to be the predominant mode of the disavowed/displaced belief characteristic of our times. What is a cultural lifestyle, if not the fact that, although we don't believe in Santa Claus, there is a Christmas tree in every house, and even in public places, every December? Perhaps, then, the "nonfundamentalist" notion of "culture" as distinguished from "real" religion, art, and so on, is in its very core the name for the field of disowned/impersonal beliefs—"culture" is the name for all those things we practice without really believing in them, without "taking them seriously." Is this not also why science is not part of this notion of culture—it is all too real? And is this also not why we dismiss fundamentalist believers as "barbarians," as anticultural, as a threat to culture—they dare to *take their beliefs seriously*? Today, we ultimately perceive as a threat to culture those who live their culture immediately, those who lack a distance toward it. Recall the outrage when, two years ago, the Taliban forces in Afghanistan destroyed the ancient Buddhist statues at Bamiyan: although none of us enlightened Westerners believe in the divinity of the Buddha, we were outraged because the Taliban Muslims did not show the appropriate respect for the "cultural heritage" of their own country and the entire world. Instead of believing through the other, like all people of culture, they really believed in their own religion, and thus had no great sensitivity toward the cultural value of the

monuments of other religions—to them, the Buddha statues were just fake idols, not "cultural treasures."

One commonplace about philosophers today is that their very analysis of the hypocrisy of the dominant system betrays their naivety: why are they still shocked to see people inconsistently violate their professed values when it suits their interests? Do they really expect people to be consistent and principled? Here one should defend authentic philosophers: what surprises them is the exact *opposite*—not that people do not "really believe," and act upon their professed principles, but that *people who profess their cynical distance and radical pragmatic opportunism secretly believe much more than they are willing to admit*, even if they transpose these beliefs onto (nonexistent) "others."

Within this framework of suspended belief, three so-called "postsecular" options are permitted: one is allowed either to praise the wealth of polytheistic premodern religions oppressed by the Judeo-Christian patriarchal legacy; or to stick to the uniqueness of the Jewish legacy, to its fidelity to the encounter with radical Otherness, in contrast to Christianity. Here, I would like to make myself absolutely clear: I do not think that the present vague spiritualism, the focus on the openness to Otherness and its unconditional Call, this mode in which Judaism has become almost the hegemonic ethico-spiritual attitude of today's intellectuals, is in itself the "natural" form of what one can designate, in traditional terms, as Jewish spirituality. I am almost tempted to claim that we are dealing here with something that is homologous to the Gnostic heresy of Christianity, and that the ultimate victim of this Pyrrhic "victory" of Judaism will be the most precious elements of Jewish spirituality itself, with their focus on a unique collective experience. Who today remembers the kibbutz, the greatest proof that Jews are not "by nature" financial middlemen?

In addition to these two options, the only Christian references permitted are the Gnostic or mystical traditions that had to be excluded and repressed in order for the hegemonic figure of Christianity to install itself. Christ himself is OK if we try to isolate the "original" Christ, "the Rabbi Jesus" not yet inscribed into the Christian tradition proper—Agnes Heller speaks ironically of the "resurrection of the Jewish Jesus": our task today is to resurrect the true Jesus from the mystifying Christian tradition of Jesus (as) Christ.[8] All this makes a positive reference to Saint Paul a very delicate issue: is he not the very symbol of the establishment of Christian orthodoxy? In the last decade, nonetheless, one small opening has appeared, a kind of exchange offered between the lines: one is allowed to praise Paul, if one reinscribes him back into the Jewish legacy—Paul as a radical Jew, an author of Jewish political theology. . . .

While I agree with this approach, I want to emphasize how, if it is taken seriously, its consequences are much more catastrophic than they may appear. When one reads Saint Paul's epistles, one cannot fail to notice how thoroughly and terribly *indifferent* he is toward Jesus as a living person (the Jesus who is not yet Christ, the pre-Easter Jesus, the Jesus of the Gospels)—Paul more or less totally ignores Jesus' particular acts, teachings, parables, all that Hegel later referred to as the mythical element of the fairytale narrative, of the mere prenotional representation [*Vorstellung*]; never in his writings does he engage in hermeneutics, in probing into the "deeper meaning" of this or that parable or act of Jesus. What matters to him is not Jesus as a historical figure, only the fact that he died on the Cross and rose from the dead—after confirming Jesus' death and resurrection, Paul goes on to his true Leninist business, that of organizing the new party called the Christian community. Paul as a Leninist: was not Paul, like Lenin, the great "institutionalizer," and, as such, reviled by the partisans of "original" Marxism-Christianity? Does not the Pauline temporality "already, but not yet" also designate Lenin's situation in between the two revolutions, between February and October 1917? Revolution is already behind us, the old regime is out, freedom is here—but the hard work still lies ahead.

In 1956, Lacan proposed a short and clear definition of the Holy Spirit: "The Holy Spirit is the entry of the signifier into the world. This is certainly what Freud brought us under the title of death

drive."[9] What Lacan means, at this moment of his thought, is that the Holy Spirit stands for the symbolic order as that which cancels (or, rather, suspends) the entire domain of "life"—lived experience, the libidinal flux, the wealth of emotions, or, to put it in Kant's terms, the "pathological." When we locate ourselves within the Holy Spirit, we are transubstantiated, we enter another life beyond the biological one. And is not this Pauline notion of life grounded in Paul's other distinctive feature? What enabled him to formulate the basic tenets of Christianity, to elevate Christianity from a Jewish sect into a universal religion (religion of universality), was the very fact that he was not part of Christ's "inner circle." One can imagine the inner circle of apostles reminiscing during their dinner conversations: "Do you remember how, at the Last Supper, Jesus asked me to pass the salt?" None of this applies to Paul: he is outside and, as such, symbolically substituting for (taking the place of) Judas himself among the apostles. In a way, Paul also "betrayed" Christ by not caring about his idiosyncrasies, by ruthlessly reducing him to the fundamentals, with no patience for his wisdom, miracles, and similar paraphernalia.

So yes, one should read Paul from within the Jewish tradition—since precisely such a reading brings home the true radicality of his break, the way he undermined the Jewish tradition from within. To use a well-known Kierkegaardian opposition: reading Saint Paul from within the Jewish tradition, as the one located in it, allows us to grasp "Christianity-in-becoming": not yet the established positive dogma, but the violent gesture of positing it, the "vanishing mediator" between Judaism and Christianity, something akin to Benjaminian law-constituting violence. In other words, what is effectively "repressed" with the established Christian doxa is not so much its Jewish roots, its indebtedness to Judaism, but, rather, *the break itself*, the true location of Christianity's rupture with Judaism. Paul did not simply pass from the Jewish position to another position; he did something with, within, and to the Jewish position itself—what?

CHAPTER 1

WHEN EAST MEETS WEST

A proper starting point would have been to ask the Schellingian question: what does the becoming-man of God in the figure of Christ, His descent from eternity to the temporal realm of our reality, mean for God Himself? What if that which appears to us, finite mortals, as God's *descent* toward us, is, from the standpoint of God Himself, an *ascent*? What if, as Schelling implied, eternity is less than temporality? What if eternity is a sterile, impotent, lifeless domain of pure potentialities, which, in order fully to actualize itself, has to pass through temporal existence? What if God's descent to man, far from being an act of grace toward humanity, is the only way for God to gain full actuality, and to liberate Himself from the suffocating constraints of Eternity? What if God actualizes Himself only through human recognition?[1]

We have to get rid of the old Platonic topos of love as Eros that gradually elevates itself from love for a particular individual, through love for the beauty of a human body in general and the love of the beautiful form as such, to love for the supreme Good beyond all forms: true love is precisely the opposite move of forsaking the promise of Eternity itself for an imperfect individual. (This lure of eternity can take many forms, from postmortal Fame to fulfilling one's social role.) What if the gesture of choosing temporal existence, of giving up eternal existence for the sake of love—from Christ to Siegmund in Act II of Wagner's *Die Walküre*, who prefers to remain a common mortal if his beloved Sieglinde cannot follow him to Valhalla, the eternal dwelling-place of dead heroes—is the highest ethical act of them all? The shattered Brünnhilde comments on this refusal: "So little do you value everlasting bliss? Is she everything to you, this poor woman who, tired and sorrowful, lies limp in your lap? Do you think nothing less glorious?" Ernst Bloch was right to observe that what is lacking in German history are more gestures like Siegmund's.

We usually claim that time is the ultimate prison ("no one can jump outside of his/her time"), and that the whole of philosophy and religion circulates around one aim: to break out of this prison-house of time into eternity. What, however, if, as Schelling implies,

eternity is the ultimate prison, a suffocating closure, and it is only the fall into time that introduces Opening into human experience? Is Time not the name for the ontological opening? The Event of "incarnation" is thus not so much the time when ordinary temporal reality touches Eternity, but, rather, the time when Eternity reaches into time. This same point has been made very clearly by intelligent conservatives like G. K. Chesterton (like Hitchcock, an English Catholic), who wrote, apropos of the fashionable claim about the "alleged spiritual identity of Buddhism and Christianity":

> Love desires personality; therefore love desires division. It is the instinct of Christianity to be glad that God has broken the universe into little pieces. . . . This is the intellectual abyss between Buddhism and Christianity; what for the Buddhist or Theosophist personality is the fall of man, for the Christian is the purpose of God, the whole point of his cosmic idea. The world-soul of the Theosophists asks man to love it only in order that man may throw himself into it. But the divine centre of Christianity actually threw man out of it in order that he might love it. . . . All modern philosophies are chains which connect and fetter; Christianity is a sword which separates and sets free. No other philosophy makes God actually rejoice in the separation of the universe into living souls.[2]

And Chesterton is fully aware that it is not enough for God to separate man from Himself so that mankind will love Him—this separation has to be reflected back into God Himself, so that God is abandoned by himself:

> When the world shook and the sun was wiped out of heaven, it was not at the crucifixion, but at the cry from the cross: the cry which confessed that God was forsaken of God. And now let the revolutionists choose a creed from all the creeds and a god from all the gods of the world, carefully weighing all the gods of inevitable recurrence and of unalterable power. They will not find another god who has himself been in revolt. Nay (the matter grows too difficult for human speech), but let the atheists themselves choose a god. They will find only one divinity who ever uttered their isolation; only one religion in which God seemed for an instant to be an atheist.[3]

Because of this overlapping between man's isolation from God and God's isolation from himself, Christianity is

> terribly revolutionary. That a good man may have his back to the wall is no more than we knew already; but that God could have His back to the wall is a boast for all insurgents for ever. Christianity is the only religion on earth that has felt that omnipotence made God incomplete. Christianity alone has felt that God, to be wholly God, must have been a rebel as well as a king.[4]

Chesterton is fully aware that we are thereby approaching "a matter more dark and awful than it is easy to discuss . . . a matter which the greatest saints and thinkers have justly feared to approach. But in that terrific tale of the Passion there is a distinct emotional suggestion that the author of all things (in some unthinkable way) went not only through agony, but through doubt."[5] In the standard form of atheism, God dies for men who stop believing in Him; in Christianity, God dies for Himself. In his "Father, why hast thou forsaken me?," Christ himself commits what is, for a Christian, the ultimate sin: he wavers in his Faith.

This "matter more dark and awful than it is easy to discuss" concerns what cannot but appear as the hidden perverse core of Christianity: if it is prohibited to eat from the Tree of Knowledge in Paradise, why did God put it there in the first place? Is it not that this was a part of His perverse strategy first to seduce Adam and Eve into the Fall, in order then to save them? That is to say: should one not apply Paul's insight into how the prohibitive law creates sin to this very first prohibition also? A similar obscure ambiguity surrounds the role of Judas in Christ's death: since his betrayal was necessary to his mission (to redeem humanity through his death on the Cross), did Christ not need it? Are his ominous words during the Last Supper not a secret injunction to Judas to betray him? "Judas, who betrayed him, said, 'Surely not I, Rabbi?' He replied, 'You have said so'" (Matthew 26:25). The rhetorical figure of Christ's reply is, of course, that of disavowed injunction: Judas is interpellated as the one who will hand Christ over to the authorities—not directly ("You are the

one who will betray me!"), but so that the responsibility is put onto the other. Is Judas not therefore the ultimate hero of the New Testament, the one who was ready to lose his soul and accept eternal damnation so that the divine plan could be accomplished?[6]

In all other religions, God demands that His followers remain faithful to Him—only Christ asked his followers to *betray* him in order to fulfill his mission. Here I am tempted to claim that the entire fate of Christianity, its innermost kernel, hinges on the possibility of interpreting this act in a nonperverse way. That is to say: the obvious reading that imposes itself is a perverse one—even as he lamented the forthcoming betrayal, Christ was, between the lines, giving the injunction to Judas to betray him, demanding of him the highest sacrifice—the sacrifice not only of his life, but also of his "second life," of his posthumous reputation. The problem, the dark ethical knot in this affair, is thus not Judas, but Christ himself: in order to fulfill his mission, was he obliged to have recourse to such obscure, arch-Stalinist manipulation? Or is it possible to read the relationship between Judas and Christ in a different way, outside this perverse economy?

In January 2002, a weird Freudian slip occurred in Lauderhill, Florida: a plaque, prepared to honor the actor James Earl Jones at a celebration of Martin Luther King, instead bore this inscription: "Thank you James Earl Ray for keeping the dream alive"—a reference to King's famous "I have a dream" speech. It is common knowledge that Ray was the man convicted of assassinating King in 1968. Of course, this was in all probability a rather elementary racist slip—however, there is a strange truth in it: Ray, in effect, contributed to keeping the King dream alive, on two different levels. First, part of the heroic larger-than-life image of Martin Luther King is his violent death: without this death, he would definitely not have become the symbol that he is now, with streets named after him and his birthday a national holiday. Even more concretely, one can argue that King died at exactly the right moment: in the weeks before his death, he moved toward a more radical anticapitalism, supporting strikes by black and white workers—had he moved further in this direction, he would definitely have become unacceptable as a member of the pantheon of American heroes.

Thus King's death follows the logic elaborated by Hegel apropos of Julius Caesar: Caesar-the-individual had to die in order for the universal notion to emerge. Nietzsche's notion of a "noble betrayal" modeled on Brutus remains the betrayal of the individual for the sake of the higher Idea (Caesar has to go in order to save the Republic), and, as such, it can be taken into account by the historical "cunning of reason" (the Caesar-name returned with a vengeance as a universal title, "caesar"). It seems that the same holds for Christ: betrayal was part of the plan, Christ ordered Judas to betray him in order to fulfill the divine plan; that is, Judas' act of betrayal was the highest sacrifice, the ultimate fidelity. However, the contrast between the death of Christ and that of Caesar is crucial: Caesar was first a name, and he had to die as a name (the contingent singular individual) in order to emerge as a universal concept-title (caesar); Christ was first, before his death, a universal concept ("Jesus the Christ-Messiah"), and, through his death, he emerged as the unique singular, "Jesus Christ." Here universality is *aufgehoben* in singularity, not the other way round.

So what about a more Kierkegaardian betrayal—not of the individual for the sake of the universality, but of the universality itself for the sake of the singular point of exception (the "religious suspension of the ethical")? Furthermore, what about "pure" betrayal, betrayal out of love, betrayal as the ultimate proof of love? And what about self-betrayal: since I am what I am through my others, the betrayal of the beloved other is the betrayal of myself. Is not such a betrayal part of every difficult ethical act of decision? One has to betray one's innermost core; as Freud did in *Moses and Monotheism*, where he deprives the Jews of their founding figure.

Judas is the "vanishing mediator" between the original circle of the Twelve Apostles and Saint Paul, founder of the universal Church: Paul literally replaces Judas, taking his absent place among the Twelve in a kind of metaphoric substitution. And it is crucial to bear in mind the necessity of this substitution: only through Judas'

"betrayal" and Christ's death could the universal Church establish itself—that is to say, the path to universality goes through the murder of the particularity. Or, to put it in a slightly different way: in order for Paul to ground Christianity from the outside, as the one who was *not* a member of Christ's inner circle, this circle had to be broken from within by means of an act of terrifying betrayal. And this does not apply only to Christ—a hero as such *has* to be betrayed to attain universal status: as Lacan put it in *Seminar VII*, the hero is the one who can be betrayed without any damage being done to him.

John Le Carré's formula from *The Perfect Spy*, "love is whatever you can still betray," is much more apposite than it may appear: who among us has not experienced, when fascinated by a beloved person who puts all his trust in us, who relies on us totally and helplessly, a strange, properly perverse urge to betray this trust, to hurt him badly, to shatter his entire existence? This "betrayal as the ultimate form of fidelity" cannot be explained away by a reference to the split between the empirical person and what this person stands for, so that we betray (let fall) the person out of our very fidelity to what he or she stands for. (A further version of this split is betrayal at the precise moment when one's impotence would have been publicly displayed: in this way, the illusion is sustained that, had one survived, things would have turned out all right. The only true fidelity to Alexander the Great, for example, would have been to kill him when he actually died—had he lived a long life, he would have been reduced to an impotent observer of the decline of his empire.) There is a higher Kierkegaardian necessity at work here: to betray (ethical) universality itself. Beyond "aesthetic" betrayal (betrayal of the universal for the sake of "pathological" interests—profit, pleasure, pride, desire to hurt and humiliate: pure vileness) and "ethical" betrayal (the betrayal of the person for the sake of universality—like Aristotle's famous "I am a friend of Plato, but I am an even greater friend of truth"), there is "religious" betrayal, betrayal out of love—I respect you for your universal features, but I love you for an X beyond these features, and the only way to discern this X is betrayal. I betray you, and then, when you are down, destroyed by my betrayal, we exchange glances—if you understand my act of betrayal, and only if you do, you are a true hero. Every true leader, religious, political, or intellectual, has to provoke such a betrayal among the closest of his disciples. Is this not how one should read the address of Lacan's late public proclamations: "A ceux qui m'aiment . . .," to those who love me—that is to say, who *love me enough to betray me*. The temporary betrayal is the only way to eternity—or, as Kierkegaard put it apropos of Abraham, when he is ordered to slaughter Isaac, his predicament "is an ordeal such that, please note, the ethical is the temptation."[7]

In what precise sense, then, was Christ not playing with Judas a perverse game of manipulating his closest disciple into the betrayal that was necessary for the accomplishment of his mission? Perhaps a detour through the best (or worst) of Hollywood melodrama can be of some help here. The basic lesson of King Vidor's *Rhapsody* is that the man, in order to gain the beloved woman's love, has to prove that he is able to survive without her, that he puts his mission or profession before her. There are two immediate choices: (1) my professional career is what matters most to me; the woman in my life is just an amusement, a distracting affair; (2) she is everything to me; I am ready to humiliate myself, to sacrifice all my public and professional dignity for her. Both are false; they lead to the man being rejected by the woman. The message of true love is thus: even if you are everything to me, I can survive without you, I am ready to forsake you for my mission or profession. The proper way for the woman to test the man's love is thus to "betray" him at a crucial moment in his career (the first public concert, as in *Rhapsody*; in the key exam; the business negotiation which will decide his future)—only if he can survive the ordeal, and accomplish his task successfully, although he is deeply traumatized by her desertion, will he deserve her, and she will return to him. The underlying paradox is that love, precisely as the Absolute, should not be posited as a direct goal—it should retain the status of a byproduct, of something we get as an undeserved grace. Perhaps there is no greater love than that of a revolutionary couple, where each of the two lovers is ready to abandon the other at any moment if revolution demands it. It is along these lines that

we should look for the nonperverse reading of Christ's sacrifice, of his message to Judas: "Prove to me that I am everything to you, so *betray me* for the sake of the revolutionary mission of both of us!"

Chesterton also correctly linked this dark core of Christianity to the opposition between Inside (the immersion in inner Truth) and Outside (the traumatic encounter with Truth): "The Buddhist is looking with a peculiar intentness inwards. The Christian is staring with a frantic intentness outwards."[8] Here he is referring to the well-known difference between the way the Buddha is represented in paintings and statues, with his benevolently peaceful gaze, and the way Christian saints are usually represented, with an intense, almost paranoiac, ecstatically transfixed gaze. This "Buddha's gaze" is often evoked as a possible antidote to the Western aggressive-paranoiac gaze, a gaze which aims at total control, and is always alert, on the lookout for some lurking threat: in the Buddha, we find a benevolently withdrawn gaze which simply lets things be, abandoning the urge to control them. However, although the message of Buddhism is one of inner peace, an odd detail in the act of consecration of the Buddha's statues throws a strange light on this peace. This act of consecration consists of painting the eyes of the Buddha. While painting these eyes,

> the artist cannot look the statue in the face, but works with his back to it, painting sideways or over his shoulder using a mirror, which catches the gaze of the image he is bringing to life. Once he has finished his work, he now has a dangerous gaze himself, and is led away blindfolded. The blindfold is removed only after his eyes can fall on something that he then symbolically destroys. As Gombrich dryly points out, "The spirit of this ceremony cannot be reconciled with Buddhist doctrine, so no one tries to do so." But isn't the key precisely this bizarre heterogeneity? The fact that for the temperate and pacifying reality of the Buddhist universe to function, the horrifying, malevolent gaze has to be symbolically excluded. The evil eye has to be tamed.[9]

Is not this ritual an "empirical" proof that the Buddhist experience of the peace of nirvana is not the ultimate fact, that *something has to be excluded* in order for us to attain this peace, namely, the Other's gaze?[10] Another indication that the "Lacanian" evil gaze posing a threat to the subject is not just an ideological hypostasis of the Western attitude of control and domination, but something that is operative also in Eastern cultures. This excluded dimension is ultimately that of the act. What, then, is an act, grounded in the abyss of a free decision? Recall C. S. Lewis's description of his religious choice from *Surprised by Joy*—what makes it so irresistibly delicious is the author's matter-of-fact "English" skeptical style, far removed from the usual pathetic narratives of mystical rapture. C. S. Lewis's description of the act thus deftly avoids any ecstatic pathos in the usual style of Saint Teresa, any multiple-orgasmic penetrations by angels or God: it is not that, in the divine mystical experience, we step out (in ex-stasis) of our normal experience of reality: it is this "normal" experience which is "ex-static" (Heidegger), in which we are thrown outside into entities, and the mystical experience signals the withdrawal from this ecstasy. Thus Lewis refers to the experience as the "odd thing"; he mentions its ordinary location: "I was going up Headington Hill on the top of a bus." He qualifies it: "in a sense," "what now appears," "or, if you like," "you could argue that . . . but I am more inclined to think . . . ," "perhaps," "I rather disliked the feeling":

> The odd thing was that before God closed in on me, I was in fact offered what now appears a moment of wholly free choice. In a sense, I was going up Headington Hill on the top of a bus. Without words and (I think) almost without images, a fact about myself was somehow presented to me. I became aware that I was holding something at bay, or shutting something out. Or, if you like, that I was wearing some stiff clothing, like corsets, or even a suit of armour, as if I were a lobster. I felt myself being, there and then, given a free choice. I could open the door or keep it shut; I could unbuckle the armour or keep it on. Neither choice was presented as a duty; no threat or promise was attached to either, though I knew that to open the door or to take off the corset meant the incalculable. The choice appeared to be momentous but it was also strangely unemotional. I was moved by no desires or fears. In a sense I was not moved by anything. I chose to open, to unbuckle, to loosen the rein. I say, "I chose,"

> yet it did not really seem possible to do the opposite. On the other hand, I was aware of no motives. You could argue that I was not a free agent, but I am more inclined to think this came nearer to being a perfectly free act than most that I have ever done. Necessity may not be the opposite of freedom, and perhaps a man is most free when, instead of producing motives, he could only say, "I am what I do." Then came the repercussion on the imaginative level. I felt as if I were a man of snow at long last beginning to melt. The melting was starting in my back—drip-drip and presently trickle-trickle. I rather disliked the feeling.[11]

In a way, everything is here: the decision is purely formal, ultimately a decision to decide, without a clear awareness of what the subject is deciding about; it is a nonpsychological act, unemotional, with no motives, desires, or fears; it is incalculable, not the outcome of strategic argumentation; it is a totally free act, although he couldn't do otherwise. It is only *afterward* that this pure act is "subjectivized," translated into a (rather unpleasant) psychological experience. There is only one aspect which is potentially problematic in Lewis's formulation: the act as conceived by Lacan has nothing to do with the mystical suspension of ties which bind us to ordinary reality, with attaining the bliss of radical indifference in which life or death and other worldly distinctions no longer matter, in which subject and object, thought and act, fully coincide. To put it in mystical terms, the Lacanian act is, rather, the exact opposite of this "return to innocence": Original Sin itself, the abyssal disturbance of primeval Peace, the primordial "pathological" Choice of unconditional attachment to some specific object (like falling in love with a specific person who, thereafter, matters to us more than anything else).

In Buddhist terms, the Lacanian act is the exact structural obverse of Enlightenment, of attaining nirvana: the very gesture by means of which the Void is disturbed, and Difference (and, with it, false appearance and suffering) emerges in the world. The act is thus close to the gesture of Bodhisattva who, having reached nirvana, out of compassion—that is, for the sake of the common Good—goes back to phenomenal reality in order to help all other living beings to achieve nirvana. The distance from psychoanalysis resides in the fact that, from the latter's standpoint, Bodhisattva's sacrificial gesture is false: in order to arrive at the act proper, one should erase any reference to the Good, and do the act just for the sake of it. (This reference to Bodhisattva also enables us to answer the "big question": if, now, we have to strive to break out of the vicious cycle of craving into the blissful peace of nirvana, how did nirvana "regress" into getting caught in the wheel of craving in the first place? The only consistent answer is: Bodhisattva *repeats* this primordial "evil" gesture. The fall into Evil was accomplished by the "original Bodhisattva"—in short, the ultimate source of Evil is compassion itself.)

Bodhisattva's compassion is strictly correlative to the notion that the "pleasure principle" regulates our activity when we are caught in the wheel of Illusion—that is to say, that we all strive toward the Good, and the ultimate problem is epistemological (we misperceive the true nature of the Good)—to quote the Dalai Lama himself, the beginning of wisdom is "to realize that all living beings are equal in not wanting unhappiness and suffering and equal in the right to rid themselves of suffering."[12] The Freudian drive, however, designates precisely the paradox of "wanting unhappiness," of finding excessive pleasure in suffering itself—the title of a Paul Watzlawik book (*The Pursuit of Unhappiness*) expresses this fundamental self-blockade of human behavior perfectly. The Buddhist ethical horizon is therefore still that of the Good—that is to say, Buddhism is a kind of negative of the ethics of the Good: aware that every positive Good is a lure, it fully assumes the Void as the only true Good. What it cannot do is to pass "beyond nothing," into what Hegel called "tarrying with the negative": to return to a phenomenal reality which is "beyond nothing," to a Something which gives body to the Nothing. The Buddhist endeavor to get rid of the illusion (of craving, of phenomenal reality) is, in effect, the endeavor to get rid of the Real of/in this illusion, the kernel of the Real that accounts for our "stubborn attachment" to the illusion.

The political implications of this stance are crucial. Recall the widespread notion that aggressive Islamic (or Jewish) monotheism

is at the root of our predicament—is the relationship between polytheism and monotheism, however, really that of the multitude and its oppressive "totalization" by the ("phallic") exclusionary One? What if, on the contrary, it is polytheism which presupposes the commonly shared (back)ground of the multitude of gods, while it is only monotheism which renders thematic the gap as such, the gap in the Absolute itself, the gap which not only separates (the one) God from Himself, but *is* this God? This difference is "pure" difference: not the difference between positive entities, but difference "as such." Thus monotheism is the only logical theology of the Two: in contrast to the multitude which can display itself only against the background of the One, its neutral ground, like the multitude of figures against the same background (which is why Spinoza, the philosopher of the multitude, is, quite logically, also the ultimate monist, the philosopher of the One), radical difference is the difference of the One with regard to itself, the noncoincidence of the One with itself, with its own place. This is why Christianity, precisely because of the Trinity, is the only true monotheism: the lesson of the Trinity is that God fully coincides with the gap between God and man, that God *is* this gap—this is Christ, not the God of beyond separated from man by a gap, but the gap as such, the gap which simultaneously separates God from God and man from man. This fact also allows us to pinpoint what is false about Levinasian-Derridean Otherness: it is the very opposite of this gap in the One, of the inherent redoubling of the One—the assertion of Otherness leads to the boring, monotonous sameness of Otherness itself.

In an old Slovene joke, a young schoolboy has to write a short composition entitled "There is only one mother!," in which he is expected to illustrate, apropos of a specific experience, the love which links him to his mother; this is what he writes: "One day I came home from school earlier than usual, because the teacher was ill; I looked for my mother, and found her naked in bed with a man who was not my father. My mother shouted at me angrily: 'What are you staring at like an idiot? Why don't you run to the fridge and get us two cold beers!' I ran to the kitchen, opened the fridge, looked inside, and shouted back to the bedroom: 'There's only one, Mother!'" Is this not a supreme case of interpretation which simply adds one diacritical sign that changes everything, as in the well-known parody of the first words of *Moby-Dick*: "Call me, Ishmael!" We can discern the same operation in Heidegger (the way he reads "Nothing is without reason [*nihil est sine ratione*]," by shifting the accent to "Nothing[ness] is without reason"), or in the superego displacement of the prohibitive injunction of the symbolic law (from "Don't kill!" to "Don't!" . . . "Kill!"). Here, however, we should risk a more detailed interpretation. The joke stages a Hamlet-like confrontation of the son with the enigma of the mother's excessive desire; in order to escape this deadlock, the mother, as it were, takes refuge in [the desire for] an external partial object, the beer, destined to divert the son's attention from the obscene Thing of her being caught naked in bed with a man—the message of this demand is: "You see, even if I am in bed with a man, my desire is for something else that you can bring me, I am not excluding you by getting completely caught in the circle of passion with this man!" The two beers (also) stand for the elementary signifying dyad, like Lacan's famous two restroom doors observed by two children from the train window in his "Instance of the letter in the unconscious"; from this perspective, the child's repartee is to be read as teaching the mother the elementary Lacanian lesson: "Sorry, Mother, but there is only one signifier, for the man only, there is no binary signifier (for the woman), this signifier is *ur-verdrängt*, primordially repressed!" In short: you are caught naked, you are not covered by the signifier. . . . And what if this is the fundamental message of monotheism—not the reduction of the Other to the One, but, on the contrary, the acceptance of the fact that the binary signifier is always-already missing? This imbalance between the One and its "primordially repressed" counterpart is the radical difference, in contrast to the big cosmological couples (*yin* and *yang*, etc.) which can emerge only within the horizon of the undifferentiated One (*tao*, etc.). And are not even attempts to introduce a balanced duality into the minor spheres of consumption, like the couple of small blue and red bags of artificial sweetener available in cafés everywhere,

yet further desperate attempts to provide a symmetrical signifying couple for the sexual difference (blue "masculine" bags versus red "feminine" bags)? The point is not that sexual difference is the ultimate signified of all such couples, but that the proliferation of such couples, rather, displays an attempt to supplement the *lack* of the founding binary signifying couple that would stand directly for sexual difference.

Furthermore, is not so-called exclusionary monotheist violence secretly polytheist? Does not the fanatical hatred of believers in a different god bear witness to the fact that the monotheist secretly thinks that he is not simply fighting false believers, but that his struggle is a struggle between different gods, the struggle of his god against "false gods" who exist as gods? Such a monotheism is effectively exclusive: it has to exclude other gods. For that reason, true monotheists are tolerant: for them, others are not objects of hatred, but simply people who, although they are not enlightened by the true belief, should nonetheless be respected, since they are not inherently evil.

The target on which we should focus, therefore, is the very ideology which is then proposed as a potential solution—for example, Oriental spirituality (Buddhism), with its more "gentle," balanced, holistic, ecological approach (all the stories about how Tibetan Buddhists, for instance, when they dig the foundations of a house, are careful not to kill any worms). It is not only that Western Buddhism, this pop-cultural phenomenon preaching inner distance and indifference toward the frantic pace of market competition, is arguably the most efficient way for us fully to participate in capitalist dynamics while retaining the appearance of mental sanity—in short, the paradigmatic ideology of late capitalism. One should add that it is no longer possible to oppose this Western Buddhism to its "authentic" Oriental version; the case of Japan provides the conclusive evidence. Not only do we have today, among top Japanese managers, a widespread "corporate Zen" phenomenon; for the whole of the last 150 years, Japan's rapid industrialization and militarization, with its ethics of discipline and sacrifice, have been sustained by the large majority of Zen thinkers—who, today, knows that D. T. Suzuki himself, the high guru of Zen in the America of the 1960s, supported in his youth, in 1930s Japan, the spirit of utter discipline and militaristic expansion?[13] There is no contradiction here, no manipulative perversion of the authentic compassionate insight: the attitude of total immersion in the selfless "now" of instant Enlightenment, in which all reflexive distance is lost, and "I am what I do," as C. S. Lewis put it—in short: in which absolute discipline coincides with total spontaneity—perfectly legitimizes subordination to the militaristic social machine. Here we can see how wrong Aldous Huxley was when, in *The Grey Eminence*, he blamed the Christian focus on Christ's suffering for its destructive social misuse (the Crusades, etc.), and opposed it to benevolent Buddhist disengagement.

The crucial feature here is how militaristic Zen justifies killing in two ultimately inconsistent ways. First, there is the standard teleological narrative that is also acceptable to Western religions: "Even though the Buddha forbade the taking of life, he also taught that until all sentient beings are united together through the exercise of infinite compassion, there will never be peace. Therefore, as a means of bringing into harmony those things which are incompatible, killing and war are necessary."[14] It is thus the very force of compassion which wields the sword: a true warrior kills out of love, like parents who hit their children out of love, to educate them and make them happy in the long term. This brings us to the notion of a "compassionate war" which gives life to both oneself and one's enemy—in it, the sword that kills is the sword that gives life. (This is how the Japanese Army perceived and justified its ruthless plundering of Korea and China in the 1930s.)

Of course, all things are ultimately nothing, a substanceless Void; however, one should not confuse this transcendent world of formlessness (*mukei*) with the temporal world of form (*yukei*), thus failing to recognize the underlying unity of the two. That was socialism's mistake: socialism wanted to realize the underlying unity directly in temporal reality ("evil equality"), thus causing social destruction. This solution may sound similar to Hegel's critique

of the revolutionary Terror in his *Phenomenology*—and even the formula proposed by some Zen Buddhists ("the identity of differentiation and equality"[15]) cannot fail to remind us of Hegel's famous speculative assertion of the "identity of identity and difference." Here, however, the difference is clear: Hegel has nothing to do with such a pseudo-Hegelian vision (espoused by some conservative Hegelians like Bradley and McTaggart) of society as an organic harmonious Whole, within which each member asserts his or her "equality" with others through performing his or her particular duty, occupying his or her particular place, and thus contributing to the harmony of the Whole. For Hegel, on the contrary, the "transcendent world of formlessness" (in short: the Absolute) is at war *with itself*, which means that the (self-)destructive formlessness (the absolute, self-relating, negativity) must appear as such in the realm of finite reality—the point of Hegel's notion of the revolutionary Terror is precisely that it is a *necessary* moment in the deployment of freedom.

However, back to Zen: this "teleological" justification (war is a necessary evil performed to bring about the greater good: "battle is necessarily fought in anticipation of peace"[16]) is accompanied by a more radical line of reasoning in which, much more directly, "Zen and the sword are one and the same."[17] This reasoning is based on the opposition between the reflexive attitude of our ordinary daily lives (in which we cling to life and fear death, strive for egotistic pleasure and profit, hesitate and think, instead of directly acting) and the enlightened stance in which the difference between life and death no longer matters, in which we regain the original selfless unity, and *are* directly our act. In a unique short circuit, militaristic Zen masters interpret the basic Zen message (liberation lies in losing one's Self, in immediately uniting with the primordial Void) as identical to utter military fidelity, to following orders immediately, and performing one's duty without consideration for the Self and its interests. The standard antimilitaristic cliché about soldiers being drilled to attain a state of mindless subordination, and carry out orders like blind puppets, is here asserted to be identical to Zen Enlightenment. This is how Ishihara Shummyo made this point in almost Althusserian terms of direct, nonreflected interpellation:

> Zen is very particular about the need not to stop one's mind. As soon as flint stone is struck, a spark bursts forth. There is not even the most momentary lapse of time between these two events. If ordered to face right, one simply faces right as quickly as a flash of lightning. . . . If one's name were called, for example, "Uemon," one should simply answer "Yes," and not stop to consider the reason why one's name was called. . . . I believe that if one is called upon to die, one should not be the least bit agitated.[18]

Insofar as subjectivity as such is hysterical, insofar as it emerges through the questioning of the interpellating call of the Other, we have here the perfect description of a perverse desubjectivization: the subject avoids its constitutive splitting by positing itself directly as the instrument of the Other's Will.[19] And what is crucial in this radical version is that it explicitly rejects all the religious rubble usually associated with popular Buddhism, and advocates a return to the original down-to-earth atheist version of the Buddha himself: as Furakawa Taigo emphasizes,[20] there is no salvation after death, no afterlife, no spirits or divinities to assist us, no reincarnation, just this life which is directly identical with death. Within this attitude, the warrior no longer acts as a person, he is thoroughly desubjectivized—or, as D. T. Suzuki himself put it: "it is really not he but the sword itself that does the killing. He had no desire to do harm to anybody, but the enemy appears and makes himself a victim. It is as though the sword performs automatically its function of justice, which is the function of mercy."[21] Does not this description of killing provide the ultimate illustration of the phenomenological attitude which, instead of intervening in reality, just lets things appear as they are? It is the sword itself which does the killing, it is the enemy himself who just appears, and makes himself a victim—I am not responsible, I am reduced to the passive observer of my own acts. Attitudes like these indicate how the famous "Buddha's gaze" could well function as the support of the most ruthless killing machine—

so, perhaps, the fact that Ben Kingsley's two big movie roles are Gandhi and the excessively aggressive English gangster in *Sexy Beast* bears witness to a deeper affinity: what if the second character is the full actualization of the hidden potential of the first? The paradoxical Pascalian conclusion of this radically atheist version of Zen is that, since there is no inner substance to religion, the essence of faith is proper decorum, obedience to ritual as such.[22] What, then, is the difference between this "warrior Zen" legitimization of violence and the long Western tradition, from Christ to Che Guevara, which also extols violence as a "work of love," as in the famous lines from Che Guevara's diary?

> Let me say, with the risk of appearing ridiculous, that the true revolutionary is guided by strong feelings of love. It is impossible to think of an authentic revolutionary without this quality. This is perhaps one of the greatest dramas of a leader; he must combine an impassioned spirit with a cold mind and make painful decisions without flinching one muscle. Our vanguard revolutionaries . . . cannot descend, with small doses of daily affection, to the places where ordinary men put their love into practice.[23]

Although we should be aware of the dangers of the "Christification of Che," turning him into an icon of radical-chic consumer culture, a martyr ready to die for his love for humanity,[24] we should perhaps take the risk of accepting this move, radicalizing it into a "Cheization" of Christ himself—the Christ whose "scandalous" words from Saint Luke's gospel ("if anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and his mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple" (14:26)) point in exactly the same direction as Che's famous quote: "You may have to be tough, but do not lose your tenderness. You may have to cut the flowers, but it will not stop the Spring."[25] So, again, if Lenin's acts of revolutionary violence were "works of love" in the strictest Kierkegaardian sense of the term, in what does the difference from "warrior Zen" consist? There is only one logical answer: it is not that, in contrast to Japanese military aggression, revolutionary violence "really" aims at establishing a nonviolent harmony; on the contrary, authentic revolutionary liberation is much more directly identified with violence—it is violence as such (the violent gesture of discarding, of establishing a difference, of drawing a line of separation) which liberates. Freedom is not a blissfully neutral state of harmony and balance, but the very violent act which disturbs this balance.[26]

Nonetheless, it is all too simple either to say that this militaristic version of Zen is a perversion of the true Zen message, or to see in it the ominous "truth" of Zen: the truth is much more unbearable—what if, in its very kernel, Zen is ambivalent, or, rather, utterly indifferent to this alternative? What if—a horrible thought—the Zen meditation technique is ultimately just that: a spiritual technique, an ethically neutral instrument which can be put to different sociopolitical uses, from the most peaceful to the most destructive? (In this sense, Suzuki was right to emphasize that Zen Buddhism can be combined with any philosophy or politics, from anarchism to Fascism.[27]) So the answer to the tortuous question "Which aspects of the Buddhist tradition lend themselves to such a monstrous distortion?" is: exactly the same ones that emphasize passionate compassion and inner peace. No wonder, then, that when Ichikawa Hakugen, the Japanese Buddhist who elaborated the most radical self-criticism after Japan's shattering defeat in 1945, listed the twelve characteristics of the Buddhist tradition which prepared the ground for the legitimization of aggressive militarism, he had to include practically all the basic tenets of Buddhism itself: the Buddhist doctrine of dependent co-arising or causality, which regards all phenomena as being in a constant state of flux, and the related doctrine of no-self; the lack of firm dogma and a personal God; the emphasis on inner peace rather than justice. . . .[28] This is how, in the Bhagavad-Gita, along similar lines, the God Krishna answers Arjuna, the warrior-king who hesitates to enter a battle, horrified at the suffering his attack will cause—an answer that is worth quoting in full:

> He who thinks it to be the killer and he who thinks it to be killed, both know nothing. The self kills not, and the self is not killed. It is

not born, nor does it ever die, nor, having existed, does it exist no more. Unborn, everlasting, unchangeable, and primeval, the self is not killed when the body is killed.

O son of Pritha, how can that man who knows the self to be indestructible, everlasting, unborn, and inexhaustible, how and whom can he kill, whom can he cause to be killed? As a man, casting off old clothes, puts on others and new ones, so the embodied self, casting off old bodies, goes to others and new ones. Weapons do not divide the self into pieces; fire does not burn it; waters to not moisten it; the wind does not dry it up. It is not divisible; it is not combustible; it is not to be moistened; it is not to be dried up. It is everlasting, all-pervading, stable, firm, and eternal. It is said to be unperceived, to be unthinkable, to be unchangeable. . . . Therefore you ought not to grieve for any being.

Having regard to your own duty also, you ought not to falter, for there is nothing better for a Kshatriya than a righteous battle. . . . Killed, you will obtain heaven; victorious, you will enjoy the earth. Therefore arise, O son of Kunti, resolved to engage in battle. Looking alike on pleasure and pain, on gain and loss, on victory and defeat, then prepare for battle, and thus you will not incur sin.[29]

Again, the conclusion is clear: if external reality is ultimately just an ephemeral appearance, then even the most horrifying crimes eventually *do not matter*. This is the crux of the doctrine of noninvolvement, of disinterested action: act as if it doesn't matter, as if you are not the agent, but things, including your own acts, just happen in an impersonal way. Here it is difficult to resist the temptation to paraphrase this passage as the justification for the burning of Jews in the gas chambers to their executioner, caught in a moment of doubt: since "he who thinks it to be the killer and he who thinks it to be killed, both know nothing," since "the self kills not, and the self is not killed," therefore "you ought not to grieve for any" burned Jew, but, "looking alike on pleasure and pain, on gain and loss, on victory and defeat," do what you were ordered to do. No wonder the *Bhagavad-Gita* was Heinrich Himmler's favorite book: it is reported that he always carried a copy in his uniform pocket.[30]

This means that Buddhist (or Hindu, for that matter) all-encompassing Compassion has to be opposed to Christian intolerant, violent Love. The Buddhist stance is ultimately one of Indifference, of quenching all passions that strive to establish differences; while Christian love is a violent passion to introduce a Difference, a gap in the order of being, to privilege and elevate some object at the expense of others. Love is violence not (only) in the vulgar sense of the Balkan proverb "If he doesn't beat me, he doesn't love me!"—violence is already the love choice as such, which tears its object out of its context, elevating it to the Thing. In Montenegrin folklore, the origin of Evil is a beautiful woman: she makes the men around her lose their balance, she literally destabilizes the universe, colors all things with a tone of partiality.[31] This same theme is one of the constants of Soviet pedagogy from the early 1920s onward: sexuality is inherently patho-logical, it contaminates cold, balanced logic with a particular pathos—sexual arousal is the disturbance associated with bourgeois corruption, and in the Soviet Union of the 1920s there were numerous psycho-physiological "materialist" researchers trying to demonstrate that sexual arousal is a pathological state.[32] Such antifeminist outbursts are much closer to the truth than the aseptic tolerance of sexuality.

CHAPTER 2

THE "THRILLING ROMANCE OF ORTHODOXY"

Chesterton's basic matrix is that of the "thrilling romance of orthodoxy": in a properly Leninist way, he asserts that the search for true orthodoxy, far from being boring, humdrum, and safe, is the most daring and perilous adventure (exactly like Lenin's search for the authentic Marxist orthodoxy—how much less risk and theoretical effort, how much more passive opportunism and theoretical laziness, is in the easy revisionist conclusion that the changed historical circumstances demand some "new paradigm"!): "People have fallen into a foolish habit of speaking of orthodoxy as something heavy, humdrum, and safe. There never was anything so perilous or so exciting as orthodoxy."[1]

Take today's deadlock of sexuality or art: is there anything more dull, opportunistic, and sterile than to succumb to the superego injunction of incessantly inventing new artistic transgressions and provocations (the performance artist masturbating on stage, or masochistically cutting himself; the sculptor displaying decaying animal corpses or human excrement), or to the parallel injunction to engage in more and more "daring" forms of sexuality? And it is impossible not to admire Chesterton's consistency: he deploys the same conceptual matrix—that of asserting the truly subversive, even revolutionary, character of orthodoxy—in his famous "Defense of Detective Stories," in which he observes how the detective story

> keeps in some sense before the mind the fact that civilization itself is the most sensational of departures and the most romantic of rebellions. When the detective in a police romance stands alone, and somewhat fatuously fearless amid the knives and fists of a thief's kitchen, it does certainly serve to make us remember that it is the agent of social justice who is the original and poetic figure, while the burglars and footpads are merely placid old cosmic conservatives, happy in the immemorial respectability of apes and wolves. [The police romance] is based on the fact that morality is the most dark and daring of conspiracies.[2]

It is not difficult to recognize here the elementary matrix of the Hegelian dialectical process: the external opposition (between Law and its criminal transgression) is transformed into the opposition,

internal to the transgression itself, between particular transgressions and the absolute transgression that appears as its opposite, as the universal Law.[3] One can thus effectively claim that the subversive sting of Chesterton's work is contained in the endless variation of one and the same matrix of the Hegelian paradoxical self-negating reversal—Chesterton himself mockingly characterizes his work as variations on a "single tiresome joke."[4] And what if, in our postmodern world of ordained transgression, in which the marital commitment is perceived as ridiculously out of date, those who cling to it are the true subversives? What if, today, straight marriage is "the most dark and daring of all transgressions"? This, precisely, is the underlying premise of Ernst Lubitsch's *Design for Living* (1933, based on a Noël Coward play): a woman leads a calm, satisfied life with two men; as a dangerous experiment, she tries marriage; however, the attempt fails miserably, and she returns to the safety of living with two men.

In the very last pages of *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton deploys the fundamental Hegelian paradox of the pseudo-revolutionary critics of religion: they start by denouncing religion as the force of oppression that threatens human freedom; in fighting religion, however, they are compelled to forsake freedom itself, thus sacrificing precisely that which they wanted to defend—the ultimate victim of the atheist theoretical and practical rejection of religion is not religion (which, unperturbed, continues its life), but freedom itself, allegedly threatened by it: the atheist radical universe, deprived of religious reference, is the gray universe of egalitarian terror and tyranny:

> Men who begin to fight the Church for the sake of freedom and humanity end by flinging away freedom and humanity if only they may fight the Church. . . . I know a man who has such a passion for proving that he will have no personal existence after death that he falls back on the position that he has no personal existence now. . . . I have known people who showed that there could be no divine judgment by showing that there can be no human judgment. . . . We do not admire, we hardly excuse, the fanatic who wrecks this world for love of the other. But what are we to say of the fanatic who wrecks this world out of hatred for the other? He sacrifices the very existence of humanity to the non-existence of God. He offers his victims not to the altar, but merely to assert the idleness of the altar and the emptiness of the throne. . . . With their oriental doubts about personality they do not make certain that we shall have no personal life hereafter; they only make certain that we shall not have a very jolly or complete one here. . . . The secularists have not wrecked divine things; but the secularists have wrecked secular things, if that is any comfort to them.[5]

The first thing we should add to this today is that the same goes for advocates of religion themselves: how many fanatical defenders of religion started by ferociously attacking contemporary secular culture and ended up forsaking religion itself (losing any meaningful religious experience)? And is it not a fact that, in a strictly analogous way, liberal warriors are so eager to fight antidemocratic fundamentalism that they will end up flinging away freedom and democracy themselves, if only they can fight terror? They have such a passion for proving that non-Christian fundamentalism is the main threat to freedom that they are ready to fall back on the position that we have to limit our own freedom here and now, in our allegedly Christian societies. If the "terrorists" are ready to wreck this world for love of the other, our warriors on terror are ready to wreck their own democratic world out of hatred for the Muslim other. Jonathan Alter and Alan Dershowitz love human dignity so much that they are ready to legalize torture—the ultimate degradation of human dignity—to defend it.

When Alan Dershowitz[6] not only condemns what he perceives as the international community's reluctance to oppose terrorism, but also provokes us to "think the unthinkable," like legalizing torture—that is to say, changing the laws so that, in exceptional situations, courts will have the right to issue "torture warrants"—his argumentation is not as easy to counter as it may appear. First, is torture "unthinkable"? Is it not going on all the time, everywhere? Secondly, if one follows Dershowitz's utilitarian line of argumentation, could one not also argue for the legitimacy of terror itself? Just as one should torture a terrorist whose knowledge could prevent the death of many more innocent people, should one not fully condone terror, at least against military and police personnel waging an unjust war of occupation, if it could prevent violence on a much larger scale? Here,

then, we have a nice case of the Hegelian opposition of In-itself and For-itself: "for itself," with regard to his explicit goals, Dershowitz is, of course, ferociously attacking terrorism—"in itself or for us," however, he is succumbing to the terrorist lure, since his argumentation against terrorism already endorses terrorism's basic premise.

More generally, does not the same apply to the postmodern disdain for great ideological Causes—to the notion that, in our post-ideological era, instead of trying to change the world, we should reinvent ourselves, our whole universe, by engaging in new forms of (sexual, spiritual, aesthetic . . .) subjective practices? As Hanif Kureishi put it in an interview about his novel *Intimacy*: "twenty years ago it was political to try to make a revolution and change society, while now politics comes down to two bodies in a basement making love who can re-create the whole world." When we are confronted with statements like this, we cannot help recalling the old lesson of Critical Theory: when we try to preserve the authentic intimate sphere of privacy against the onslaught of instrumental/objectivized "alienated" public exchange, it is privacy itself that changes into a totally objectivized "commodified" sphere. Withdrawal into privacy today means adopting formulas of private authenticity propagated by the modern culture industry—from taking lessons in spiritual enlightenment, and following the latest cultural and other fashions, to taking up jogging and bodybuilding. The ultimate truth of withdrawal into privacy is the public confession of intimate secrets on TV—against this kind of privacy, one should emphasize that, today, the only way of breaking out of the constraints of "alienated" commodification is to invent a new collectivity. Today, more than ever, the lesson of Marguerite Duras's novels is pertinent: the way—the *only* way—to have an intense and fulfilling personal (sexual) relationship is not for the couple to look into each other's eyes, forgetting about the world around them, but, while holding hands, to look together outside, at a third point (the Cause for which both are fighting, to which both are committed).

The ultimate result of globalized subjectivization is not that "objective reality" disappears, but that our subjectivity itself disappears, turns into a trifling whim, while social reality continues its course. Here I am tempted to paraphrase the interrogator's famous answer to Winston Smith, who doubts the existence of Big Brother ("It is YOU who doesn't exist!"): the proper reply to the postmodern doubt about the existence of the ideological big Other is that it is the subject itself who doesn't exist. No wonder that our era, whose basic stance is best encapsulated by the title of Phillip McGraw's recent bestseller *Self Matters*, which teaches us how to "create your life from the inside out," finds its logical complement in books with titles like *How to Disappear Completely*—manuals about how to erase all traces of one's previous existence, and "reinvent" oneself completely.[7] It is here that we should locate the difference between Zen proper and its Western version: the proper greatness of Zen is that it cannot be reduced to an "inner journey" into one's "true Self"; the aim of Zen meditation is, quite on the contrary, a total voiding of the Self, the acceptance that there is no Self, no "inner truth" to be discovered. What Western Buddhism is not ready to accept is thus that the ultimate victim of the "journey into one's Self" is this Self itself. And, more generally, is this not the lesson of Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*? The ultimate victims of positivism are not confused metaphysical notions, but facts themselves; the radical pursuit of secularization, the turn toward our worldly life, transforms this life itself into an "abstract" anemic process—and nowhere is this paradoxical reversal more evident than in the work of de Sade, where the unconstrained assertion of sexuality deprived of the last vestiges of spiritual transcendence turns sexuality itself into a mechanical exercise devoid of any authentic sensual passion. And is not a similar reversal clearly discernible in the deadlock of today's Last Men, "postmodern" individuals who reject all "higher" goals as terrorist, and dedicate their life to a survival replete with more and more refined and artificially excited/aroused small pleasures?

In psychoanalysis, perhaps the supreme case of such a reversal is the emergence of the so-called "anal character": what begins when the small child refuses to cede his excrement on demand, preferring to keep it for himself, since he does not want to be deprived of the

surplus-enjoyment of doing it on his own terms, ends in the grown-up figure of the miser, a subject who dedicates his life to hoarding his treasure, and pays the price of an infinitely stronger renunciation: he is allowed no consumption, no indulging in pleasures; everything must serve the accumulation of his treasure. The paradox is that, when the small child refuses "castration" (ceding of the privileged detachable object), he takes the path that will end in his total self-castration in the Real; that is to say, his refusal to cede the surplus-object will condemn him to the prohibition on enjoying any other object. In other words, his rejection of the demand of the real parental Other (to behave properly on the toilet) will result in the rule of an infinitely more cruel internalized superego Other that will totally dominate his consumption. And this brings us to Chesterton's principle of Conditional Joy: by refusing the founding exception (the ceding of the excessive object), the miser is deprived of *all* objects.

Perhaps the ultimate example of this paradoxical reversal in Chesterton is the one between magic and reality: for Chesterton, reality and magic are far from being simply opposed—the greatest magic is that of reality itself, the fact that there really is such a wonderful rich world out there. And the same goes for the dialectical tension between repetition and creativity: we should discard the mistaken notion that repetition means death, automatic mechanical movement, while life means diversity, surprising twists. The greatest surprise, the greatest proof of divine creativity, is that the *same* thing gets repeated again and again:

> The sun rises every morning. I do not rise every morning; but the variation is due not to my activity, but to my inaction. . . . It might be true that the sun rises regularly because he never gets tired of rising. His routine might be due, not to a lifelessness, but to a rush of life. . . . A child kicks his legs rhythmically through excess, not absence, of life. Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, "Do it again"; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. But, perhaps, God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, "Do it again" to the sun.[8]

This is what Hegel calls the dialectical coincidence of opposites: monotony is the highest idiosyncrasy; repetition demands the highest creative effort. Does Chesterton not thereby provide the clue to the strange Aztec ritual of offering human sacrifices so that the sun will rise again the next day? This attitude becomes comprehensible the moment we are able to perceive the infinite effort that has to sustain such an endless repetition. Perhaps the fact that, apropos of this miracle of continuous repetition, he inadvertently uses the term "gods"[9] is crucial: is not this attitude of perceiving repetition not as a blind automatism, but as a miracle of the highest effort of the will, profoundly pagan? On a different level, the same point was made long ago by intelligent Marxists: in the "natural" course of events, things change, so the truly difficult thing to explain is not social change but, on the contrary, stability and permanence—not why this social order collapsed, but how it succeeded in stabilizing itself and persisting in the midst of general chaos and change. For example, how it is that Christianity, the hegemonic ideology of medieval times, survived the rise of capitalism? And does the same not hold for anti-Semitism? The true mystery to be explained is its persistence through so many different societies and modes of production—we find it in feudalism, capitalism, socialism. . . .

For Chesterton, the basic Christian lesson of fairytales is contained in what he mockingly calls the "Doctrine of Conditional Joy": "You may live in a palace of gold and sapphire, if you do not say the word 'cow'; or 'You may live happily with the King's daughter, if you do not show her an onion.' The vision always hangs upon a veto."[10] Why, then, does this seemingly arbitrary single condition always limit the universal right to happiness? Chesterton's profoundly Hegelian solution is: to "extraneate" the universal right/law itself, to remind us that the universal Good to which we gain access is no less contingent, that it could have been otherwise: "If Cinderella says: 'How is it that I must leave the ball at twelve?' her godmother might answer, 'How is it that you are going there till twelve?'"[11] The function of the arbitrary limitation is to remind us that the object itself, access to which is thus limited, is given to us through an inexpli-

cable arbitrary miraculous gesture of divine gift, and thus to sustain the magic of being allowed to have access to it: "Keeping to one woman is a small price for so much as seeing one woman. . . . Oscar Wilde said that sunsets were not valued because we could not pay for sunsets. But Oscar Wilde was wrong; we can pay for sunsets. We can pay for them by not being Oscar Wilde."[12]

Here Chesterton approaches the renunciation that is necessary to happiness. When, exactly, can people be said to be happy? In a country like Czechoslovakia in the late 1970s and 1980s, people were, in a way, actually happy: three fundamental conditions of happiness were fulfilled. (1) Their material needs were basically satisfied—not *too* satisfied, since the excess of consumption can in itself generate unhappiness. It is good to experience a brief shortage of some goods on the market from time to time (no coffee for a couple of days, then no beef, then no TV sets): these brief periods of shortage functioned as exceptions that reminded people that they should be glad that these goods were generally available—if everything is available all the time, people take this availability as an evident fact of life, and no longer appreciate their luck. So life went on in a regular and predictable way, without any great efforts or shocks; one was allowed to withdraw into one's private niche. (2) A second extremely important feature: there was the Other (the Party) to blame for everything that went wrong, so that one did not feel really responsible—if there was a temporary shortage of some goods, even if stormy weather caused great damage, it was "their" fault. (3) And, last but not least, there was an Other Place (the consumerist West) about which one was allowed to dream, and one could even visit it sometimes—this place was at just at the right distance: not too far away, not too close. This fragile balance was disturbed—by what? By *desire*, precisely. Desire was the force that compelled the people to move on—and end up in a system in which the great majority are definitely *less* happy.

Happiness is thus, to put it in Badiou's terms, not a category of truth, but a category of mere Being, and, as such, confused, indeterminate, inconsistent (recall the proverbial answer of a German immigrant to the United States who, when asked "Are you happy?," answered: "Yes, yes, I am very happy, *aber glücklich bin ich nicht . . .*"). It is a pagan category: for pagans, the goal of life is to live a happy life (the idea of living "happily ever after" is a Christianized version of paganism), and religious experience or political activity themselves are considered a higher form of happiness (see Aristotle)—no wonder the Dalai Lama himself has had such success recently preaching the gospel of happiness around the world, and no wonder he is finding the greatest response precisely in the United States, the ultimate empire of (the pursuit of) happiness. . . . In short, "happiness" is a category of the pleasure principle, and what undermines it is the insistence of a Beyond of the pleasure principle.[13]

In the strict Lacanian sense of the term, one should thus posit that "happiness" relies on the subject's inability or unreadiness fully to confront the consequences of its desire: the price of happiness is that the subject remains stuck in the inconsistency of its desire. In our daily lives, we (pretend to) desire things that we do not really desire, so that, ultimately, the worst thing that can happen is for us to get what we "officially" desire. Happiness is thus inherently hypocritical: it is the happiness of dreaming about things we do not really want. When today's Left bombards the capitalist system with demands that it obviously cannot fulfill (Full employment! Retain the welfare state! Full rights for immigrants!), it is basically playing a game of hysterical provocation, of addressing the Master with a demand that will be impossible for him to meet, and will thus expose his impotence. The problem with this strategy, however, is not only that the system cannot meet these demands, but that those who voice them do not *really* want them to be satisfied. When, for example, "radical" academics demand full rights for immigrants and the opening of borders to them, are they aware that the direct implementation of this demand would, for obvious reasons, inundate the developed Western countries with millions of newcomers, thus provoking a violent racist working-class backlash that would then endanger the privileged position of these very academics? Of course they are, but they count on the fact that their demand will not be

met—in this way, they can hypocritically retain their clear radical conscience while continuing to enjoy their privileged position.

In 1994, when a new wave of emigration to the United States was in the making, Fidel Castro warned the USA that if they did not stop encouraging Cubans to emigrate, Cuba would no longer prevent them from doing so—and the Cuban authorities actually carried out this threat a couple of days later, embarrassing the United States with thousands of unwanted newcomers. Is this not like the proverbial woman who snaps back at the man making macho advances to her: "Shut up, or you'll have to do what you're boasting about!" In both cases, the gesture is that of calling the other's bluff, counting on the fact that what the other really fears is that one will fully meet his or her demand. And would not the same gesture also throw our radical academics into a panic? Here the old '68 motto "*Soyons réalistes, demandons l'impossible!*" acquires a new cynical-sinister meaning which, perhaps, reveals its truth: "Let's be realistic: we, the academic Left, want to appear critical, while fully enjoying the privileges the system offers us. So let's bombard the system with impossible demands: we all know that such demands won't be met, so we can be sure that nothing will actually change, and we'll maintain our privileged status quo!" If you accuse a big corporation of particular financial crimes, you expose yourself to risks that can go even as far as murder attempts; if you ask the same corporation to finance a research project on the link between global capitalism and the emergence of hybrid postcolonial identities, you stand a good chance of getting hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Conservatives are therefore fully justified in legitimizing their opposition to radical knowledge in terms of happiness: ultimately, knowledge makes us unhappy. Contrary to the notion that curiosity is innate to humans, that there is deep within each of us a *Wissenstrieb*, a drive to know, Jacques Lacan claims that the spontaneous attitude of a human being is that of "I don't want to know about it"—a fundamental resistance against knowing too much. All true progress in knowledge has to be bought at the price of a painful struggle against our spontaneous propensities—is today's biogenetics not the clearest proof of these limits of our readiness to know? The gene responsible for Huntington's chorea is isolated, so that each of us can learn precisely not only if he will get Huntington's, but also when he will get it. The onset of the disease depends on a genetic transcription mistake—the stuttering repetition of the "word" CAG in the middle of the gene: the age at which the madness will appear depends strictly and implacably on the number of repetitions of CAG in one place in this gene (if there are forty repetitions, you will get the first symptoms at fifty-nine; if forty-one, at fifty-four . . . if fifty, at twenty-seven). Good living, physical fitness, the best medicine, healthy food, family love and support can do nothing about it—it is pure destiny, undiluted by environmental variability. There is as yet no cure, we can do nothing about it.[14] So what should we do when we know that we can submit ourselves to a test, and thus acquire knowledge that, if it is positive, tells us exactly when we will go mad and die? Is it possible to imagine a clearer confrontation with the meaningless contingency that rules our life?

Thus Huntington's chorea confronts us with a disturbing alternative: if there is a history of this disease in my family, should I take the test that will tell me if (and when) I will inevitably get the disease, or not? What is the answer? If I cannot bear the prospect of knowing when I will die, the (more fantasmatic than realistic) ideal solution may seem to be the following one: I authorize another person or institution whom I trust completely to test me, and *not to tell me the result*, simply to kill me unexpectedly and painlessly in my sleep just before the onslaught of the fatal illness, if the result was positive. The problem with this solution, however, is that *I know that the Other knows* (the truth about my potential illness), and this ruins everything, exposing me to horrifying gnawing suspicion.

Lacan drew attention to the paradoxical status of this *knowledge about the Other's knowledge*. Recall the final reversal of Wharton's *Age of Innocence*, mentioned above, in which the husband, who harbored an illicit passionate love for Countess Olenska for many years, learns that his young wife knew about his secret passion all the time. Perhaps this would also be a way of redeeming the unfortunate *Bridges of Madison County*: if, at the end of the film, the dying Francesca were to learn that

her apparently simple, down-to-earth husband knew all the time about her brief passionate affair with the *National Geographic* photographer, and how much this meant to her, but kept silent about it in order not to hurt her. That is the enigma of knowledge: how is it possible that the whole psychic economy of a situation changes radically not when the hero directly learns something (some long-repressed secret), but when he *gets to know that the other* (whom he mistook for ignorant) *also knew it all the time*, and just pretended not to know in order to keep up appearances—is there anything more humiliating than the situation of a husband who, after a long secret love affair, learns all of a sudden that his wife knew about it all the time, but kept silent about it out of politeness or, even worse, out of love for him?

Is the ideal solution, then, the opposite one: if I suspect that my child may have the disease, I test him *without him knowing it*, then kill him painlessly just before the onslaught? The ultimate fantasy of happiness here would be that of an anonymous state institution doing this for all of us without our knowledge—but, again, the question crops up: do we know about it (about the fact that the other knows), or not? The path to a perfect totalitarian society is open. . . . There is only one way out of this conundrum: what if what is false here is the underlying premise, the notion that the ultimate ethical duty is that of protecting the Other from pain, of keeping him or her in protective ignorance? So when Habermas advocates constraints on biogenetic manipulations with reference to the threat they pose to human autonomy, freedom, and dignity,[15] he is philosophically "cheating," concealing the true reason why his line of argumentation appears convincing: what he is really referring to is not autonomy and freedom, but happiness—it is on behalf of happiness that he, the great representative of the Enlightenment tradition, ended up on the same side as conservative advocates of blessed ignorance.

It is in this sense that the Christian doctrine "not only discovered the law, but it foresaw the exceptions":[16] it is only the exception that allows us to perceive the miracle of the universal rule. And, for Chesterton, the same goes for our rational understanding of the universe:

> The whole secret of mysticism is this: that man can understand everything by the help of what he does not understand. The morbid logician seeks to make everything lucid, and succeeds in making everything mysterious. The mystic allows one thing to be mysterious, and everything else becomes lucid. . . . The one created thing which we cannot look at is the one thing in the light of which we look at everything. Like the sun at noonday, mysticism explains everything else by the blaze of its own victorious invisibility.[17]

Chesterton's aim is thus to *save reason through sticking to its founding exception*: deprived of this, reason degenerates into blind self-destructive skepticism—in short: into total *irrationalism*. This was Chesterton's basic insight and conviction: that the irrationalism of the late nineteenth century was the necessary consequence of the Enlightenment rationalist attack on religion:

> The creeds and the crusades, the hierarchies and the horrible persecutions were not organized, as is ignorantly said, for the suppression of reason. They were organized for the difficult defense of reason. Man, by a blind instinct, knew that if once things were wildly questioned, reason could be questioned first. The authority of priests to absolve, the authority of popes to define the authority, even of inquisitors to terrify: these were all only dark defenses erected round one central authority, more undemonstrable, more supernatural than all—the authority of a man to think. . . . In so far as religion is gone, reason is going.[18]

The problem here is: is this "Doctrine of Conditional Joy" (or, to put it in Lacanese: the logic of *symbolic castration*) effectively the ultimate horizon of our experience? Is it that, in order to enjoy a limited scope of actual freedom, we have to endorse a transcendental limitation to our freedom? Is the only way to safeguard our reason to admit to an island of unreason at its very heart? Can we love another person only if we are aware that we love God more? It is to Chesterton's credit that he spelled out the properly *perverse* nature of this solution apropos of paganism; he turns around the standard (mis)perception according to which the ancient pagan attitude is that of the joyful assertion of life, while Christianity imposes a

somber order of guilt and renunciation. It is, on the contrary, the pagan stance that is deeply melancholic: even if it preaches a pleasurable life, it is in the mode of "enjoy it while it lasts, because, at the end, there is always death and decay." The message of Christianity, on the contrary, is that of infinite joy beneath the deceptive surface of guilt and renunciation: "The outer ring of Christianity is a rigid guard of ethical abnegations and professional priests; but inside that inhuman guard you will find the old human life dancing like children, and drinking wine like men; for Christianity is the only frame for pagan freedom."[19]

Is not Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* the ultimate proof of this paradox? Only a devout Christian could have imagined such a magnificent pagan universe, thereby confirming that *paganism is the ultimate Christian dream*. This is why the conservative Christian critics who recently expressed their concern at how books and movies like *Lord of the Rings* or the Harry Potter series undermine Christianity through their message of pagan magic miss the point, that is, the perverse conclusion that is unavoidable here: You want to enjoy the pagan dream of pleasurable life without paying the price of melancholic sadness for it? Choose Christianity! We can discern traces of this paradox right up to the well-known Catholic figure of the Priest (or Nun) as the ultimate bearer of sexual wisdom. Take what is arguably the most powerful scene in *The Sound of Music*: after Maria escapes from the von Trapp family back to the convent, unable to deal with her sexual attraction toward Baron von Trapp, she cannot find peace there, since she is still longing for the baron; in a memorable scene, the Mother Superior summons her and advises her to return to the von Trapp family, and try to sort out her relationship with the baron. She delivers this message in a weird song, "Climb Every Mountain!," whose surprising theme is: Do it! Take the risk, and try everything your heart desires! Do not allow petty considerations to stand in your way! The uncanny power of this scene lies in its unexpected display of the spectacle of desire, which makes the scene literally *embarrassing*: the very person whom one would expect to preach abstinence and renunciation turns out to be the agent of fidelity to one's desire.[20]

Significantly, when *The Sound of Music* was shown in (still Socialist) Yugoslavia in the late 1960s, this scene—the three minutes of this song—was the only part of the film which was censored (cut). The anonymous Socialist censor thereby displayed his profound sense of the truly dangerous power of Catholic ideology: far from being the religion of sacrifice, of the renunciation of earthly pleasures (in contrast to the pagan affirmation of the life of the passions), Christianity offers a devious stratagem for indulging our desires *without having to pay the price for them*, for enjoying life without the fear of decay and debilitating pain awaiting us at the end of the day. If we go to the limit in this direction, it would even be possible to maintain that this is the ultimate message of Christ's sacrifice: *you can indulge in your desires, and enjoy; I took the price for it upon myself!* There is thus an element of truth in a joke about a young Christian girl's ideal prayer to the Virgin Mary: "O thou who conceived without having sinned, let me sin without having to conceive!"—in the perverse functioning of Christianity, religion is, in effect, evoked as a safeguard allowing us to enjoy life with impunity.

The impression that we do not have to pay the price is, of course, misleading here: in effect, the price we pay is desire itself—that is to say, in succumbing to this perverse call, we compromise our desire. We all know the feeling of tremendous relief when, after a long period of tension or abstention, we are finally allowed to "let go," to indulge in hitherto forbidden pleasures—this relief, when one can finally "do what one wants," is perhaps the very model (not of realizing, but) of compromising one's desire. That is to say: for Lacan, the status of desire is inherently ethical: "not to compromise one's desire" ultimately equals "do your duty." And this is what the perverse version of Christianity entices us to do: betray your desire, compromise with regard to the essential, to what really matters, and you are welcome to have all the trivial pleasures you are dreaming about deep in your heart! Or, as they would put it today: renounce marriage, become a priest, and you can have all the little boys you want. . . . The fundamental structure here is not so much that of "Conditional Joy" (you can have "it" on condition of some "irrational"

contingent exception/prohibition), but, rather, that of fake sacrifice, of pretending not to have "it," to renounce "it," in order to deceive the big Other, to conceal from it the fact that we *do* have it.

Let us take the example of Jeannot Szwarc's *Enigma* (1981), one of the better variations on what is arguably the basic matrix of Cold War spy thrillers with artistic pretensions à la John Le Carré; it tells the story of a dissident journalist-turned-spy who emigrates to the West, and is then recruited by the CIA and sent to East Germany to get hold of a scrambling/descrambling computer chip whose possession enables the owner to read all communications between KGB headquarters and its outposts. However, small clues tell the spy that there is something wrong with his mission: that is, that the East Germans and the Russians were informed of his arrival in advance—so what is going on? Is it that the Communists have a mole in CIA headquarters who informed them of this secret mission? As we learn toward the end of the film, the solution is much more ingenious: the CIA already possesses the scrambling chip, but, unfortunately, the Russians suspect this fact, so they have temporarily stopped using this computer network for their secret communications. The true aim of the operation was the CIA attempt to convince the Russians that they did not possess the chip: they sent an agent to get it and, at the same time, deliberately let the Russians know that there was an operation going on to get the chip; of course, the CIA is counting on the fact that the Russians will arrest the agent. The ultimate result will thus be that, by successfully preventing the mission, the Russians will be convinced that the Americans do not possess it, and that it is therefore safe to use this communication link. . . . The tragic aspect of the story, of course, is that the mission's failure is taken into account: the CIA wants the mission to fail, that is, the poor dissident agent is sacrificed in advance for the higher goal of convincing the opponent that one doesn't possess his secret. The strategy here is to stage a search operation in order to convince the Other (the enemy) that one does not already possess what one is looking for—in short, one feigns a lack, a want, in order to conceal from the Other that one already possesses the *agalma*, the Other's innermost secret.

Is this structure not somehow connected with the basic paradox of symbolic castration as constitutive of desire, in which the object has to be lost in order to be regained on the inverse ladder of desire regulated by the Law? Symbolic castration is usually defined as the loss of something that one never possessed, that is to say, the object-cause of desire is an object that emerges through the very gesture of its loss/withdrawal; however, what we encounter here, in the case of *Enigma*, is the obverse structure of feigning a loss. Insofar as the Other of the symbolic Law prohibits *jouissance*, the only way for the subject to enjoy is to pretend that he lacks the object that provides *jouissance*, that is, to conceal its possession from the Other's gaze by staging the spectacle of a desperate search for it. This also casts new light on the topic of sacrifice: one sacrifices not in order to get something from the Other, but in order to dupe the Other, in order to convince him or it that one is still missing something, that is, *jouissance*. This is why obsessional neurotics experience the compulsion repeatedly to accomplish their compulsive rituals of sacrifice—in order to disavow their *jouissance* in the eyes of the Other. And does not the same apply, on a different level, to the so-called "woman's sacrifice," to the woman who adopts the role of remaining in the shadows, and sacrifices herself for her husband or family? Is this sacrifice not also false in the sense of serving to dupe the Other, of convincing it that, through this sacrifice, the woman is, in effect, desperately craving something she lacks? In this precise sense, sacrifice and castration are to be opposed: far from involving the voluntary acceptance of castration, sacrifice is the most refined way of disavowing it, that is, of acting as if I really do possess the hidden treasure that makes me a worthy object of love.

Is the way out of this predicament then, to pass from the Doctrine of Conditional Joy to the Doctrine of *Unconditional* Joy as exemplified by the mystical experience? And what is the exact status of this unconditional *jouissance*? Is it only presupposed, imputed by the hysteric to the perverse Other, the "subject supposed to enjoy", or is it accessible in moments of mystical encounters with the Real? The crucial question here is: how does this "Doctrine of Conditional Joy"

relate to the Pauline suspension of our full commitment to earthly social obligations (live your life in the *as if* mode—"from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions")? Are they two versions of the same principle? Are they not, rather, two *opposed* principles? In the "Doctrine of Conditional Joy," the Exception (be home by midnight, etc.) allows us fully to rejoice, while the Pauline *as if* mode deprives us of the ability fully to rejoice by displacing the external limit into an internal one: the limit is no longer the one between rejoicing in life and its exception (renunciation), it runs in the midst of rejoicing, that is, we have to rejoice *as if we are not rejoicing*. The limit of Chesterton is clearly perceptible in his insistence on the need for firm eternal standards: he ferociously opposes the "false theory of progress, which maintains that we alter the test instead of trying to pass the test."[21] In his usual way, in order to prove his point, Chesterton enumerates a series of brilliant examples of the self-refuting inconsistency of modern critical intellectuals:

> A man denounces marriage as a lie, and then denounces aristocratic profligates for treating it as a lie. He calls a flag a bauble, and then blames the oppressors of Poland or Ireland because they take away that bauble. The man of this school goes first to a political meeting, where he complains that savages are treated as if they were beasts; then he takes his hat and umbrella and goes on to a scientific meeting, where he proves that they practically are beasts.[22]

Here, in effect, we jump from establishing that a concrete example fails the test (savages are treated like beasts, not as men; aristocrats treat marriage as a lie) to the universal conclusion that the very notion that enabled us to measure the falsity of a particular case is in itself already false (man as such is a beast, an animal species; marriage as such is a lie). In rejecting this universalization, Chesterton implicitly rejects the Hegelian self-negation that is also the fundamental procedure of the Marxian critique of ideology—recall Brecht's famous "What is the robbery of a bank compared to the founding of a new bank?," or the good old "property is theft" (that is, the passage from the theft of some particular property to the notion that property as such is already theft). Similar reversals abound in the first chapter of *The Communist Manifesto*: from prostitution as opposed to marriage to the notion of (the bourgeois) marriage itself as a form of prostitution; and so on. In all these cases, Marx applies Hegel's insight (first articulated in the Introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*) according to which, when the particular does not fit its universal measure, one should change the measure itself: the gap between the universal normative notion and its particular cases is to be reflected back into this notion itself, as its inherent tension and insufficiency—however, does Chesterton's basic matrix not involve the same gesture of self-negating universalization? Is not the "truth" of the opposition between Law and its particular transgressions that the Law itself is the highest transgression?

That is not only the limit of Chesterton, but, more radically, the limit of the perverse solution that forms the very core of "really existing Christianity": with modernity proper, we can no longer rely on the preestablished Dogma to sustain our freedom, on the preestablished Law/Prohibition to sustain our transgression—this is one way of reading Lacan's thesis that the big Other no longer exists. Perversion is a double strategy to counteract this nonexistence: an (ultimately deeply conservative, nostalgic) attempt to install the law artificially, *in the desperate hope that we will then take this self-posited limitation "seriously,"* and, in a complementary way, a no less desperate attempt to codify the very transgression of the Law. In the perverse reading of Christianity, God first threw humanity into Sin in order to create the opportunity for saving it through Christ's sacrifice; in the perverse reading of Hegel, the Absolute plays a game with itself—it first separates itself from itself, introduces a gap of self-misrecognition, in order to reconcile itself with itself again. This is why today's desperate neoconservative attempts to reassert "old values" are also ultimately a failed perverse strategy of imposing prohibitions that can no longer be taken seriously. More precisely: when, exactly, did

prohibitions lose their power? The answer is very clear: with Kant. No wonder Kant is the philosopher of freedom: with him, the deadlock of freedom emerges. That is to say, with Kant, the standard Chestertonian solution—the reliance on the preestablished Obstacle against which we can assert our freedom—is no longer viable; our freedom is asserted as autonomous, every limitation/constraint is thoroughly *self-posited*. This is also why we should be very attentive in reading Kant *avec* Sade: Lacan's ultimate thesis[23] is not that the Sadean perversion is the "truth" of Kant, more "radical" than Kant, that it draws out the consequences Kant himself did not have the courage to confront; on the contrary, the Sadean perversion emerges as the result of the Kantian compromise, of Kant's avoiding the consequences of his breakthrough.

Far from being the seminar of Lacan, his *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* is, rather, the point of deadlock at which Lacan comes dangerously close to the standard version of the "passion for the Real."[24] Do not the unexpected echoes between this seminar and the thought of Georges Bataille—*the* philosopher of the passion for the Real, if ever there was one—point unambiguously in this direction? Is not Lacan's ethical maxim "do not compromise your desire" (which, we should always bear in mind, was never used again by Lacan in his later work) a version of Bataille's injunction "to think everything to a point that makes people tremble,"[25] to go as far as possible—to the point at which opposites coincide, at which infinite pain turns into the joy of the highest bliss (discernible in the photograph of the Chinese submitted to the terrifying torture of being slowly cut to pieces), at which the intensity of erotic enjoyment encounters death, at which sainthood overlaps with extreme dissolution, at which God Himself is revealed as a cruel Beast? Is the temporal coincidence of Lacan's seminar on the ethics of psychoanalysis and Bataille's *Eroticism* more than a mere coincidence? Is Bataille's domain of the Sacred, of the "accursed part," not his version of what, apropos of *Antigone*, Lacan deployed as the domain of *ate*?

Does not Bataille's opposition of "homogeneity," the order of exchanges, and "heterogeneity," the order of limitless expenditure, echo Lacan's opposition of the order of symbolic exchanges and the excess of the traumatic encounter with the Real? "Heterogeneous reality is that of a force or shock."[26] And how can Bataille's elevation of the dissolute woman to the status of God fail to remind us of Lacan's claim that Woman is one of the names of God? Not to mention Bataille's term for the experience of transgression—impossible—that is Lacan's qualification of the Real . . . It is this urge to "go to the very end," to the extreme experience of the Impossible as the only way of being authentic, which makes Bataille *the* philosopher of the passion for the Real—no wonder he was obsessed with Communism and Fascism, those two excesses of life, against democracy, which was "a world of appearances and of old men with their teeth falling out."[27]

Bataille was fully aware of how this transgressive "passion for the Real" *relies on prohibition*; that is why he was explicitly opposed to the "sexual revolution," to the rise of sexual permissiveness, which began in his last years:

> In my view, sexual disorder is accursed. In this respect and in spite of appearances, I am opposed to the tendency which seems today to be sweeping it away. I am not among those who see the neglect of sexual interdictions as a solution. I even think that human potential depends on these interdictions: we could not imagine this potential without these interdictions.[28]

Bataille thus brought to its climax the dialectical interdependence between law and its transgression—"system is needed and so is excess," as he liked to repeat: "Often, the criminal himself wants death as the answer to the crime, in order finally to impart the sanction, without which the crime would be *possible* instead of being *what it is*, what the criminal wanted."[29] This, also, was why he ultimately opposed Communism: he was for the excess of the revolution, but feared that the revolutionary spirit of excessive expenditure would afterward be contained in a new order, even more "homogeneous" than the capitalist one: "the idea of a revolution is intoxicating, but what happens afterward? The world will remake itself and remedy what oppresses us today to take some other form tomorrow."[30]

This, perhaps, is why Bataille is strictly *premodern*: he remains stuck in this dialectic of the law and its transgression, of the prohibitive law as generating the transgressive desire, which forces him to the debilitating perverse conclusion that one has to install prohibitions in order to be able to enjoy their violation—a clearly unworkable pragmatic paradox. (And, incidentally, was not this dialectic fully explored by Saint Paul in Romans, in the famous passage on the relationship between Law and sin, on how Law engenders sin, that is, the desire to transgress it?) What Bataille is unable to perceive are simply the consequences of the Kantian philosophical revolution: the fact that *the absolute excess is that of the Law itself*—the Law intervenes in the "homogeneous" stability of our pleasure-oriented life as the shattering force of absolute destabilizing "heterogeneity." On a different level, but no less radically, late-capitalist "permissive" society in the thrall of the superego injunction "Enjoy!" elevates excess into the very principle of its "normal" functioning, so that I am tempted to propose a paraphrase of Brecht: "What is a poor Bataillean subject engaged in his transgressions of the system compared to the late-capitalist excessive orgy of the system itself?" (And it is interesting to note how this very point was made by Chesterton: orthodoxy itself is the highest subversion; serving the Law is the highest adventure.)

It is only in this precise sense that the otherwise journalistic designation of our age as the "age of anxiety" is appropriate: what causes anxiety is the elevation of transgression into the norm, the lack of the prohibition that would sustain desire. This lack throws us into the suffocating proximity of the object-cause of desire: we lack the breathing space provided by the prohibition, since, even before we can assert our individuality through our resistance to the Norm, the Norm enjoins us in advance to resist, to violate, to go further and further. We should not confuse this Norm with regulation of our intersubjective contacts: perhaps there has been no period in the history of humankind, when interactions were so closely regulated; these regulations, however, no longer function as the symbolic prohibition—rather, they regulate modes of transgression themselves. So when the ruling ideology enjoins us to enjoy sex, not to feel guilty about it, since we are not bound by any prohibitions whose violations should make us feel guilty, the price we pay for this absence of guilt is anxiety. It is in this precise sense that—as Lacan put it, following Freud—anxiety is the only emotion that does not deceive: all other emotions, from sorrow to love, are based on deceit. Again, back to Chesterton: when he writes that "Christianity is the only frame for pagan freedom," this means that, precisely, this frame—the frame of prohibitions—is the only frame within which we can enjoy pagan pleasures: the feeling of guilt is a fake enabling us to give ourselves over to pleasures—when this frame falls away, anxiety arises.

It is here that one should refer to the key distinction between the object of desire and its object-cause. What should the analyst do in the case of a promiscuous woman who has regular one-night stands, while complaining all the time how bad and miserable and guilty she feels about it? The thing *not* to do, of course, is to try to convince her that one-night stands are bad, the cause of her troubles, signs of some libidinal deadlock—in this way, one merely feeds her symptom, which is condensed in her (misleading) dissatisfaction with one-night stands. That is to say, it is obvious that what gives the woman true satisfaction is not promiscuity as such, but the very accompanying feeling of being miserable—that is the source of her "masochistic" enjoyment. The strategy should thus be, as a first step, *not* to convince her that her promiscuity is pathological, but, on the contrary, to convince her that there is nothing to feel bad or guilty about: if she really enjoys one-night stands, she should continue to have them without any negative feelings. The trick is that, once she is confronted with one-night stands *without* what appears to be the obstacle preventing her from fully enjoying them, but is in reality the *objet petit a*, the feature that allows her to enjoy them, the feature through which she can only enjoy them, one-night stands will lose their attraction and become meaningless. (And if she still goes on with her one-night stands? Well, why not? Psychoanalysis is not a moral catechism: if this is her path to enjoyment, why not?) It is this gap between object and object-cause that the subject has to confront when the prohibition falls away: is she ready to desire the obstacle directly as such?[31]

CHAPTER 3

THE SWERVE OF THE REAL

The *Fort-Da* story from Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* can perhaps serve as the best test to detect the level of understanding of Freud. According to the standard version, Freud's grandson symbolizes the departure and return of his mother by throwing away a spool—"*Fort!*"—and retrieving it—"*Da!*" The situation thus seems clear: traumatized by the mother's absence, the child overcomes his anxiety, and gains mastery over the situation, by symbolizing it: through the substitution of the spool for the mother, he himself becomes the stage-director of her appearance and disappearance. Anxiety is thus successfully "sublated [*aufgehoben*]" in the joyful assertion of mastery.

However, are things really so clear? What if the spool is not a stand-in for the mother, but a stand-in for what Jacques Lacan called *objet petit a*, ultimately the object in me, that which my mother sees in me, that which makes me the object of *her* desire? What if Freud's grandson is staging *his own* disappearance and return? In this precise sense, the spool is what Lacan called a "biceptor": it properly belongs neither to the child nor to his mother; it is in-between the two, the excluded intersection of the two sets. Take Lacan's famous "I love you, but there is something in you more than yourself that I love, *objet petit a*, so I destroy you"—the elementary formula of the destructive passion for the Real as the endeavor to extract from you the real kernel of your being. This is what gives rise to anxiety in the encounter with the Other's desire: what the Other is aiming at is not simply myself but the real kernel, that which is in me more than myself, and he is ready to destroy me in order to extract that kernel. . . . Is not the ultimate cinematic expression of the ex-timate character of the *objet petit a* in me that of the "alien" in the film of the same name, which is quite literally what is "in me more than myself," a foreign body at the very heart of myself, and can therefore be extracted from me only at the price of my destruction?

Consequently, we should invert the standard constellation: the true problem is the mother who *enjoys* me (her child), and the true stake of the game is to escape this closure. The true anxiety is this being-caught in the Other's *jouissance*. So it is not that, anxious about losing my mother, I try to master her departure/arrival; it is that, anxious

about her overwhelming *presence*, I try desperately to carve out a space where I can gain a distance toward her, and so become able to sustain my desire. Thus we obtain a completely different picture: instead of the child mastering the game, and thus coping with the trauma of his mother's absence, we get the child trying to escape the suffocating embrace of his mother, and construct an open space for desire; instead of the playful exchange of *Fort* and *Da*, we get a desperate oscillation between the two poles, neither of which brings satisfaction—or, as Kafka wrote: "I cannot live with you, and I cannot live without you." And it is this most elementary dimension of the *Fort-Da* game that is missed in the cognitivist science of the mind. A recent cognitivist textbook tells us: "If someone were to claim that, *for the sake of his desire* for an object, he moved away from this object, then we would surmise that he is either a madman or he does not know the meaning of the term 'desire'."[1] Is not such an avoiding of the object for the sake of our very desire for it, however, the very paradox of courtly love? Is it not a feature of desire as such, at its most fundamental? So, perhaps, we, psychoanalysts, are a species of madmen. That is to say, is not such an avoiding of the object for the sake of our very desire for it—such a persisting *Fort* in the very heart of *Da*—the very paradox of desire as such, at its most fundamental? What about the eternal deferral of finally meeting "the distant beloved [*die ferne Geliebte*]"?[2] In the same cognitivist vein, Douglas Lenat tries to construct a computer that would possess human common sense, filling its memory with millions of "obvious" rules like: *Nothing can be in two places at the same time. When humans die, they are not born again. Dying is undesirable. Animals do not like pain. Time advances at the same rate for everyone. When it rains, people get wet. Sweet things taste good.*[3] However, are these rules really so obvious? What about the same thought shared by two people? What about people who believe in reincarnation? What about desperate people who long to die? What about masochists who like pain? What about our thrilling experiences when time seems to run faster than usual? What about people with umbrellas who do not get wet? What about those among us who prefer dark, "bitter" chocolate to sweet chocolate?

It is against this background that one should conceptualize the difference between desire of the Other and *jouissance* of the Other; this difference is often described as the threshold of symbolic castration: while desire of the Other (*genitivus subjectivus* and *objectivus*) can thrive only insofar as the Other remains an undecipherable abyss, the Other's *jouissance* indicates its suffocating overproximity. Here we should recall the two meanings of the French *jouir*: "enjoy" plus "the right to enjoy something [even if one does not own it]," the so-called *usufruit* (for example, when the owner of a big house leaves the house to his children, but gives his faithful old servant the right to stay in his apartment in the house rent-free until his death—the servant is free to "enjoy" his apartment). The Other's enjoyment is thus its right to "enjoy me" as a sexual object—this is what is at stake in what Lacan reconstructs as the Kantian imperative of the work of de Sade: "Anyone can tell me: 'I have the full right to enjoy any part of your body in any way that brings pleasure to me. . . .'" Although this seems to be a "feminine position" (women as the *usufruit* of men), this Other is ultimately the pre-Oedipal Mother (this is why Lacan draws attention to the fact that in de Sade's universe, with all its "perversity," *the mother remains prohibited*). Through symbolic castration, this overwhelming *jouissance* of the (M)Other is then sublated (in the precise Hegelian sense of *Aufhebung*) into the localized phallic *jouissance* that, precisely, is *jouissance* under the condition of desire, that is, as it appears after symbolic castration. When Lacan speaks of "phallic *jouissance*," we should always bear in mind that the phallus is the signifier of castration—phallic *jouissance* is therefore *jouissance* under the condition of symbolic castration that opens up and sustains the space of desire.

Along these lines, Richard Boothby interprets the Lacanian *objet petit a* as the remainder of the Maternal Thing within the domain of the paternal symbolic Law: once the direct confrontation with the Maternal Thing, her terrifying desire, is screened through the paternal Law, "each incarnation of the *objet a* allows the subject, not to provide any final answer to the question of the Other's desire, the unthinkable dimension of the imaginary other that emerges primitively as *das Ding*, but to pass that question into the unfolding of a symbolic

process."[4] The problem with Boothby is that he endorses this Oedipalization—more precisely, he reads Lacan as endorsing it: "The function of the paternal metaphor is to submit the desire of the Mother (which is of the order of the Thing) to the law of the Father (which comprises the totality of the signifying system, the structure of the symbolic order)."[5] For Boothby, the original fact is the gap between the Real of the bodily passions, their mobility, and the fixity of imaginary identifications that coordinate the subject's identity; there are two ways of dealing with the excess of the Real, the terrifying abyss of what is in the image beyond the image: either one confronts it directly, or one mediates it through the symbolic order. Here, however, he takes the problematic step of identifying the Real with the open horizon of meaning, with the elusive unspeakable kernel of the potentiality of meaning, with the true focus of what we want to say that can never be fully explicated: "The real is the dimension of *das Ding*, of what is in the other more than the other. It is this dimension that is unassimilable in the image and is implicitly animated in every registration of the signifier, in the overflow of meaning by virtue of which every utterance says more than it means to say."[6]

Instead of the traumatic intractable Thing with which no exchange is possible, we thus enter the domain of symbolic exchanges within which the Real appears as the elusive missing ultimate point of reference that sets in motion the indefinite sliding (*dérive*) of signifiers. Consequently, Boothby identifies the Real with the phallus *qua* Master-Signifier: as a signifier, the phallus stands for the "overflow of meaning," for the potentiality of meaning that eludes every determinate signification. There is, however, a problem with this version: it implies that Lacan preaches phallic *jouissance* as the symbolization/normalization of the presymbolic excessive (M)Other's *jouissance*—however, is this really Lacan's position? Is symbolic castration the ultimate horizon of his thought, beyond which there is only the inaccessible abyss of the (M)Other, the Real of the ultimate Night that dissolves all distinctions? In order to approach this question properly, we must elaborate the concept of the Real.

Alain Badiou identified as the key feature of the twentieth century the "passion for the Real [*la passion du réel*]": in contrast to the nineteenth century of utopian or "scientific" projects and ideals, plans for the future, the twentieth century aimed at delivering the thing itself, at directly realizing the longed-for New Order—or, as Fernando Pessoa puts it: ". . . do not crave to construct in the space / which appears to lie in the future, / and to promise you some kind of tomorrow. Realize yourself today, do not wait. / You alone are your life." The ultimate and defining experience of the twentieth century was the direct experience of the Real as opposed to everyday social reality—the Real in its extreme violence as the price to be paid for peeling off the deceptive layers of reality.[7] In the trenches of World War I, Ernst Jünger was celebrating face-to-face combat as the authentic intersubjective encounter: authenticity lies in the act of violent transgression, from the Lacanian Real—the Thing Antigone confronts when she violates the order of the City—to the Bataillean excess.

What this passion for the Real confronts us with is the properly ontological impossibility of locating within the same space of reality our normal daily interactions side by side with scenes of intense enjoyment—here is Bataille's formulation:

> A madness suddenly takes possession of a person. That madness is well known to us but we can easily picture the surprise of anyone who did not know about it and who by some device witnesses unseen the passionate lovemaking of some woman who had struck him as particularly distinguished. He would think she was sick, just as mad dogs are sick. Just as if some bitch had usurped the personality of the dignified hostess.[8]

And the fact that this dimension is that of the sacred is attested to by the minor scandal created a couple of years ago by an English writer who began his novel with: "There are women for whom it holds that, in order to be allowed to fuck them freely and repeatedly, one would be ready to calmly observe one's own wife and small child drowning in cold water." Is this not an extreme formulation of the

"religious" status of sexual passion, beyond the pleasure principle and involving the teleological suspension of the ethical?

There is, however, another way of approaching the Real—that is to say, the twentieth-century passion for the Real has two sides: that of purification and that of subtraction. In contrast to purification, which endeavors to isolate the kernel of the Real through a violent peeling off, subtraction starts from the Void, from the reduction ("subtraction") of all determinate content, and then tries to establish a minimal difference between this Void and an element that functions as its stand-in. Apart from Badiou himself, it was Jacques Rancière who developed this structure as that of the politics of the "empty set," of the "supernumerary" element that belongs to the set but has no distinctive place in it. What, for Rancière, is politics proper?[9] A phenomenon that appeared for the first time in Ancient Greece, when the members of demos (those with no firmly determined place in the hierarchical social edifice) not only demanded that their voice be heard against those in power, those who exerted social control—that is to say, they not only protested the wrong (*le tort*) they suffered, and wanted their voice to be heard, to be recognized as included in the public sphere, on an equal footing with the ruling oligarchy and aristocracy; even more, they, the excluded, those with no fixed place within the social edifice, presented themselves as the representatives, the stands-in, for the Whole of Society, for the true Universality ("we—the 'nothing,' not counted in the order—are the people, we are All against others who stand only for their particular privileged interest"). In short, political conflict designates the tension between the structured social body, in which each part has its place, and "the part with no-part" that unsettles this order for the sake of the empty principle of universality, of what Balibar calls *égaliberté*, the principled equality of all men *qua* speaking beings—right down to the *liumang*, "hoodlums," in present-day feudal-capitalist China, those who (in terms of the existing order) are displaced, and float freely, lacking work-and-residence, but also cultural or sexual, identity and registration. Politics proper thus always involves a kind of short circuit between the Universal and the Particular: the paradox of a "universal singular," of a singular that appears as the stand-in for the Universal, destabilizing the "natural" functional order of relations in the social body.

This identification of the non-part with the Whole, of the part of society with no properly defined place within it (or resisting the allocated subordinated place within it) with the Universal, is the elementary gesture of politicization, discernible in all great democratic events from the French Revolution (in which *le troisième état* proclaimed itself identical to the Nation as such, against the aristocracy and the clergy) to the demise of ex-European Socialism (in which dissident "forums" proclaimed themselves representative of the whole society against the Party nomenklatura). In this precise sense, politics and democracy are synonymous: the basic aim of antidemocratic politics, always and by definition, is and was depoliticization, that is, the unconditional demand that "things should return to normal," with each individual doing his or her particular job. The same point can also be made in anti-Statist terms: those who are subtracted from the grasp of the State are not accounted for, counted in—that is to say, their multiple presence is not properly represented in the One of the State. In this sense, the "minimal difference" is the difference between the set and this surplus-element that belongs to the set, but lacks any differential property that would specify its place within its edifice: it is precisely this lack of specific (functional) difference that makes it an embodiment of the pure difference between the place and its elements.[10] This "supernumerary" element is thus a kind of "Malevich in politics," a square on a surface marking the minimal difference between the place and what takes place, between background and figure. Or, in the terms of Laclau and Mouffe, this "supernumerary" element emerges when we pass from *difference* to *antagonism*: since, in it, all qualitative differences inherent to the social edifice are suspended, it stands for the "pure" difference as such, for the nonsocial within the field of the social.[11] Or—to put it in the terms of the logic of the signifier—in it, the Zero itself is counted as One.

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

The Real as the terrifying primordial abyss that swallows everything, dissolving all identities, well known in literature in its multiple guises, from Poe's maelstrom and Kurtz's "horror" at the end of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to Pip from Melville's *Moby-Dick* who, cast to the bottom of the ocean, experiences the demon God—

> Carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes . . . Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke to it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad.

—this Real is precisely the ultimate lure that, as Richard Kearney was right to emphasize,[12] lends itself easily to New Age appropriation, as in Joseph Campbell's notion of the monstrous God:

> By monster I mean some horrendous presence or apparition that explodes all your standards for harmony, order and ethical conduct. . . . That's God in the role of destroyer. Such experiences go past ethical judgments. This is wiped out . . . God is horrific.[13]

Against this notion of the Real, one should emphasize that the Lacanian Real is not *another* Center, a "deeper," "truer" focal point or "black hole" around which symbolic formations fluctuate; rather, it is the obstacle on account of which every Center is always displaced, missed. Or, with regard to the topic of the Thing-in-itself: the Real is not the abyss of the Thing that forever eludes our grasp, and on account of which every symbolization of the Real is partial and inappropriate; it is, rather, that invisible obstacle, that distorting screen, which always "falsifies" our access to external reality, that "bone in the throat" which gives a pathological twist to every symbolization, that is to say, on account of which every symbolization misses its object. Or, with reference to the notion of the Thing as the ultimate traumatic unbearable Referent that we are unable to confront directly, since its direct presence is too blinding: what if this very notion that delusive everyday reality is a veil concealing the Horror of the unbearable Thing is false, what if the ultimate veil concealing the Real is the very notion of the horrible Thing behind the veil?

Critics of the Lacanian Real like to point out the problematic nature of the distinction between the Symbolic and the Real: is not the very act of drawing a line between the two a symbolic act *par excellence*? This criticism, however, is based on a misunderstanding that is best explained through reference to the "feminine" logic of non-All deployed by Lacan in *Seminar XX*. According to the standard reading of this logic, the "non-All" means that not all of a woman is caught in the phallic function: there is a part of her that resists symbolic castration, inclusion in the symbolic order. However, there is a problem with this reading: how, then, are we to read the complementary

formula according to which there is nothing in a woman that is not caught in the phallic function, and thus included in the symbolic order? In the volume *Reading Seminar XX*, there is an interesting divergence between Bruce Fink and Suzanne Barnard that concerns precisely this point. Fink follows the standard reading: *jouissance féminine*, that part of a woman that resists symbolization, is beyond speech; it can be experienced only in a silent mystic rapture modeled on Bernini's Saint Teresa; in other words, "there is no *jouissance* that is not phallic *jouissance*" means that feminine *jouissance* does not exist in the strict sense of symbolic existence—it is not symbolized, it just ex-sists outside speech: "it is ineffable. No words come at that moment."[14] How, then, are we to read Lacan's identification of *jouissance féminine* with the *jouissance* of speech, *jouissance* that is inherent to the act of speaking as such? It is a sign of Fink's extraordinary intellectual integrity that he openly confesses his perplexity at this point, saying that this, perhaps, is simply one example of Lacan's inconsistency, of making contradictory claims in the space of a dozen or fewer pages:

> How [*jouissance féminine* as the satisfaction of speech] is compatible with the notion that it is an ineffable experience . . . I do not profess to know. . . . Nor can I say why Lacan associates [the satisfaction of speech] specifically with women. . . . We need not assume that there is some sort of complete unity or consistency to his work.[15]

Such an inconsistency would, however, be catastrophic for Lacan, bearing in mind that this point is absolutely central to his concept of sexual difference; so, before conceding that we are dealing here with a simple inconsistency, we should try to reconcile the two statements. And does not Barnard's essay show us a way out of this deadlock when she insists on how the feminine "non-All" does not mean that there is a mysterious part of a woman outside the symbolic, but a simple absence of totalization, of the All: totalization takes place through its constitutive exception, and since, in the feminine libidinal economy, there is no Outside, no Exception to the phallic function, for that very reason a woman is immersed in the symbolic order more wholly than a man—without restraint, without exception:

> . . . the feminine structure (and, hence, Other *jouissance*) is produced in relation to a "set" that *does not* exist on the basis of an external, constitutive exception. . . . However, this does not mean, in turn, that the non-whole of feminine structure is simply outside of or indifferent to the order of masculine structure. Rather, she is in the phallic function *altogether* or, in Lacan's words, "She is not not at all there. She is there in full." . . . By being in the symbolic "without exception" then, the feminine subject has a relation to the Other that produces another "unlimited" form of *jouissance*.[16]

Recall the famous scene, in Bergman's *Persona*, of Bibi Andersson telling of a beach orgy and passionate lovemaking in which she participated: we see no flashback pictures; nonetheless, this scene is one of the most erotic in the entire history of cinema—the excitement is in the way she tells it, and this excitement that resides in speech itself is *jouissance féminine*. And, incidentally, does not the very duality of Bibi Andersson and Liv Ullman—the hysterical-talkative "ordinary" woman and the more aristocratic Ullman, the actress who withdraws into complete silence—reproduce the two sides of *jouissance féminine*: the hysterical "overidentification" with speech, and silence, withdrawal into the ineffable? Furthermore, as many a critic has noted, does this duality not reproduce the duality of analysand and analyst in the psychoanalytic treatment? Does not Ullman, "officially" a psychiatric patient, play the role of the analyst whose silence frustrates the analysand, provoking him or her into hysterical outbursts?[17] And is not this duality (in Lacanian mathemes, $ and *a*) a further indication that the position of the analyst is fundamentally feminine, in contrast to the masculine duality of S_1 and S_2 (the Master and the servant's Knowledge)?

This means that the Real is not external to the Symbolic: the Real is the Symbolic itself in the modality of non-All, lacking an external Limit/Exception. In this precise sense, the line of separation between the Symbolic and the Real is not only a symbolic gesture *par excellence*, but the very founding gesture of the Symbolic and to step into the Real does not entail abandoning language, throwing oneself into the abyss of the chaotic Real, but, on the contrary, dropping the very al-

lusion to some external point of reference which eludes the Symbolic. This is also why Hegel's logic is the (first case of the) *logic of the Real*—precisely because of Hegel's "absolute panlogicism," the erasure of any external reference. In short, the unnameable is strictly inherent to language—how does it emerge? It is not that we need words to designate objects, to symbolize reality, and that then, in surplus, there is some excess of reality, a traumatic core that resists symbolization—this obscurantist theme of the unnameable Core of Higher Reality that eludes the grasp of language is to be thoroughly rejected; not because of a naive belief that everything can be nominated, grasped by our reason, but because of the fact that the Unnameable is an effect of language. We have reality before our eyes well before language, and what language does, in its most fundamental gesture, is—as Lacan put it—the very opposite of designating reality: it *digs a hole in it*, it opens up visible/present reality toward the dimension of the immaterial/unseen. When I simply see you, I simply see you—but it is only by naming you that I can indicate the abyss in you beyond what I see.

What, then, is the Real? Jonathan Lear[18] has demonstrated how Freud's "pre-Socratic" turn to Eros and Thanatos as the two basic polar forces of the universe is a false escape, a pseudo-explanation generated by his inability properly to conceptualize the dimension of "beyond the pleasure principle" that he encountered in his practice. After establishing the pleasure principle as the "swerve" that defines the functioning of our psychic apparatus, Freud is compelled to take note of the phenomena (primarily repetitions of traumatic experiences) that disrupt this functioning: they form an exception that cannot be accounted for in terms of the pleasure principle. It was "at this point that Freud covers over the crucial nugget of his own insight: that the mind can disrupt its own functioning." Instead of trying to conceptualize this break (negativity) as such in its modalities, he wants to ground it in *another*, "deeper," positivity. In philosophical terms, the mistake here is the same as that of Kant, according to Hegel: once Kant discovers the inner inconsistency of our experiential reality, he feels compelled to posit the existence of another, inaccessible, true reality of Things-in-themselves, instead of accepting this inconsistency: "Freud is not in the process of discovering a new life force, he is in the process of trying to cover over a trauma to psychoanalytic theory. In this way, invoking Plato and the ancients gives a false sense of legitimacy and security." I must agree fully with Lear: far from being the name of an unbearable traumatic fact that is unacceptable to most of us (the fact that we "strive toward death"), the introduction of Thanatos as a cosmic principle (and the retroactive elevation of libido into Eros as the other cosmic principle) is *an attempt to cover the true trauma*. The apparent "radicalization" is, in effect, a philosophical domestication: the break that disrupts the functioning of the universe—its ontological fault, as it were—is transformed into one of the two positive cosmic principles, thus reestablishing the pacifying, harmonious vision of the universe as the battlefield of the two opposing principles. (And the theological implications here are also crucial: instead of thinking the subversive deadlock of monotheism through to the end, Freud regresses to pagan wisdom.)

Here Lear introduces the notion of "enigmatic terms," terms that seem to designate a determinate entity while, in reality, they simply stand for the failure of our understanding: when he mentions Thanatos, Freud "takes himself to be naming a real thing in the world but he is in fact injecting an enigmatic term into our discourse. There is no naming, for nothing has genuinely been isolated for him to name. His hope is to provide an explanation, in fact all we have is the illusion of one." Examples from the history of science abound here—from phlogiston (a pseudo-concept that simply betrayed the scientist's ignorance of how light actually travels) to Marx's "Asiatic mode of production" (which is a kind of negative container: the only true content of this concept is "all the modes of production that do not fit Marx's standard categorization of the modes of production"). However, is not Lear too dismissive of "enigmatic terms"? Are they really just indications of our failure and ignorance? Do they not play a key structural role? "Enigmatic term" fits exactly what Lacan calls the Master-Signifier (the phallus as signifier), the "empty" signifier without a signified: this signifier (the

paternal metaphor) is the substitute for the mother's desire, and the encounter with the mother's desire, with its enigma (*che vuoi?*, what does she want?) is the primordial encounter with the opacity of the Other. The fact that the phallus is a *signifier*, not the signified, plays a pivotal role here: the phallic signifier does not provide an explanation for the enigma of the mother's desire, it is not its signified (it does not tell us "what the mother really wants"), it simply designates the impenetrable space of her desire. Furthermore, as it was developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss (on whom Lacan relies here), *every* signifying system necessarily contains such a paradoxical excessive element, the stand-in for the enigma that eludes it.

The analogy with Lacan goes even further: in Lacanese, is Lear's point not that the Freudian pleasure principle is "non-All": there is nothing outside it, no external limits, yet it is not all, it can break down? Why, then, do breaks occur? When does our mind disrupt its own functioning? These breaks simply occur, ungrounded in any deeper Principle: as a "blind" destructive *passage à l'acte*, when we find ourselves in a deadlock; as a traumatic encounter. Again, what Lear calls the split between the psyche's normal functioning (under the swerve of the pleasure principle) and its break perfectly fits Lacan's couple of *automaton* and *tyche* (taken from Aristotle, also Lear's great authority); when Lear describes how, "after a break, the mind tries to get itself back into the swerve-like activity of sexuality, fantasy, dreaming," he thereby clearly echoes Lacan's notion of how fantasmatic formations and symbolic fictions endeavor to patch up the intrusions of the Real. Furthermore, when Lear emphasizes that trauma is just a species, one of the modalities, of the break, is this not strictly analogous to Lacan's thesis that trauma is only one of the modalities of the Real?

Is the misunderstanding between Lacan and Lear, then, purely and simply terminological? In his critique of Freud's treatment of Dora, Lear claims that Freud repeats Herr K.'s mistake, and "assumes [Dora] is already a woman, when her problem is that she is trying to figure out how to become one. He assumes she already understands erotic life; she is trying to figure out what it is." In short, Freud interprets Dora as a sexually mature woman with clear (albeit unconscious) desires, instead of perceiving her as what she was: a girl still in search of the mystery of feminine desire, and projecting the solution of this mystery into Frau K., her "subject supposed to know (how to desire)." However, Lear seems to miss the point here, which is that being in search of this mystery is the very definition of a feminine hysterical subject: there is no woman who really knows how to desire—such a woman would be the Lacanian Woman, *the* woman who doesn't exist, whose existence is a fantasy.

The more general conclusion to be drawn from this concerns the location of Eros with regard to the break. Lear tends to locate Eros within the swerve of the "pleasure principle"—however, is not love, the shattering experience of falling in love, a break *par excellence*, the mother of all breaks, the opening up of the possibility of new possibilities? Consequently, is not love itself the supreme example of the "enigmatic term"? It refers by definition to an unknowable X, to the *je ne sais quoi* that makes me fall in love—the moment I can enumerate reasons why I love you, the things about you that made me fall in love with you, we can be sure that this is not love. And, *mutatis mutandis*, does the same not hold for sexuality? Is the child's shattering encounter with the impenetrable enigma of his or her parents' sexuality not the break which disturbs his or her narcissistic closure, and compels him or her to confront new possibilities, as Jean Laplanche would have it? The further conclusion to be drawn from this difference is that, perhaps, one cannot oppose swerve and break as simply as Lear tends to do—this is how he defines swerve:

> I call this type of mental functioning *swerve* because it exercises a kind of gravitational pull on the entire field of conscious mental functioning, bending it into idiosyncratic shapes. By way of analogy, we detect the existence of black holes by the way light swerves toward them. We detect this type of unconscious process by the ways our conscious reasoning, our bodily expressions, our acts and our dreams swerve toward them.

For Lacan, however, the Real (of a trauma) is also a "swerve," a black hole detectable only through its effects, only in the way it "curves" mental space, bending the line of mental processes. And is not sexuality (this Real of the human animal) also such a swerve? Here one should endorse Freud's fundamental insight according to which sexuality does *not* follow the pleasure principle: its fundamental mode of appearance is that of a break, of the intrusion of some excessive *jouissance* that disturbs the "normal," balanced functioning of the psychic apparatus.

Does this mean that Lacan repeats Freud's mistake, and again locates the cause of the break in some preexisting positive external entity, like the Thing, *das Ding*, the impenetrable substance of the Real? Since it is Lear himself who alludes to physics (black holes), we should look here once more at the general theory of relativity, in which matter, far from causing the curvature of space, is its effect. In the same way, the Lacanian Real—the Thing—is not so much the inert presence that "curves" the symbolic space (introducing breaks in it), but, rather, the effect of these breaks. In contrast to Lear, for whom swerve is the swerve of the pleasure principle, acting as the force of stability and occasionally disrupted by breaks, for Lacan, swerve is the destabilizing force whose gravitational pull disrupts the psychic *automaton*.

A reference to Lévi-Strauss's exemplary analysis, from *Structural Anthropology*, of the spatial disposition of buildings in the Winnebago, one of the Great Lakes tribes, might be of some help here. The tribe is divided into two subgroups ("moieties"), "those who are from above" and "those who are from below"; when we ask an individual to draw on a piece of paper, or on sand, the ground-plan of his or her village (the spatial disposition of cottages), we obtain two quite different answers, depending on his or her belonging to one subgroup or the other. Both perceive the village as a circle; but for one subgroup there is another circle of central houses within this circle, so that we have two concentric circles; while for the other subgroup the circle is split in two by a clear dividing line. In other words, a member of the first subgroup (let us call it "conservative-corporatist") perceives the ground-plan of the village as a ring of houses more or less symmetrically disposed around the central temple, whereas a member of the second ("revolutionary-antagonistic") subgroup perceives his or her village as two distinct heaps of houses separated by an invisible frontier.[19] The point Lévi-Strauss wants to make is that this example should in no way entice us into cultural relativism, according to which the perception of social space depends on the observer's group-belonging: the very splitting into the two "relative" perceptions implies a hidden reference to a constant—not the objective, "actual" disposition of buildings but a traumatic kernel, a fundamental antagonism the inhabitants of the village were unable to symbolize, to account for, to "internalize," to come to terms with, an imbalance in social relations that prevented the community from stabilizing itself into a harmonious whole. The two perceptions of the ground-plan are simply two mutually exclusive endeavors to cope with this traumatic antagonism, to heal its wound by means of the imposition of a balanced symbolic structure.

It is here that we can see in what precise sense the Real intervenes through anamorphosis. First we have the "actual," "objective" arrangement of the houses, and then its two different symbolizations that both distort, in an anamorphic way, the actual arrangement. The "Real" here, however, is not the actual arrangement, but the traumatic core of the social antagonism that distorts the tribe members' view of the actual antagonism. The Real is thus the disavowed X on account of which our vision of reality is anamorphically distorted. (And, incidentally, this three-level structure is exactly homologous to Freud's three-level structure of the interpretation of dreams: the real kernel of the dream is not the dream's latent thought that is displaced/translated into the explicit texture of the dream, but the unconscious desire that inscribes itself through the very distortion of the latent thought into the explicit texture.)

This means that the Lacanian Real is on the side of virtuality against "real reality." Let us take the case of pain: there is an intimate connection between the virtualization of reality and the emergence

of an infinite and infinitized bodily pain, much stronger than the usual one: do not biogenetics and Virtual Reality combined open up new "enhanced" possibilities of torture, new and unheard-of horizons of extending our ability to endure pain (through increasing our sensory capacity to sustain pain, and, above all, through inventing new forms of inflicting pain by directly attacking the brain centers for pain, bypassing sensorial perception)? Perhaps, the ultimate Sadean image of an "undead" victim of torture who can sustain endless pain, without having the escape into death at his or her disposal, is also about to become reality. In such a constellation, the ultimate real/impossible pain is no longer the pain of the real body, but the "absolute" virtual–real pain caused by Virtual Reality, in which I move (and, of course, the same goes for sexual pleasure). An even more "real" approach is opened up by the prospect of the direct manipulation of our neurons: although it is not "real" in the sense of being part of the reality in which we live, this pain is impossible–real.

And does the same not go for emotions? Take Hitchcock's dream of the direct manipulation of emotions: in the future, a director will no longer have to invent intricate narratives, and shoot them in a convincingly heartbreaking way, in order to generate the proper emotional response in the viewer; he will be able to use a computer keyboard connected directly with the viewer's brain, so that, if he presses the right buttons, the viewer will experience sorrow, terror, sympathy, fear . . . he will experience them *for real*, to an extent never equaled by situations "in real life" that evoke fear or sorrow. It is especially crucial to distinguish this procedure from that of Virtual Reality: fear is aroused not by generating virtual images and sounds that provoke fear, but through a *direct* intervention that bypasses the level of perception altogether. This, not the "return to real life" from the artificial virtual environment, is the Real generated by radical virtualization itself. What we experience here at its purest is thus the gap between reality and the Real: the Real of, say, the sexual pleasure generated by direct neuronal intervention does not take place in the reality of bodily contacts, yet it is "more real than reality," more intense. This Real thus undermines the division between objects in reality and their virtual simulacra: if, in Virtual Reality, I stage an impossible fantasy, I can experience there an "artificial" sexual enjoyment that is much more "real" than anything I can experience in "real reality."

The Real is thus *simultaneously* the Thing to which direct access is not possible and the obstacle that prevents this direct access; the Thing that eludes our grasp and the distorting screen that makes us miss the Thing. More precisely, the Real is ultimately the very shift of perspective from the first standpoint to the second. Remember Adorno's well-known analysis of the antagonistic character of the notion of society: on a first approach, the split between the two notions of society (the Anglo-Saxon individualistic-nominalistic notion, and the Durkheimian organicist notion of society as a totality that preexists individuals) seems irremediable; we seem to be dealing with a true Kantian antinomy that cannot be resolved through a higher "dialectical synthesis," and elevates society into an inaccessible Thing-in-itself; on a second approach, however, we should merely take note of how this radical antinomy that seems to preclude our access to the Thing *already is the Thing itself*—the fundamental feature of today's society is the irreconcilable antagonism between Totality and the individual.

Is this shift not structurally analogous to the one in the Russian joke about Rabinovitch from the late Soviet era? Rabinovitch wants to emigrate from the Soviet Union for two reasons: "First, I'm afraid that, if the socialist order disintegrates, all the blame for the Communists' crimes will be put on us, the Jews." To the state bureaucrat's exclamation "But nothing will ever change in the Soviet Union! Socialism is here to stay, forever!," Rabinovitch calmly answers: "That's my second reason!" The very problem—obstacle—retroactively appears as its own solution, since what prevents us from accessing the Thing directly is the Thing itself. The change here lies only in the shift of perspective—and, in exactly the same way, the final twist in Kafka's parable about the Door of the Law relies on a mere shift of perspective: the man from the country, confronted with the Door of the Law preventing his access to the terrifying Thing (the Law), is

told that, from the very beginning, the door has been there only for him—that is to say, he has been included in the Law from the very beginning—the Law was not just the Thing that fascinated his gaze, it always-already returned its gaze. And, to go a step further, is not exactly the same shift at the very core of the Christian experience? It is the very radical separation of man from God that unites us with God, since, in the figure of Christ, God is thoroughly separated from himself—thus the point is not to "overcome" the gap that separates us from God, but to take note of how *this gap is internal to God Himself* (Christianity as the ultimate version of the Rabinovitch joke).

This notion of shift also allows us a new approach to Nietzsche, who, in one and the same text (*Beyond Good and Evil*), seems to advocate two opposed epistemological stances:[20] on the one hand, the notion of truth as the unbearable Real Thing, as dangerous, even lethal, like the direct gaze into Plato's sun, so that the problem is how much truth a man can endure without diluting or falsifying it; on the other, the "postmodern" notion that appearance is more valuable than stupid reality: that, ultimately, there is no final Reality, just the interplay of multiple appearances, so that one should abandon the very opposition between reality and appearance—man's greatness is that he is able to give priority to brilliant aesthetic appearance over gray reality. So, in Badiou's terms, the passion for the Real versus the passion for semblance. How are we to read these two opposed stances together? Is Nietzsche simply inconsistent here, oscillating between two mutually exclusive views? Or is there a "third way"? That is to say: what if the two opposed options (passion for the Real/passion for the semblance) illustrate Nietzsche's struggle, his failure to articulate the "right" position whose formulation eluded him? Back to our example from Lévi-Strauss: it should now be clear what his position is. Everything is not just the interplay of appearances, there is a Real—this Real, however, is not the inaccessible Thing, but the *gap* that prevents our access to it, the "rock" of the antagonism that distorts our view of the perceived object through a partial perspective. And, again, the "truth" is not the "real" state of things, that is, the "direct" view of the object without perspectival distortion, but the very Real of the antagonism that causes perspectival distortion. The site of truth is not the way "things really are in themselves," beyond their perspectival distortions, but the very gap, passage, that separates one perspective from another, the gap (in this case social antagonism) that makes the two perspectives radically *incommensurable*. The "Real as impossible" is the cause of the impossibility of ever attaining the "neutral" nonperspectival view of the object. There is a truth; everything is not relative—but this truth is the truth of the perspectival distortion as such, not the truth distorted by the partial view from a one-sided perspective.

So when Nietzsche affirms that truth is a perspective, this assertion is to be read together with Lenin's notion of the partisan/partial character of knowledge (the (in)famous *partij'nost*): in a class society, "true" objective knowledge is possible only from the "interested" revolutionary standpoint. This means neither an epistemologically "naive" reliance on the "objective knowledge" available when we get rid of our partial prejudices and preconceptions, and adopt a "neutral" view, nor the (complementary) relativist view that there is no ultimate truth, only multiple subjective perspectives. Both terms have to be fully asserted: there is, among the multitude of opinions, a true knowledge, and this knowledge is accessible only from an "interested" partial position.[21]

There are two fundamentally different ways for us to relate to the Void of the Real, best captured by the paradox of Achilles and the tortoise: while Achilles can easily overtake the tortoise, he can never reach her. We either posit the Void as the impossible-real Limit of the human experience that we can approach only indefinitely, the absolute Thing toward which we have to maintain a proper distance—if we get too close to it, we get burned by the sun. . . . Our attitude toward the Void is thus thoroughly ambivalent, marked by simultaneous attraction and repulsion. Or we posit it as that through which we should (and, in a way, even always-already have) pass(ed)—therein lies the gist of the Hegelian concept of "tarrying with the negative," which Lacan illustrated in his notion of the deep connection between the death drive and creative sublimation: in order for

(symbolic) creation to take place, the death drive (the Hegelian self-relating absolute negativity) has to accomplish its work of, precisely, emptying the place, and thus making it ready for creation. Instead of the old topic of phenomenal objects disappearing/dissolving in the vortex of the Thing, we get objects which are *nothing* but the Void of the Thing embodied, or, in Hegelese, objects in which negativity assumes positive existence.

In religious terms, this passage from the Impossible-Real One (Thing), refracted/reflected in the multitude of its appearances, to the Twosome is the very passage from Judaism to Christianity: the Jewish God is the Real Thing of Beyond, while the divine dimension of Christ is just a tiny grimace, an imperceptible shade, which differentiates him from other (ordinary) humans. Christ is not "sublime" in the sense of an "object elevated to the dignity of a Thing," he is not a stand-in for the impossible Thing-God; he is, rather, "the Thing itself," or, more accurately, "the Thing itself" is nothing but the rupture/gap which makes Christ not fully human. Christ is thus the ultimate *Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, the man without properties, as Robert Musil would have put it: he is "more than man"—and why should we not take the risk here of referring to Nietzsche: he is *overman*?—precisely insofar as one can say, apropos of his figure: "Ecce homo," precisely insofar as he is a man *kat' exochen*, "as such," a man with no distinctions, no particular features. This means that Christ is a singular universal—just as, for Rancière, those without a proper place within the social order stand for humanity as such, in its universal dimension.[22] This does not mean that Christ is somehow divided between the "human" and the "divine" parts of his nature: the minimal difference which we encounter in the logic of subtraction is not the difference between two parts, but the difference between two aspects of—or, to put it in Nietzsche's terms again, two *perspectives* on—one and the same entity; it is the difference of an entity with itself. Christ is not man *and* overman: he is overman insofar as he is a man *sans phrase*, that is, what separates the two is just a shift in perspective.[23]

In other words, Christ is the very minimal difference between "man" and "overman"—what Nietzsche, that consummate and self-professed Antichrist, called "High Noon": the thin edge between Before and After, the Old and the New, the Real and the Symbolic, between God-Father-Thing and the community of the Spirit. As such, he is both at the same time: the extreme point of the Old (the culmination of the logic of sacrifice, himself standing for the extreme sacrifice, for the self-relating exchange in which we no longer pay God, but God pays for us to Himself, and thus involves us in debt indefinitely), and its overcoming (the shift of perspective) into the New. It is just a tiny nuance, an almost imperceptible shift in perspective, that distinguishes Christ's sacrifice from the atheist assertion of a life which needs no sacrifice. This, then, is, perhaps, all that happens in the passage from Judaism to Christianity: this shift from purification to subtraction.

No wonder, then, that Nietzsche's attitude toward Christ himself was far more ambivalent than his attitude toward Christianity: when Nietzsche elevates *amor fati*, the full acceptance of suffering and pain, as the only way to redemption—that is, to a full assertion of life—is he not uncannily close to Christ's message of death on the Cross as the triumph of eternal life? This means that the properly Christian Redemption is not simply the undoing of the Fall, but *stricto sensu* its repetition. The key to Saint Paul's theology is repetition: Christ as the redemptive repetition of Adam. Adam has fallen, Christ has risen again; Christ is therefore "the last Adam" (1 Corinthians 15:45–49). Through Adam, as sons of Adam, we are lost, condemned to sin and suffering; through Christ, we are redeemed. This, however, does not mean that Adam's Fall (and the subsequent instauration of the Law) was a simple contingency—that is to say, that, if Adam had chosen obedience to God, there would have been no sin and no Law: *there would also have been no love*.

Adam's first choice was thus forced: the first choice has to be that of sin. This logic was first deployed by Hegel in his opposition of abstract and concrete universality. On a first approach, things may seem

clear and unambiguous: the philosopher of abstract universality is Kant (and, in Kant's steps, Fichte); in Kant's philosophy, the Universal (the moral Law) functions as the abstract *Sollen*, that which "ought to be," and which, as such, possesses a terrorist/subversive potential—the Universal stands for an impossible/unconditional demand, whose power of negativity is destined to undermine any concrete totality; against this tradition of abstract/negative universality opposed to its particular content, Hegel emphasizes how true universality is actualized in the series of concrete determinations perceived by the abstract point of view of Understanding as the obstacle to the full realization of the Universal (for example, the universal moral Duty is actualized, becomes effective, through the concrete wealth of particular human passions and strivings devalued by Kant as "pathological" obstacles). However, are matters really so simple?

Let us recall Hegel's analysis of phrenology, which closes the chapter on "Observing Reason" in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*: Hegel resorts here to an explicit phallic metaphor in order to explain the opposition of the two possible readings of the proposition "the Spirit is a bone" (the vulgar materialist "reductionist" reading—the shape of a person's skull actually and directly determines the features of his or her mind—and the speculative reading—the spirit is strong enough to assert its identity with even the most inert stuff, and to "sublate" it—that is to say, even the most inert stuff cannot escape the Spirit's power of mediation). The vulgar materialist reading is like the approach which sees in the phallus only the organ of urination, while the speculative reading is also able to discern in it the much higher function of insemination (that is, precisely, "conception" as the biological anticipation of concept). On a first approach, we are dealing here with the well-known elementary movement of *Aufhebung* ("sublation"): you must go through the lowest in order once more to reach the highest, the lost totality (you must lose immediate reality in the self-contraction of the "night of the world" in order to regain it as "posited," mediated by the symbolic activity of the subject; you must renounce the immediate organic Whole, and abandon yourself to the mortifying activity of abstract Understanding, in order to regain the lost totality at a higher, "mediated" level, as the totality of Reason). This move thus seems to offer itself as an ideal target of the standard criticism: yes, of course, Hegel recognizes the horror of the psychotic self-contraction and its "loss of reality," yes, he acknowledges the need for abstract dismemberment, but only as a step, a detour, on the triumphant path which, according to the inexorable dialectical necessity, leads us back to the reconstituted organic Whole. My contention is that such a reading misses the point of Hegel's argumentation:

> The depth which the Spirit brings forth from within—but only as far as its picture-thinking consciousness where it lets it remain—and the ignorance of this consciousness about what it really is saying, are the same conjunction of the high and the low which, in the living being, Nature naively expresses when it combines the organ of its highest fulfillment, the organ of generation, with the organ of urination. The infinite judgment, qua infinite, would be the fulfillment of life that comprehends itself; the consciousness of the infinite judgment that remains at the level of picture-thinking behaves as urination.[74]

A close reading of this passage makes it clear that Hegel's point is not that, in contrast to the vulgar empiricist mind, which sees only urination, the proper speculative attitude has to choose insemination. The paradox is that the direct choice of insemination is the sure way to miss it: it is not possible to choose the "true meaning" directly. That is, one has to begin by making the "wrong" choice (of urination)—the true speculative meaning emerges only through repeated reading, as the aftereffect (or byproduct) of the first, "wrong," reading. And the same goes for social life, in which the direct choice of the "concrete universality" of a particular ethical life-world can end only in a regression to a premodern organic society that denies the infinite right of subjectivity as the fundamental feature of modernity. Since the subject-citizen of a modern state can no longer accept his immersion in some particular social role that confers on him a determinate place within the organic social Whole, the only way to the

rational totality of the modern State leads through the horror of the revolutionary Terror: one should ruthlessly tear up the constraints of premodern organic "concrete universality," and fully assert the infinite right of subjectivity in its abstract negativity. In other words, the point of Hegel's deservedly famous analysis of the revolutionary Terror in *Phenomenology* is not the rather obvious insight into how the revolutionary project involved the unilateral direct assertion of abstract Universal Reason, and was, as such, doomed to perish in self-destructive fury, since it was unable to organize the transposition of its revolutionary energy into a concrete, stable, and differentiated social order; Hegel's point is, rather, the enigma of why, despite the fact that revolutionary Terror was a historical deadlock, we have to pass through it in order to arrive at the modern rational State.

There is a clear parallel between this necessity of making the wrong choice in order to arrive at the proper result (of choosing "urination" in order to arrive at "insemination"), and the structure of the Rabinovitch joke, in which, also, the only way to arrive at the true reason is via the wrong, first reason. Surprisingly, one can learn the same lesson even from Colin Wilson's *From Atlantis to the Sphinx*, one in the endless series of New Age airport pocketbook variations on the theme of "recovering the lost wisdom of the ancient world" (the book's subtitle). In his concluding chapter, Wilson opposes two types of knowledge: the "ancient" intuitive, encompassing one, which makes us experience the underlying rhythm of reality directly ("right-brain awareness"), and the modern knowledge of self-consciousness and the rational dissection of reality ("left-brain awareness"). After all his high praise for the magic powers of ancient collective consciousness, the author acknowledges that, although this type of knowledge had enormous advantages, "it was essentially limited. It was too pleasant, too relaxed, and its achievements tended to be communal"; so it was necessary for human evolution to escape from this state to the more active attitude of rational technological domination. Today, of course, we are confronted with the prospect of reuniting the two halves, and "recovering the lost wisdom," combining it with modern achievements (the usual story of how modern science itself, in its most radical achievements—quantum physics, and so on—already points toward the self-sublation of the mechanistic view in the direction of the holistic universe dominated by a hidden pattern of the "dance of life").

Here, however, Wilson's book takes an unexpected turn: how will this synthesis occur? Wilson is intelligent enough to reject both predominant views: the directly premodern one, according to which the history of the "rationalist West" was a mere aberration, and we should simply return to the old wisdom; as well as the pseudo-Hegelian notion of a "synthesis" that would somehow maintain the balance between the two spiritual principles, enabling us to keep the best of both worlds—that is, to regain the lost Unity while maintaining the achievements based on its loss (technical progress, individualist dynamics, etc.). Against both these versions, Wilson emphasizes that the next stage, overcoming the limitations of the Western rationalist/individualist stance, must somehow emerge from within this Western stance. Wilson locates its source in the force of imagination: the Western principle of self-consciousness and individuation also brought about a breathtaking rise in our imaginative capacity, and if we develop this capacity to its uttermost, it will lead to a new level of collective consciousness, of shared imagination. So the surprising conclusion is that the longed-for next step in human evolution, the step beyond the alienation from nature and the universe as a Whole, "has already happened. It has been happening for the past 3,500 years. Now all we have to do is recognize it" (the last sentence of the book).

So what happened 3,500 years ago—that is, around 2000 BC? The decline of the Old Kingdom of Egypt, the highest achievement of ancient wisdom, and the rise of the new, violent cultures out of which modern European consciousness arose—in short, the Fall itself, the fateful forgetting of the ancient wisdom that enabled us to maintain a direct contact with the "dance of life." If we take these statements literally, the unavoidable conclusion is that the moment of the Fall (the forgetting of the ancient wisdom) coincides with its exact opposite—with the longed-for next step in evolution. Here we

have the properly Hegelian matrix of development: the Fall is *in itself* already its own self-sublation, the wound is *in itself* already its own healing, so that the perception that we are dealing with the Fall is ultimately a misperception, an effect of our distorted perspective—all we have to do is to accomplish the move from In-itself to For-itself, that is, to change our perspective, and recognize how the longed-for reversal is already operative in what has been going on for a long time. The inner logic of the movement from one stage to another is not that from one extreme to the opposite extreme, and then to their higher unity; the second passage is, rather, simply the radicalization of the first passage. The problem with the "Western mechanistic attitude" is not that it forgot-repressed the ancient holistic Wisdom, but that it *did not break with it thoroughly enough*: it continued to perceive the new universe (of the discursive stance) from the perspective of the old one, of the "ancient wisdom," and, of course, from this perspective, the new universe cannot but appear as the catastrophic world which came "after the Fall." We rise again from the Fall not by undoing its effects, but in recognizing the longed-for liberation in the Fall itself.[25]

It is with regard to the theme of the Fall that the opposition between Gnosticism and Christianity is most conspicuous. Both share the notion of the Fall—for Gnosticism, however, we are dealing with the Fall from the pure spiritual dimension into the inert material world, with the notion that we strive to return to our lost spiritual home; while for Christianity, the Fall is not really a Fall at all, but "in itself" its very opposite, the emergence of freedom. There is no place from which we have fallen; what came before was just the stupid natural existence. The task is thus not to return to a previous "higher" existence, but to transform our lives in this world. In Saint Thomas's Gospel, we can read: "His disciples said to him: 'When will the resurrection of the dead take place, and when will the new world come?' He said to them: 'That (resurrection) which you are awaiting has (already) come, but you do not recognize it.'"[26] This is the key "Hegelian" point of Christianity: the resurrection of the dead is not a "real event" which will take place sometime in the future, but something that is already here—we merely have to shift our subjective position.

The problem with the Fall is thus not that it is in itself a Fall, but, precisely, that, *in itself, it is already a Salvation which we misrecognize as a Fall.* Consequently, Salvation consists not in our reversing the direction of the Fall, but in recognizing Salvation in the Fall itself. To put it in simplified narrative terms: it is not that we must first make the wrong move, introducing a split, so that we can then heal the wound, and return to a higher unity: the first move is already the right move, but we can learn this only too late. Here again, one should apply Hegel's dictum that Evil resides in the gaze which perceives Evil: the true Fall is in the very gaze which misperceives the first move as a Fall. It is not that things went wrong, downhill, first with Adam, and were then restored with Christ: Adam and Christ are *one and the same* ("Christ is Adam"—perhaps the ultimate speculative judgment); all that changes in order for us to pass from one to the other is the perspective. Here we should recall the Hegelian notion of speculative judgment, which *should be read twice*: to get at its truth, we should not go on to another judgment, but just *read the same judgment again, including in it our own position of enunciation.*

And the same goes for the relationship between "abstract" and "concrete" universality: in a first move, universality has to be asserted in its negativity, as exclusive of all particular content—that is to say, not as an all-encompassing container, but as the destructive force which undermines every particular content. One should not oppose to this violent force of abstraction, of tearing-apart the concrete fabric of reality, concrete universality as the totality which mediates all particular content within its organic Whole; on the contrary, the true Hegelian "concrete universality" is the very movement of negativity which splits universality *from within*, reducing it to one of the particular elements, one of its own species. It is only at this moment, when universality, as it were, loses the distance of an abstract container, and *enters its own frame*, that it becomes truly *concrete*.

Adam and Christ also relate as "negation" and "negation of negation," but in the above-mentioned precise meaning—Adam is

Christ "in itself," and Christ's Redemption is not the "negation" of the Fall, but its accomplishment, in exactly the same sense that, according to Saint Paul, Christ accomplishes the Law. In a wonderful alternative history essay, "Pontius Pilate Spares Jesus,"[27] Josiah Ober entertains the hypothesis that Pilate did not yield to the pressure of the mob, and spared Christ, who survived, and thrived to a very great age as a successful preacher, supported by the Roman authorities against the Jewish establishment; his sect gradually became dominant, and also became the Roman state religion, albeit in its more Jewish version, without the Cross and Redemption by Christ's death. The coincidence of Fall and Redemption makes this hypothesis *stricto sensu* beside the point.[28]

Both Christianity and Hegel transpose the gap which separates us from the Absolute into the Absolute itself. In terms of the gap that separates man from God, this means that this gap is transposed into God Himself, as the gap between Christ and the God-Father—Christ is the new, second, Job. In ethical terms, this means that we should acknowledge the positive force of Evil without regressing to Manichean dualism. The only way to do this was deployed by Schelling: Evil is not "substantially" different from Good, a positive force opposing it—Evil is *substantially the same* as Good, simply a different mode of (or perspective on) it. To put it in Kierkegaard's terms, Evil is Good "in becoming": the radically negative break, rupture, with the old substantial order as the condition of a new universality.

In a classic Bosnian joke, a guy visits his best friend, and finds him playing tennis in a backyard court—Agassi, Sampras, and other top players are waiting there for a game with him. Surprised, the guy asks his friend: "But you were never much of a tennis player! How did you manage to improve your game so fast?" The friend answers: "You see that pond behind my house? There's a magic golden fish in it; if you tell her a wish, she immediately makes it come true!" The friend goes to the pond, sees the fish, tells her that he wants his closet full of money, and runs home to check up on it. When he approaches his closet, he sees honey dripping out from it everywhere. Furious, he runs back to his friend, and tells him: "But I wanted money, not honey!" The friend replies calmly: "Oh, I forgot to tell you—the fish has impaired hearing, and sometimes misunderstands the wish. Can't you see how bored I am, running around playing this stupid game? Do you think I really asked for an outstanding tennis?" Is there not a Kafkaesque twist to this story? There is a God; He is good, and answers our requests—the origin of evil, and of our misfortunes, is just that He does not hear very well and often misunderstands our prayers.[29]

In his reading of Sylvia Plath's poem "The Other," Tim Kendall points out the limitations of "decoding" her late poems—that is, of precisely identifying the biographical details to which a poem refers: the impossibility of doing it, the way the reader gets lost in the multitude of contradictory indications concerning not only the events in question (is this a reference to that precise conflict between Sylvia and Ted recorded in her diary?); but also the fact that the very identity of the speaker (is the "I" who speaks here Sylvia, or her rival, Assia?) and the tone in which a line is meant (irony? disdain? is Assia perceived as a threat to Sylvia, or as her intimate double, part of herself? or both?), "force the reader to become implicated in this unstable world, where meaning can only be derived from the external imposition of tone and emphasis. The reader must perform the same cognitive leaps, and pursue the same hints and suspicions, as the poem's speaker."[30] In addition to all this, it is not simply that one failure overlaps with another: it is through this very failure to show its "true reference in reality" directly that a poem sublates its "pathological" idiosyncrasy, and generates its properly *universal* artistic impact. This shift, this sudden recognition of how the very obstacle preventing us from reaching the Thing Itself enables us to identify directly with it (with the deadlock at its heart), defines the properly Christian form of identification: it is ultimately *identification with a failure*—and, consequently, since the object of identification is God, God Himself must be shown to fail.

In his (unpublished) seminar on anxiety (1962–1963), Lacan explained why a certain fragment of our daily life is picked up as the element into which, in our dreams, an unconscious desire gets

invested (the function of the "daily residues [*Tagesreste*]": as a rule, the selected fragment has the character of something unfinished, open (a sentence cut short, an act not brought to fruition, something which was about to happen but, due to some circumstance or other, did not happen): "*The condition of interruption, linked to the message, causes a coincidence with the structure of desire, which by definition has a dimension of lack or inconclusion.*"[31] Are we not, in the case of Christian identification, dealing with something similar? In our very failure, we identify with the divine failure, with Christ's confrontation with "*Che vuoi?*," with the enigma of the Other's desire ("Why are you doing this to me, Father? What do you want from me?"). In one of the most intriguing passages from 2 Corinthians, Paul defends himself against false apostles by assuming a stance of carnivalesque foolishness:

> I wish that you would bear with me in a little foolishness, but indeed you do bear with me. For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading as Christ's apostles. And no wonder, for even Satan masquerades as an angel of light. It is no great thing therefore if his ministers also masquerade as servants of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works. I say again, let no one think me foolish. But if so, yet receive me as foolish, that I also may boast a little. That which I speak, I don't speak according to the Lord, but as in foolishness, in this confidence of boasting. Seeing that many boast after the flesh, I will also boast. For you bear with the foolish gladly, being wise. If I must boast, I will boast of the things that concern my weakness. Most gladly therefore I will rather glory in my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest on me. Therefore I take pleasure in weaknesses, in injuries, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then am I strong. I have become foolish in boasting. You compelled me, for I ought to have been commended by you, for in nothing was I inferior to the very best apostles, though I am nothing.

This reference to the carnivalesque reversal is not to be understood along the lines of "I am weak in order to make the strength of God visible," and so on. It is that, in my weakness and ridicule, when I am mocked and laughed at, I am identified with Christ, who was mocked and laughed at—Christ, the ultimate divine Fool, deprived of all majesty and dignity. In Paul's view, false apostles are mighty, taking themselves seriously, so the only way for a true prophet to behave is to mock oneself like a fool. However, it is no less wrong simply to identify Paul's stance with the Bakhtinian carnivalesque reversal of existing relations of authority: this notion is deeply pagan, it relies on the insight that hierarchical power relations are fragile, since they disturb the natural balance of the Order of Things, so, sooner or later, authority has to return to dust.

The true intervention of Eternity in Time occurs when this Lord of Misrule, the Fool-King, does not stand just for a passing carnivalesque suspension of Order, reminding us of the instability of things in their eternal circuit, of the great Wheel of Fortune ("What goes up must come down!"), but starts to function as a founding figure of a New Order. We are one with God only when God is no longer one with Himself, but abandons Himself, "internalizes" the radical distance which separates us from Him. Our radical experience of separation from God is the very feature which unites us with Him—not in the usual mystical sense that only through such an experience do we open ourselves to the radical Otherness of God, but in a sense similar to the one in which Kant claims that humiliation and pain are the only transcendental feelings: it is preposterous to think that I can identify myself with the divine bliss—only when I experience the infinite pain of separation from God do I share an experience with God Himself (Christ on the Cross).

CHAPTER 4

FROM LAW TO LOVE . . . AND BACK

The paradox of the "Higgs field" is widely discussed in contemporary particle physics. Left to their own devices in an environment to which they can pass on their energy, all physical systems will eventually assume a state of lowest energy; to put it in another way, the more mass we take from a system, the more we lower its energy level, until we reach the vacuum state at which the energy level is zero. There are, however, phenomena which compel us to posit the hypothesis that there has to be something (some substance) that we *cannot take away from a given system without raising that system's energy*—this "something" is called the Higgs field: once this field *appears* in a vessel that has been pumped empty, and whose temperature has been lowered as much as possible, its energy will be further *lowered*. The "something" that thus appears is a something that contains less energy than nothing, a "something" that is characterized by an overall negative energy—in short, what we get here is the physical version of how "something appears out of nothing."

On the philosophico-ontological level, this is what Lacan is aiming at when he emphasizes the difference between the Freudian death drive and the so-called "nirvana principle" according to which every life system tends toward the lowest level of tension, ultimately toward death: "nothingness" (the void, being deprived of all substance) and the lowest level of energy paradoxically no longer coincide, that is, it is "cheaper" (it costs the system less energy) to persist in "something" than to dwell in "nothing," at the lowest level of tension, or in the void, the dissolution of all order. It is this distance that sustains the death drive: far from being the same as the nirvana principle (the striving toward the dissolution of all life tension, the longing for the return to original nothingness), the death drive is the tension which persists and insists beyond and against the nirvana principle. In other words, far from being opposed to the pleasure principle, the nirvana principle is its highest and most radical expression. In this precise sense, the death drive stands for its exact opposite, for the dimension of the "undead," of a spectral life which insists beyond (biological) death. And, in psychoanalysis proper, does not this paradox of the Higgs field also embody the mystery of

symbolic castration—*a deprivation, a gesture of taking away, which is in itself giving*, productive, generating, opening up and sustaining the space in which something(s) can appear?

Insofar as "death" and "life" designate for Saint Paul two existential (subjective) positions, not "objective" facts, we are fully justified in raising the old Pauline question: who is really alive today?[1] What if we are "really alive" only if and when we engage ourselves with an excessive intensity which puts us beyond "mere life"? What if, when we focus on mere survival, even if it is qualified as "having a good time," what we ultimately lose is life itself? What if the Palestinian suicide bomber on the point of blowing himself (and others) up is, in an emphatic sense, "more alive" than the American soldier engaged in a war in front of a computer screen hundreds of miles away from the enemy, or a New York yuppie jogging along the Hudson river in order to keep his body in shape? Or, in terms of the psychoanalytic clinic, what if a hysteric is truly alive in her permanent, excessive, provoking questioning of her existence, while an obsessional is the very model of choosing a "life in death"? That is to say, is not the ultimate aim of his compulsive rituals to prevent the "thing" from happening—this "thing" being the excess of life itself? Is not the catastrophe he fears the fact that, finally, *something will really happen* to him? Or, in terms of the revolutionary process, what if the difference that separates Lenin's era from Stalinism is, again, the difference between life and death?

There is an apparently marginal feature which clearly illustrates this point: the basic attitude of a Stalinist Communist is that of following the correct Party line against "Rightist" or "Leftist" deviation—in short, to steer a safe middle course; for authentic Leninism, in clear contrast, there is ultimately only one deviation, the Centrist one—that of "playing it safe," of opportunistically avoiding the risk of clearly and excessively "taking sides." There was no "deeper historical necessity," for example, in the sudden shift of Soviet policy from "War Communism" to the "New Economic Policy" in 1921—it was just a desperate strategic zigzag between the Leftist and the Rightist line, or, as Lenin himself put it in 1922, the Bolsheviks made "all the possible mistakes." This excessive "taking sides," this permanent imbalance of zigzag, is ultimately (the revolutionary political) life itself—for a Leninist, the ultimate name of the counterrevolutionary Right is "Center" itself, the fear of introducing a radical imbalance into the social edifice.

It is a properly Nietzschean paradox that the greatest loser in this apparent assertion of Life against all transcendent Causes is actual life itself. What makes life "worth living" is the very *excess of life*: the awareness that there is something for which we are ready to risk our life (we may call this excess "freedom," "honor," "dignity," "autonomy," etc.). Only when we are ready to take this risk are we really alive. So when Hölderlin wrote: "To live is to defend a form," this form is not simply a *Lebensform*, but the form of the excess-of-life, the way this excess violently inscribes itself into the life-texture. Chesterton makes this point apropos of the paradox of courage:

> A soldier surrounded by enemies, if he is to cut his way out, needs to combine a strong desire for living with a strange carelessness about dying. He must not merely cling to life, for then he will be a coward, and will not escape. He must not merely wait for death, for then he will be a suicide, and will not escape. He must seek his life in a spirit of furious indifference to it; he must desire life like water and yet drink death like wine.[2]

The "postmetaphysical" survivalist stance of the Last Men ends up in an anemic spectacle of life dragging on as its own shadow. It is within this horizon that we should appreciate today's growing rejection of the death penalty: what we should be able to discern is the hidden "biopolitics" which sustains this rejection. Those who assert the "sacredness of life," defending it against the threat of transcendent powers which parasitize on it, end up in a "supervised world in which we'll live painlessly, safely—and tediously,"[3] a world in which, for the sake of its very official goal—a long, pleasurable life—all real pleasures are prohibited or strictly controlled (smoking, drugs, food. . .). Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* is the latest example of this survivalist attitude toward dying, with its "demystifying"

presentation of war as a meaningless slaughter which nothing can really justify—as such, it provides the best possible justification for Colin Powell's "No-casualties-on-our-side" military doctrine.

On today's market, we find a whole series of products deprived of their malignant property: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol. . . . And the list goes on: what about virtual sex as sex without sex, the Colin Powell doctrine of warfare with no casualties (on our side, of course) as warfare without warfare, the contemporary redefinition of politics as the art of expert administration as politics without politics, up to today's tolerant liberal multiculturalism as an experience of the Other deprived of its Otherness (the idealized Other who dances fascinating dances, and has an ecologically sound, holistic approach to reality, while features like wife-beating remain out of sight)? Virtual Reality simply generalizes this procedure of offering a product deprived of its substance: it provides reality itself deprived of its substance, of the hard resistant kernel of the Real—just as decaffeinated coffee smells and tastes like real coffee without being the real coffee, Virtual Reality is experienced as reality without being so.

Is this not the attitude of the hedonistic Last Man? Everything is permitted, you can enjoy everything, but deprived of its substance, which makes it dangerous. (This is also the Last Man's revolution—"revolution without revolution.") Is this not one of the two versions of Lacan's anti-Dostoevsky motto "If God doesn't exist, everything is prohibited"? (1) God is dead, we live in a permissive universe, you should strive for pleasure, you should avoid dangerous excesses, so everything is prohibited if it is not deprived of its substance. (2) If God is dead, the superego enjoins you to enjoy, but every determinate enjoyment is already a betrayal of the unconditional one, so it should be prohibited. The nutritive version of this is to enjoy the Thing Itself directly: why bother with coffee? Inject caffeine directly into your bloodstream! Why bother with sensual perceptions and excitation by external reality? Take drugs which directly affect your brain! And if God does exist, then everything is permitted—to those who claim to act directly on behalf of God, as the instruments of His will; clearly, a direct link to God justifies our violation of any "merely human" constraints and considerations (as in Stalinism, where the reference to the big Other of historical Necessity justifies absolute ruthlessness).

Today's hedonism combines pleasure with constraint: it is no longer the old notion of the right balance between pleasure and constraint, but a kind of pseudo-Hegelian immediate coincidence of opposites: action and reaction should coincide; the very thing that causes damage should already be the remedy. The ultimate example is arguably a *chocolate laxative*, available in the USA, with the paradoxical injunction: Do you have constipation? Eat more of this chocolate! (that is, of the very thing that causes constipation). Do we not find here a weird version of Wagner's famous "Only the spear which caused the wound can heal it," from *Parsifal*? And is not a negative proof of the hegemony of this stance the fact that genuine unconstrained consumption (in all its forms: drugs, free sex, smoking) is emerging as the main danger? The fight against such danger is one of the principal motivations of today's biopolitics. Solutions are desperately sought that would reproduce the paradox of the chocolate laxative. The main contender is safe sex—a term which makes us appreciate the truth of the old saying "Isn't having sex with a condom like taking a shower with your raincoat on?" The ultimate goal here would be, along the lines of decaffeinated coffee, to invent opium without opium: no wonder marijuana is so popular among liberals who want to legalize it—it already is a kind of opium without opium.

In his scathing remarks on Wagner, Nietzsche diagnosed Wagner's decadence as consisting in a combination of asceticism and excessive morbid excitation: the excitation is false, artificial, morbid, hysterical, and the ensuing peace is also a fake, that of an almost medical tranquilization. This, for Nietzsche, was the universe of *Parsifal*, which embodied Wagner's capitulation to the appeal of Christianity: the ultimate fake of Christianity is that it sustains its official message of inner peace and redemption by a morbid excitation, namely, a fixation on the suffering, mutilated corpse of Christ. The very term

passion here is revealing in its ambiguity: passion as suffering, passion as passion—as if the only thing that can arouse passion is the sick spectacle of passive suffering. The key question, of course, is: can Saint Paul be reduced to mixture of morbid excitation and ascetic renunciation? Is not the Pauline *agape* precisely an attempt to break out of the morbid cycle of law and sin sustaining each other?

More generally, what, exactly, is the status of the excess, the too-muchness (Eric Santner) of life with regard to itself? Is this excess generated only by the turn of life against itself, so that it actualizes itself only in the guise of the morbid undeadness of the sick passion? Or, in Lacanese: is the excess of *jouissance* over pleasure generated only through the reversal of the repression of desire into the desire for repression, of the renunciation of desire into the desire for renunciation, and so on? It is crucial to reject this version, and to assert some kind of primordial excess or too-muchness of life itself: human life never coincides with itself; to be fully alive means to be larger than life, and a morbid denial of life is not a denial of life itself, but, rather, the denial of this excess. How, then, are the two excesses related: the excess inherent to life itself, and the excess generated by the denial of life? Is it not that the excess generated by the denial of life is a kind of revenge, a return of the excess repressed by the denial of life?

A state of emergency coinciding with the normal state is the political formula of this predicament: in today's antiterrorist politics, we find the same mixture of morbid excitation and tranquilization. The official aim of Homeland Security appeals to the US population in early 2003, intended to make them ready for a terrorist attack, was to calm people down: everything is under control, just follow the rules and carry on with your life. However, the very warning that people must be ready for a large-scale attack sustained the tension: the effort to keep the situation under control asserted the prospect of a catastrophe in a negative way. The aim was to get the population used to leading their daily lives under the threat of a looming catastrophe, and thus to introduce a kind of permanent state of emergency (since, let us not forget, we were informed in the fall of 2002 that the War on Terror will go on for decades, at least for our lifetime). We should therefore interpret the different levels of the Alert Code (red, orange) as a state strategy to control the necessary level of excitation, and it is precisely through such a permanent state of emergency, in which we are interpellated to *participate* through our readiness, that the power asserts its hold over us.

In *The Others* (Alejandro Amenabar, 2001), Nicole Kidman, a mother who lives with her two young children in a haunted house on Jersey Island, discovers at the end that they are all ghosts: a couple of years before, she first strangled her children and then shot herself (it is the "intruders" who disturb their peace from time to time who are the real people, potential buyers interested in their house). The only interesting feature of this rather ineffective *Sixth Sense*-type final twist is the precise reason why Kidman returns as a ghost: she cannot assume her Medea-like act—in a way, continuing to live as a ghost (who doesn't know that she is one) symbolizes her ethical compromise, her unreadiness to confront the terrible act constitutive of subjectivity. This reversal is not simply symmetrical: instead of ghosts disturbing real people, appearing to them, it is the real people who disturb the ghosts, appearing to them. Is it not like this when—to paraphrase Saint Paul—we are not alive in our "real" lives? It is not that, in such a case, the promise of real life haunts us in a ghost-like form? Today we are like the anemic Greek philosophers who read Paul's words on the Resurrection with ironic laughter. The only Absolute acceptable within this horizon is a negative one: absolute Evil, whose paradigmatic figure today is that of the Holocaust. The evocation of the Holocaust serves as a warning of what the ultimate result of the submission of Life to some higher Goal is.

What characterizes the human universe is the complication in the relationship between the living and the dead: as Freud wrote apropos of the killing of the primordial father, the murdered father returns more powerful than ever in the guise of the "virtual" symbolic authority. What is uncanny here is the gap which opens up with the reduplication of life and death in the symbolic medium, on account of the noncoincidence of the two circles: we get people who are still alive, although symbolically they are already dead, and people who

are already dead, although symbolically they are still alive. The double meaning of the term "spirit" (if we ignore the alcoholic association)—"pure" spirituality and ghosts—is thus structurally necessary: no (pure) spirit without its obscene supplement, ghosts, their spectral pseudo-materiality, the "living dead." The category of the "undead" is crucial here: those who are not dead, although they are no longer alive, and continue to haunt us. The fundamental problem here is how to prevent the dead from returning, how to put them properly to rest.

I am tempted to construct a mock Hegelian triad here: a living organism is negated first by its death (a once-living organism dies); then, more radically, in absolute negation, by something which always-already *was* dead (an inanimate thing, a stone); finally, in a "negation of negation," there emerges a mock synthesis in the guise of the apparition of the "living dead," the undead, a spectral entity which, in its death itself, as dead, continues to live. Or, to put it in the terms of the Greimasian semiotic square: the main opposition is the one between alive and dead (as inanimate, never having been alive); this couple is then redoubled by the couple of dead (as no longer alive) and undead (as alive after death).

Perhaps we should therefore add another twist to the prohibition on killing: at its most fundamental, this prohibition concerns not the living, but the dead. "Don't kill . . ." whom? *The dead.* You can kill the living—on condition that you bury them properly, that you perform the proper rites. These rites, of course, are fundamentally ambivalent: through them, you show your respect for the dead, and thereby prevent them from returning to haunt you. This ambivalence of the work of mourning is clearly discernible in the two opposed attitudes toward the dead: on the one hand, we should not ignore them, but mark their death properly, perform the proper rituals; on the other hand, there is something obscene, transgressive, in talking about the dead at all. We find the same ambivalence in the "speak no ill of the dead" motto: we should not judge the dead—yet is it not a fact that it is *only* the dead whom we can really adequately judge, since their life is completed?

When, in *Being and Time*, Heidegger insists that death is the only event which cannot be taken over by another subject for me—another cannot die for me, in my place—the obvious counterexample is Christ himself: did he not, in the extreme gesture of interpassivity, take over for us the ultimate passive experience of dying? Christ dies so that we are given a chance to live forever. . . . The problem here is not only that, obviously, we don't live forever (the answer to this is that it is the Holy Spirit, the community of believers, which lives forever), but the subjective status of Christ: when he was dying on the Cross, did he know about his Resurrection-to-come? If he did then it was all a game, the supreme divine comedy, since Christ knew his suffering was just a spectacle with a guaranteed good outcome—in short, Christ was faking despair in his "Father, why hast thou forsaken me?" If he didn't, then in what precise sense was Christ (also) divine? Did God the Father limit the scope of knowledge of Christ's mind to that of a common human consciousness, so that Christ actually thought he was dying abandoned by his father? Was Christ, in effect, occupying the position of the son in the wonderful joke about the rabbi who turns in despair to God, asking Him what he should do with his bad son, who has deeply disappointed him; God calmly answers: "Do the same as I did: write a new testament!"

What is crucial here is the radical ambiguity of the term "the faith of Jesus Christ," which can be read as subjective or objective genitive: it can be either "the faith of Christ" or "the faith / of us, believers / in Christ." Either we are redeemed because of Christ's pure faith, or we are redeemed by our faith in Christ, if and insofar as we believe in him. Perhaps there is a way to read the two meanings together: what we are called to believe in is not Christ's divinity as such but, rather, his faith, his sinless purity. What Christianity proposes is the figure of Christ as our *subject supposed to believe*: in our ordinary lives, we never truly believe, but we can at least have the consolation that there is One who truly believes (the function of what Lacan, in his seminar *Encore*, called *y'a de l'un*). The final twist here, however, is that on the Cross, Christ himself has to suspend his belief momentarily. So maybe, at a deeper level, Christ is, rather, our (believers') subject

supposed NOT to believe: it is not our belief we transpose onto others, but, rather, our disbelief itself. Instead of doubting, mocking, and questioning things while believing through the Other, we can also transpose onto the Other the nagging doubt, thus regaining the ability to believe. (And is there not, in exactly the same way, also the function of the subject supposed not to know? Take little children who are supposed not to know the "facts of life," and whose blessed ignorance we, knowing adults, are supposed to protect by shielding them from brutal reality; or the wife who is supposed not to know about her husband's secret affair, and willingly plays this role even if she really knows all about it, like the young wife in *The Age of Innocence*; or, in academia, the role we assume when we ask someone: "OK, I'll pretend I don't know anything about this topic—try to explain it to me from scratch!") And, perhaps, the true communion with Christ, the true imitatio Christi, is to participate in Christ's doubt and disbelief.

There are two main interpretations of how Christ's death deals with sin: sacrificial and participatory.[4] In the first one, we humans are guilty of sin, the consequence of which is death; however, God presented Christ, the sinless one, as a sacrifice to die in our place—through the shedding of his blood, we may be forgiven and freed from condemnation. In the second one, human beings lived "in Adam," in the sphere of sinful humanity, under the reign of sin and death. Christ became a human being, sharing the fate of those "in Adam" to the end (dying on the Cross), but, having been sinless, faithful to God, he was raised from the dead by God to become the firstborn son of a new, redeemed humanity. In baptism, believers die with Christ—they die to their old life "in Adam," and become new creations, freed from the power of sin.

The first approach is legalistic: there is guilt to be paid for, and, by paying our debt for us, Christ redeemed us (and, of course, thereby forever indebted us); from the participationist perspective, on the contrary, people are freed from sin not by Christ's death as such, but by sharing in Christ's death, by dying to sin, to the way of flesh. Adam and Christ are thus, in a way, "corporate persons" in whom people live: we either live "in Adam" (under the power of sin and death), or we live "in Christ" (as children of God, freed from guilt and the dominion of sin). We die with Christ "in Adam" (as Adamesque creatures), and then we begin a new life "in Christ"—or, as Paul put it, "all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death": "we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:2–4). This reading also tends to deny the direct divine nature of Christ: Christ is a man who, on account of his purity and sacrifice, after his death, "was appointed, or became, Messiah when God raised him from the dead and thus 'adopted' him as his son."[5] From this perspective, Christ's divinity is not his "natural" property, but his symbolic mandate, the title conferred on him by God—after following in his footsteps, we all become "sons of God": "For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26–28).

Which of these two readings, then, is the right one? Here again we encounter the structure of the forced choice: in the abstract, of course, the participationist reading is the correct one, while the sacrificial reading "misses the point" of Christ's gesture; the only way to the participationist reading, however, is through the sacrificial one, through its inherent overcoming. The sacrificial reading is the way Christ's gesture appears within the very horizon that Christ wanted to leave behind, within the horizon for which we die in identifying with Christ: within the horizon of the Law (symbolic exchange, guilt and its atonement, sin and the price to be paid for it), Christ's death cannot but appear as the ultimate assertion of the Law, as the elevation of the Law into an unconditional superego agency which burdens us, its subjects, with guilt, and with a debt we will never be able to repay. In a properly dialectical move, love and grace thus coincide with their radical opposite, with the unbearable pressure of an "irrational" Kafkaesque law. "Love" appears as the name (the mask, even) of an Infinite Law, of a Law which, as it were,

self-sublates itself, of a Law which no longer imposes specific, determinate, prohibitions and/or injunctions (do this, don't do that . . .), but just reverberates as an empty tautological Prohibition: *don't . . .*, of a Law in which everything is simultaneously prohibited and permitted (i.e. enjoined).

Take a weird but crucial feature of Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Decalogue*: the rock song performed during the credits is the only place in the entire *Decalogue* series where the Ten Commandments are mentioned—*in the inverted form of injunctions to violate the Ten Commandments*—"Kill, rape, steal, beat up your mother and father. . . ." This subversion of the prohibition into the obscene injunction to transgress the Law is entailed by the very formal procedure of Kieślowski's dramatization of a law: the dramatic staging automatically cancels the (purely intellectual) negation, shifting the focus on the imposing image of the act of, say, killing, irrespective of its ethical preamble (+ or –, recommended or prohibited)—like the Freudian unconscious, the dramatic staging knows of no negation. In his famous reflections on negativity and the Decalogue, Kenneth Burke reads the Ten Commandments through the opposition between the notional level and the level of imagery: "though the injunction 'Thou shalt not kill' is in essence an idea, in its role as imagery it can but strike the resonant gong: 'Kill!'"[6] This is the Lacanian opposition between the symbolic Law and the obscene call of the superego at its purest: all the negations are powerless, and turn into mere denegations, so that what remains is the obscene intrusive reverberation of "Kill! Kill!"

This reversal of prohibitions into imperatives is a strictly tautological gesture which simply elaborates what is already contained in the prohibitions, insofar as, according to Saint Paul, the Law itself generates the desire to violate it. Along the same lines, in contrast to the Law's precise prohibitions ("You shall not kill, steal . . ."), the true superego injunction is just the truncated "You shall not!"—do what? This gap opens up the abyss of the superego: you yourself should know or guess what you should not do, so that you are put in an impossible position of always and a priori being under suspicion of violating some (unknown) prohibition. More precisely, the superego splits every determinate commandment into two complementary, albeit asymmetrical, parts—"You shall not kill!," for instance, is split into the formal-indeterminate "You shall not!" and the obscene direct injunction "Kill!" The silent dialogue which sustains this operation is thus: "You shall not!" "I shall not—what? I have no idea what is being demanded of me! *Che vuoi?*" "You shall not!" "This is driving me crazy, being under pressure to do something without knowing what, feeling guilty without knowing of what, so I'll just explode, and start killing!" Thus killing is the desperate response to the impenetrable abstract superego prohibition.

In the eyes of this "crazy" Law, we are always-already guilty, without even knowing what, exactly, we are guilty of. This Law is the meta-Law, the Law of the state of emergency in which positive legal order is suspended, the "pure" Law, the form of ordering/prohibiting "as such," the enunciation of an Injunction deprived of any content. And, in effect, does not the Stalinist regime, among others, provide clear proof of how such an "irrational" unconditional Law coincides with love? In the eyes of the Stalinist Law, anyone can be proclaimed guilty at any point (accused of counterrevolutionary activity); the very denial of guilt is considered the ultimate proof of guilt, and so on—but, simultaneously, obeying a deep structural necessity, the relationship of the Stalinist subjects to their Leader is determined as that of *love*, of infinite love for the wise Leader.

How did Stalinism function on the level of political guidelines? On a first approach, things may seem clear: Stalinism was a strictly centralized system of command, so the top leadership issued directives which had to be obeyed all the way down. Here, however, we encounter the first enigma: "how can one obey when one has not been told clearly what to do?"[7] In the collectivization drive of 1929–1930, for example, "no detailed instructions about how to collectivize were ever issued, and local officials who asked for such instructions were rebuked." All that was actually given was a sign, Stalin's speech to the Communist Academy in December 1929, where he demanded that the kulaks should be "liquidated as a class."

The lower-level cadres, eager to fulfill this command, anxious not to be accused of tolerance toward the class enemy and a lack of vigilance, naturally overfulfilled the order; it is only then that we get "the closest thing to an explicit public policy statement," Stalin's famous letter "Dizzy with success," published in *Pravda* on March 1, 1930, which repudiates the excesses in what had been done without precise instructions by local officials.

How, then, could these local cadres orient themselves? Were they totally at a loss, face to face with an unspecified general order? Not quite: the gap was ambiguously filled in by the so-called "signals," the key element of the Stalinist semiotic space: "important policy changes were often 'signaled' rather than communicated in the form of a clear and detailed directive." Such signals "indicated a shift of policy in a particular area without spelling out exactly what the new policy entailed or how it should be implemented." They consisted of, say, an article by Stalin discussing a minor point of cultural politics, an anonymous derogatory comment in *Pravda*, a criticism of a local party functionary, the unexpected praise of a provincial worker, even an explanatory note on a historical event which had taken place hundreds of years before. The message to be deciphered from such signals was mostly quantitative; it concerned the level of pure intensities more than concrete content: "faster," "slow down" (the pace of collectivization), and so on. These signals were of two basic types: the main type was the "hardline" signal to proceed faster, to crush the enemy more mercilessly, even if one violated the existing laws. In the big radicalization of the policy toward the Orthodox Church at the end of the 1920s, for instance, the signal enjoined the mass closings and destruction of the churches and the arrests of priests, acts which ran counter to the explicit existing laws (such instructions were issued to local party organizations, but treated as a secret not to be published). The advantage of such a *modus operandi* is obvious: since these signals were never explicitly stated, they were much easier to repudiate or reinterpret than explicit policy statements. The complementary opposite signal pointed in the direction of relaxation and tolerance, as a rule attributed to Stalin himself,

putting the blame for the "excesses" on lower-level officials who did not understand Stalin's policy. Such a signal was also issued in an informal way—for example, Stalin personally phoned a writer (Pasternak), asking him, with feigned surprise, why he had not published a new book recently; the news circulated fast on the intelligentsia grapevine. The ambiguity was thus total: a local official, confronted by a general unspecified order, was caught in the unsolvable dilemma of how to avoid being accused of leniency, but also how to avoid being scapegoated as responsible for the "excesses." We should not forget, however, that the deadlock of the Party leadership emitting these signals was no less debilitating: with total power in their hands, they were not even able to issue explicit orders about what was to be done.

The problem (for Giorgio Agamben, among others) is how (if at all) we are to pass from this superego hyperbole of the Law to love proper: is love just the mode of appearance of this Law, is this superego hyperbole the hidden "truth" of love, is the infinite "irrational" Law thus the hidden third term, the vanishing mediator, between Law and love, or is there love also beyond the infinite-obscene Law? The text on the back cover of the French edition of Giorgio Agamben's *Le temps qui reste*, his reading of Paul's Epistle to the Romans,[8] provides such a precise résumé of the book that one can surmise that it was written by Agamben himself—it is worth quoting in full:

> If it is true that every work of the past attains its complete readability only in certain moments of its own history which one should know how to grasp, this book originates in the conviction that there is a kind of secret link, which we should not miss at any price, between Paul's letters and our epoch. From this perspective, one of the most often read and commented texts of our entire cultural tradition undoubtedly acquires a new readability which displaces and reorients the canons of its interpretation: Paul is no longer the founder of a new religion, but the most demanding representative of the Jewish messianism; no longer the inventor of universality, but the one who overcame the division of peoples with a new division and who introduced in it a remainder; no longer the proclamation of a new identity and of a new vocation, but the revoking of every identity and

> of every vocation; no longer the simple critique of the Law, but its opening toward a use beyond every system of law. And, in the heart of all these motifs, there is a new experience of time which, inverting the relation between the past and the future, between memory and hope, constitutes the messianic *kairos*, not as the end of time, but as the very paradigm of the present time, of all the present times.

The first problem with this focus (not on the end of time, but) on the condensed *time to arrive at the end of time* is its more than obvious formalism: what Agamben describes as a messianic experience is the pure formal structure of such an experience without any specific determinations that would elaborate the claim that Benjamin "repeats" Paul: *why* is today's moment a unique moment which renders Paul's letters readable? Is it because the emerging New World (Dis)Order is parallel to the Roman Empire (the thesis of Negri and Hardt)? Furthermore, in defense of Alain Badiou (whose book on Paul[9] is Agamben's implicit target in the quoted passage), I am tempted to assert the fundamental equality of the statements opposed in the above résumé: what if the way to found a new religion is precisely through bringing the preceding logic (in this case, of Jewish messianism) to its end? What if the only way to invent a new universality is precisely through overcoming the old divisions with a new, more radical division which introduces an indivisible remainder into the social body? What if the proclamation of a new identity and of a new vocation can take place only if it functions as the revoking of every identity and every vocation? What if the truly radical critique of the Law equals its opening toward a use beyond every system of law? Furthermore, when Agamben introduces the triad of Whole, Part, and Remainder, is he not following the Hegelian paradox of a genus which has only one species, the other species being the genus itself? The Remainder is nothing other than the excessive element which gives body to the genus itself, the Hegelian "reflexive determination" in the guise of which the genus encounters itself within its species.

When Agamben claims that the messianic dimension is not a safe neutral universality encompassing all the species, indifferent toward their (specific) differences, but, rather, the noncoincidence of each particular element with itself, is he not thereby reinventing the central thesis of the "logic of the signifier" according to which universality acquires actual existence in a particular element that is unable to achieve its full identity? A universality "comes to itself," is posited "as such," in the gap which divides a particular element not from other elements, but from itself. For example, in politics, as discussed by Laclau and Rancière, the properly democratic subject is the "remainder," the element of the Whole deprived of any particular features which would give him or her a specific place within the Whole, the element whose position with regard to the Whole is that of internal exclusion. Unable to occupy its proper specific place, such a democratic subject gives body to universality as such. So when one opposes radical political universality (radical emancipatory egalitarianism) to a universality grounded in exception (for example, "universal human rights" which secretly privilege some particular groups and exclude others), the point is not simply that the latter does not cover all particulars, that there is a "rest," a remainder, while radical universality "really includes all and everyone"; the point is, rather, that *the singular agent of radical universality is the Remainder itself*, that which has no proper place in the "official" universality grounded in exception. Radical universality "covers all its particular content" precisely insofar as it is linked through a kind of umbilical cord to the Remainder—its logic is: "it is those who are excluded, with no proper place within the global order, who directly embody true universality, who represent the Whole in contrast to all others who stand only for their particular interests." Lacking any specific difference, such a paradoxical element stands for the absolute difference, for pure Difference as such. In this precise sense, Pauline universality is not mute universality as the empty neutral container of its particular content, but a "struggling universality," a universality the actual existence of which is a radical division which cuts through the entire particular content.

And when Agamben cogently describes the "Kafkaesque" dimension of the Pauline distance toward the Old Testament law, when

he interprets the opposition of Law and Love as an opposition internal to the Law itself, as the opposition between a positive law with precise prescriptions and prohibitions and the Kafkaesque unconditional Law which is, as such, pure potentiality, which cannot be executed, or even translated into positive norms, but remains an abstract injunction making us all guilty precisely because we don't even know what we are guilty of,[10] does he not thereby delineate the opposition between Law and its superego excess-supplement? One should effectively correlate unconditional superego guilt and the mercy of love—two figures of the excess, the excess of guilt without proportion to what I actually did, and the excess of mercy without proportion to what I deserve for my acts. In short, the superego excess is ultimately nothing but the inscription back into the domain of the Law, the reflection-into-Law, of the Love which abolishes ("sublates") the Law. The advent of the New Pact is thus not simply a new order which leaves the old Law behind, but the Nietzschean "High Noon," the time of the cleaving in two, of the minimal, invisible difference which separates the excess of the Law itself from the Love beyond Law.

Is the relationship between law (legal justice) and mercy in fact the relationship between necessity and choice (one *has* to obey the law, while mercy is, by definition, dispensed as a free and excessive act, as something that the agent of mercy is free to do or not to do—mercy under compulsion is not mercy but, at its best, a travesty of mercy)? What if, on a deeper level, the relationship is the opposite one? What if, with regard to the law, we have the freedom to choose (to obey or violate it), while mercy is obligatory, we *have* to display it—mercy is an unnecessary excess which, as such, has to occur? (And does not the law always take this freedom of ours into account, not only by punishing us for its transgression, but by providing escapes from punishment through its ambiguity and inconsistency?) Is it not a fact that showing mercy is the only way for a Master to demonstrate his supralegal authority? If a Master were merely to guarantee the full application of the law, of legal regulations, he would be deprived of his authority, and turn into a mere figure of knowledge, the agent of the discourse of the university.[11] This applies even to Stalin himself: we should never forget that, as the (now available) minutes of the meetings of the Politburo and Central Committee from the 1930s demonstrate, Stalin's direct interventions were, as a rule, those of displaying mercy. When younger CC members, eager to prove their revolutionary fervor, demanded the instant death penalty for Bukharin, Stalin always intervened and said: "Patience! His guilt is not yet proven!" or something similar. Of course this was a hypocritical attitude—Stalin was well aware that he himself generated this destructive fervor, that the younger members were eager to please him—nonetheless, this appearance of mercy is necessary.

Here, however, we confront the crucial alternative: is Pauline love the obverse of the obscene superego Law that cannot be executed and specified into particular regulations? Are we, in effect, dealing with two sides of the same coin? Agamben focuses on the *as-if-not* stance from the famous Pauline passage in which he instructs believers in the messianic time neither to escape from the world of social obligations, nor simply to accomplish a social revolution, replacing one set of social obligations with another, but to continue to participate in the world of social obligations through an attitude of suspension ("cry *as* if you are not crying, deal with money *as* if you are without it," and so on):

> Let each of you remain in the condition in which you were called. . . . I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away. (1 Corinthians 7:20, 7:29–31)

Agamben is right here to emphasize that this stance has nothing to do with the legitimization of the existing power relations, in the sense of "stay what you are, what you were interpellated into (a

slave, a Jew . . .), just maintain a distance toward it." It has nothing to do with the standard version of Oriental Wisdom which imposes indifference toward worldly affairs (in the sense of the *Bhagavad-Gita*: accomplish your worldly acts as if it is not you who are doing them, as if their final result does not matter): the key difference is that, in Paul, the distance is not that of a disengaged observer aware of the nullity of worldly passions, but that of a thoroughly engaged fighter who ignores distinctions that are not relevant to the struggle. It is also to be opposed to the usual *as* if attitude of philosophers of fiction, from Bentham to Vaihinger: it is not that of the fetishist disavowal which pertains to the symbolic order ("although I know very well that the judge is not an honest man, I treat him, the representative of the Law, as if he were . . ."), but that of the disavowal of the symbolic realm itself: I use symbolic obligations, but I am not performatively *bound* by them. However, Agamben reads this suspension as a purely formal gesture of distance: "faith" has no positive content, it is nothing but this distance-toward-itself, this self-suspension, of the Law. Here Agamben refers to the Hegelian notion of "sublation [*Aufhebung*]": Pauline love is not the cancellation or destructive negation of the Law, but its accomplishment in the sense of "sublation," where the Law is retained through its very suspension, as a subordinate (potential) moment of a higher actual unity. Significantly, Agamben refers here also to Carl Schmitt's notion of the "state of exception" as the negation of the rule of law which is not its destruction, but its very founding gesture—the question remains, however, if Pauline love can be reduced to this founding suspension of the Law. In short, what if Romans has to be read together with Corinthians?

What we find in Paul is a commitment, an engaged position of struggle, an uncanny "interpellation" beyond ideological interpellation, an interpellation which suspends the performative force of the "normal" ideological interpellation that compels us to accept our determinate place within the sociosymbolic edifice. Can we thus say, in reading *Paul avec Schmitt*, that love has the structure of a "state of emergency/exception" which suspends the "normal" functioning of one's emotional life? Is love not war also in this precise sense: when I fall violently and passionately in love, my balance is disturbed, the course of my life is derailed, logos turns into pathology, I lose my neutral capacity to reflect and judge; all my (other) abilities are suspended in their autonomy, subordinated to One Goal, colored by It—indeed, love is a malady? To paraphrase Paul, when we are in love, "we buy as though we have no possessions, we deal with the world as though we have no dealings with it," since all that ultimately matters is love itself.[12] Perhaps the gap which separates pleasure and *jouissance* is nowhere more palpable than in the situation when, after a long period of calm complaisant life, with its little pleasures, one all of a sudden falls passionately in love: love shatters our daily life as a heavy duty whose performance demands heavy sacrifices on the level of the "pleasure of principle"—how many things must a man renounce? "Freedom," drinks with friends, card evenings.

It is therefore crucial to distinguish between the Jewish-Pauline "state of emergency," the suspension of the "normal" immersion in life, and the standard Bakhtinian carnivalesque "state of exception" when everyday moral norms and hierarchies are suspended, and one is encouraged to indulge in transgressions: the two are opposed—that is to say, what the Pauline emergency suspends is not so much the explicit Law regulating our daily life, but, precisely, its obscene unwritten underside: when, in his series of *as* if prescriptions, Paul basically says: "obey the laws as if you are not obeying them," this means precisely that *we should suspend the obscene libidinal investment in the Law, the investment on account of which the Law generates/solicits its own transgression*. The ultimate paradox, of course, is that this is how the Jewish law, the main target of Paul's critique, functions: it is already a law deprived of its superego supplement, not relying on any obscene support. In short: in its "normal" functioning, the Law generates as the "collateral damage" of its imposition its own transgression/excess (the vicious cycle of Law and sin described in an unsurpassable way in Corinthians), while in Judaism and Christianity, it is directly this excess itself which addresses us.

That is the ultimate alternative: is the opposition between Love and Law to be reduced to its "truth," the opposition, internal to the Law itself, between the determinate positive Law and the excessive superego injunction, the Law beyond every measure—that is to say, is the excess of Love with regard to the Law the form of appearance of a superego Law, of a Law beyond any determinate law; or is the excessive superego Law the way the dimension beyond the Law appears within the domain of the Law, so that the crucial step to be accomplished is the step (comparable to Nietzsche's "High Noon") from the excessive Law to Love, from the way Love appears within the domain of the Law to Love beyond the Law? Lacan himself struggled continuously with this same deeply Pauline problem: is there love beyond Law? Paradoxically (in view of the fact that the notion as unsurpassable Law is usually perceived as Jewish), in the very last page of *Four Fundamental Concepts*, he identifies this stance of love beyond Law as that of Spinoza, opposing it to the Kantian notion of moral Law as the ultimate horizon of our experience. In *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan deals extensively with the Pauline dialectic of the Law and its transgression[13]—perhaps what we should do, therefore, is read this Pauline dialectic together with its corollary, Saint Paul's other paradigmatic passage, the one on love from 1 Corinthians 13:

> If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast [alt. trans.: to be burned], but do not have love, I gain nothing. . . .
>
> Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. . . . For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Crucial here is the clearly paradoxical place of Love with regard to All (to the completed series of knowledge or prophecies): first, Saint Paul claims that love is here even if we possess all of knowledge—then, in the second quoted paragraph, he claims that love is here only for incomplete beings, that is, beings who possess incomplete knowledge. When I "know fully . . . as I have been fully known," will there still be love? Although, in contrast to knowledge, "love never ends," it is clearly only "now" (while I am still incomplete) that "faith, hope, and love abide." The only way out of this deadlock is to read the two inconsistent claims according to Lacan's feminine formulas of sexuation:[14] even when it is "all" (complete, with no exception), the field of knowledge remains, in a way, non-all, incomplete—love is not an exception to the All of knowledge, but precisely that "nothing" which makes incomplete even the complete series/field of knowledge. In other words, the point of the claim that, even if I were to possess all knowledge, without love, I would be nothing, is not simply that with love, I am "something"—in love, I *am also nothing*, but, as it were, a Nothing humbly aware of itself, a Nothing paradoxically made rich through the very awareness of its lack.

Only a lacking, vulnerable being is capable of love: the ultimate mystery of love, therefore, is that incompleteness is, in a way, higher than completion. On the one hand, only an imperfect, lacking being loves: we love because we do not know all. On the other hand, even if we were to know everything, love would, inexplicably, still be higher than completed knowledge. Perhaps the true achievement of Christianity is to elevate a loving (imperfect) Being to the place of God, that is, of ultimate perfection. That is the kernel of the Christian experience. In the previous pagan attitude, imperfect earthly phenomena can serve as signs of the unattainable divine perfection. In Christianity, on the contrary, it is physical (or mental) perfection itself that is the sign of the imperfection (finitude, vulnerability, uncertainty) of you as the absolute person. Your physical beauty itself

becomes a sign of this spiritual dimension—not the sign of your "higher" spiritual perfection, but the sign of *you* as a finite, vulnerable person. Only in this way do we really break out of idolatry. For this reason, the properly Christian relationship between sex and love is not the one between body and soul, but almost the opposite: in "pure" sex, the partner is reduced to a fantasy object, that is to say, pure sex is masturbation with a real partner who functions as a prop for our indulging in fantasies, while it is only through love that we can reach the Real (of the) Other. (This also accounts for the status of the Lady in courtly love: precisely because of its endless postponing of the consummation of the sexual act, courtly love remains on the level of sexual desire, not love—the proof of this is the fact that the Lady is reduced to a pure symbolic entity, indistinguishable from all others, not touched in the Real of her singularity.)

Lacan's extensive discussion of love in *Encore* is thus to be read in the Pauline sense, as opposed to the dialectic of the Law and its transgression: this second dialectic is clearly "masculine"/phallic, it involves the tension between the All (the universal Law) and its constitutive exception, while love is "feminine," it involves the paradoxes of the non-All.[15] Or—as Eric Santner put it in the context of Badiou's reading of Saint Paul—

> The Pauline question, in B's reformulation, is: Is all the subject within the figure of legal subjection? There are two answers to this—Lacanian answers: 1) there is a place of exception; 2) not all of the subject is within the figure of legal subjection. The key, however, as far as I can see, is to note that there is *no direct path* from legal subjection to "not all"; "not all" only opens up through a traversal of the *fantasy* of exception, which in its turn sustains the force of the figure of legal subjection. Put differently, "not all" is what you get with the traversal of fantasy.[16]

The co-dependency of law and sin (its transgression) thus obeys the Lacanian "masculine" logic of exception: "sin" is the very exception that sustains the Law. This means that love is not simply beyond the Law, but articulates itself as the stance of total immersion in the Law: "not all of the subject is within the figure of legal subjection" equals "there is nothing in the subject which escapes its legal subjection." "Sin" is the very intimate resistant core on account of which the subject experiences its relationship to the Law as that of subjection; it is that on account of which the Law has to appear to the subject as a foreign power crushing the subject.

This, then, is how we are to grasp the idea that Christianity "accomplished/fulfilled" the Jewish Law: not by supplementing it with the dimension of love, but by fully realizing the Law itself—from this perspective, the problem with Judaism is not that it is "too legal," but that it is not "legal" enough. A brief reference to Hegel might be of some help here: when Hegel endeavors to resolve the conflict between Law and love, he does not mobilize his standard triad (the immediacy of the love link turns into its opposite, hate and struggle, which calls for an external-alienated Law to regulate social life; finally, in an act of magical "synthesis," Law and love are reconciled in the organic totality of social life). The problem with the law is not that it does not contain enough love, but, rather, the opposite one: there is *too* much love in it—that is to say, social life appears to me as dominated by an externally imposed Law in which I am unable to recognize myself, precisely insofar as I continue to cling to the immediacy of love that feels threatened by the rule of Law. Consequently, Law loses its "alienated" character of an external force brutally imposing itself on the subject the moment the subject renounces its attachment to the pathological *agalma* deep within itself, the notion that there is deep within it some precious treasure that can only be loved, and cannot be submitted to the rule of Law. In other words, the problem (today, even) is not how we are to supplement Law with true love (the authentic social link), but, on the contrary, how we are to accomplish the Law by getting rid of the pathological stain of love.

Paul's negative appreciation of law is clear and unambiguous: "For no human being will be justified in his sight by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin" (Romans 3:20). "The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the

law" (1 Corinthians 15:56), and, consequently, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law" (Galatians 3:13). So when Paul says that "the letter kills, but the spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:6), this letter is precisely the letter of the Law. The strongest proponents of this radical opposition between the law and the divine love moving him to grace are Lutheran theologists like Bultmann, for whom

> [t]he way of works of the Law and the way of grace and faith are mutually exclusive opposites. . . . Man's effort to achieve his salvation by keeping the Law only leads him into sin, *indeed this effort itself in the end is already sin*. . . . The Law brings to light that man is sinful, whether it be that his sinful desire leads him to transgression of the Law or that *that desire disguises itself in zeal for keeping the Law.*[17]

How are we to understand this? Why, then, did God proclaim Law in the first place? According to the standard reading of Paul, God gave Law to men in order to make them conscious of their sin, even to make them sin all the more, and thus make them aware of their need for the salvation that can occur only through divine grace—however, does this reading not involve a strange, perverse notion of God? As we have already seen, the only way to avoid such a perverse reading is to insist on the absolute *identity* of the two gestures: God does not first push us into Sin in order to create the need for Salvation, and then offer Himself as the Redeemer from the trouble into which He got us in the first place; it is not that the Fall is followed by Redemption: the Fall is *identical* to Redemption, it is "in itself" already Redemption. That is to say: what is "redemption"? The explosion of freedom, the breaking out of the natural enchainment—*and this, precisely, is what happens in the Fall*. We should bear in mind here the central tension of the Christian notion of the Fall: the Fall ("regression" to the natural state, enslavement to passions) is *stricto sensu* identical with the dimension from which we fall, that is, it is the very movement of the Fall that creates, opens up, what is lost in it.

We should be very precise here about the Christian "unplugging" from the domain of social mores, from the social substance of our being: the reference to the Jewish Law is crucial here—why? As Eric Santner has pointed out, it is already the Jewish Law that relies on a gesture of "unplugging": by means of reference to the Law, Jews in diaspora maintain a distance toward the society in which they live. In short, the Jewish Law is not a social law like others: while other (pagan) laws regulate social exchange, the Jewish Law introduces a different dimension, that of divine justice which is radically heterogeneous with regard to the social law.[18] (Furthermore, this justice is different from the pagan notion of justice as reestablished balance, as the inexorable process of Fate that reestablishes the balance disturbed by human *hubris*: Jewish justice is the very opposite of the victorious reassertion of the right/might of the Whole over its parts—it is the vision of the final state in which all the wrongs done to individuals will be undone.) When Jews "unplug," and maintain a distance toward the society in which they live, they do not do it for the sake of their own different substantial identity—in a way, anti-Semitism is right here: the Jews are, in effect, "rootless," their Law is "abstract," it "extrapolates" them from the social Substance.

And there we have the radical gap that separates the Christian suspension of the Law, the passage from Law to love, from the pagan suspension of the social law: the highest (or, rather, deepest) point of every pagan Wisdom is, of course, also a radical "unplugging" (either the carnivalesque orgy, or direct immersion in the abyss of the primordial Void, in which all articulated differences are suspended); what is suspended here, however, is the "pagan" immanent law of the social, not the Jewish Law that already unplugs us from the social. When Christian mystics get too close to the pagan mystical experience, they bypass the Jewish experience of the Law—no wonder they often become ferocious anti-Semites. Christian anti-Semitism is, in effect, a clear sign of the Christian position's regression into paganism: it gets rid of the "rootless," universalist stance of Christianity proper by transposing it onto the Jewish Other; consequently, when Christianity loses the mediation of the Jewish Law, it loses the specific Christian dimension of Love itself, reducing Love to the pagan "cosmic feeling" of oneness with the universe. It is only reference to the Jewish Law that sustains the specific Christian notion of

Love that needs a distance, that thrives on differences, that has nothing to do with any kind of erasure of borders and immersion in Oneness. (And within the Jewish experience, love remains on this pagan level—that is to say, the Jewish experience is a unique combination of the new Law with pagan love, which accounts for its inner tension.)

The trap to be avoided here is the opposition of the "external" social law (legal regulations, "mere legality") and the higher "internal" moral law, where the external social law may strike us as contingent and irrational, while the internal law is fully assumed as "our own": we should radically abandon the notion that external social institutions betray the authentic inner experience of the true Transcendence of Otherness (in the guise, for example, of the opposition between the authentic "inner" experience of the divine and its "external" reification into a religious institution in which the religious experience proper degenerates into an ideology legitimizing power relations). If there is a lesson to be learned from Kafka, it is that, in the opposition between internal and external, the divine dimension is on the side of the external. What can be more "divine" than the traumatic encounter with the bureaucracy at its craziest—when, say, a bureaucrat tells us that, legally, we don't exist? It is in such encounters that we catch a glimpse of another order beyond mere earthly everyday reality. There is no experience of the divine without such a suspension of the Ethical. And far from being simply external, this very externality (to sense, to symbolic integration) holds us from within: Kafka's topic is precisely the obscene *jouissance* through which bureaucracy addresses the subject on the level of the disavowed innermost ("ex-timate," as Lacan would have put it) real kernel of his being.

As such, bureaucratic knowledge is the very opposite of scientific knowledge concerned with positive facts: its pervasiveness gives birth to a certain gap best exemplified by the French "certificat d'existence," or by strange stories, reported from time to time, of how (usually in Italy) some unfortunate individual, asking a certain favor from a state apparatus, is informed that, according to the register, he is officially dead or nonexistent, and that, in order to be able to make claims, he must first produce official documents that prove his existence—do we not find here the bureaucratic version of "in-between the two deaths"? When bureaucratic knowledge thus brings home the absurd discord between the Symbolic and the Real, it opens us up to the experience of an order that is radically heterogeneous to commonsense positive reality. Kafka was well aware of the deep link between bureaucracy and the divine: it is as if, in his work, Hegel's thesis on the State as the earthly existence of God is "bugged" in the Deleuzian sense of the term, given a properly obscene twist.

CHAPTER 5

SUBTRACTION, JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN

When they are dealing with an erotic-religious text like the Song of Songs, commentators hasten to warn us that its extreme and explicit erotic imagery is to be read allegorically, as a metaphor: when, for instance, the lover kisses the woman's lips, this "really means" that He imparts to the Jews the Ten Commandments. In short, what appears to be a description of a "purely human" sexual encounter symbolically conveys the spiritual communion of God and the Jewish people. However, the most perspicacious Bible scholars themselves are the first to emphasize the limits of such a metaphorical reading that dismisses the sexual content as "only a simile": it is precisely such a "symbolic" reading that is "purely human," that is to say, that persists in the external opposition of the symbol and its meaning, clumsily attaching a "deeper meaning" to the explosive sexual content. The literal reading (say, of the Song of Songs as almost pornographic eroticism) and the allegorical reading are two sides of the same operation: what they share is the common presupposition that "real" sexuality is "purely human," with no discernible divine dimension. (Of course, a question arises here: if sexuality is just a metaphor, why do we need this problematic detour in the first place? Why do we not convey the true spiritual content directly? Because, due to the limitations of our sensual finite nature, this content is not directly accessible to us?) What, however, if the Song of Songs is to be read *not* as an allegory but, much more literally, as the description of purely sensual erotic play? What if the "deeper" spiritual dimension is already operative in the passionate sexual interaction itself? The true task is thus not to reduce sexuality to a mere allegory, but to unearth the inherent "spiritual" dimension that forever separates human sexuality from animal coupling. Is it, however, possible to accomplish this step from allegory to full identity in Judaism? Is this not what Christianity is about, with its assertion of the direct identity of God and man?[1]

There is a further problem with the Song of Songs. The standard defense of "psychoanalytic Judaism" against Christianity involves two claims: first, it is only in Judaism that we encounter the anxiety of the traumatic Real of the Law, of the abyss of the Other's desire ("What do you want?"); Christianity covers up this abyss with love, that is, the

imaginary reconciliation of God and humanity, in which the anxiety-provoking encounter with the Real is mitigated: now we know what the Other wants from us—God loves us, Christ's sacrifice is the ultimate proof of it. Second claim: do not texts like the Song of Songs demonstrate that Judaism, far from being (only) a religion of anxiety, is also and above all the religion of love, an even more intense love than Christianity? Is not the covenant between God and the Jewish people a supreme act of love? As I have just indicated, however, this Jewish love remains "metaphorical"; as such, it is itself the imaginary reconciliation of God and humanity in which the anxiety-provoking encounter with the Real is mitigated. Or—to put it in a direct and brutal way—is not the Song of Songs ideology at its purest, insofar as we conceive of ideology as the imaginary mitigating of a traumatic Real, as "the Real of the divine encounter with a human face"?

How, then, do we go from here to Christianity proper? The key to Christ is provided by the figure of Job, whose suffering prefigures that of Christ. What makes the Book of Job so provocative is not simply the presence of multiple perspectives without a clear resolution of their tension (the fact that Job's suffering involves a different perspective than that of religious reliance on God); Job's perplexity stems from the fact that he experiences God as an impenetrable Thing: he is uncertain what He wants from him in inflicting the ordeals to which he is submitted (the Lacanian "*Che vuoi?*"), and, consequently, he—Job—is unable to ascertain how he fits into the overall divine order, unable to recognize his place in it.

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

Against this temptation, we should precisely locate the true greatness of Job: contrary to the usual notion of Job, he is *not* a patient sufferer, enduring his ordeal with a firm faith in God—on the contrary, he complains all the time, rejecting his fate (like Oedipus at Colonus, who is also usually misperceived as a patient victim resigned to his fate). When the three theologians-friends visit him, their line of argumentation is the standard ideological sophistry (if you are suffering, you must by definition have done something wrong, since God is just). Their argumentation, however, is not confined to the claim that Job must somehow be guilty: what is at stake on a more radical level is the meaning(lessness) of Job's suffering. Like Oedipus at Colonus, Job insists on the utter *meaninglessness* of his suffering—as the title of Job 27 says: "Job Maintains His Integrity."[2] In this way, the Book of Job provides what is perhaps the first exemplary case of the critique of ideology in human history, laying bare the basic discursive strategies of legitimizing suffering: Job's properly ethical dignity lies in the way he persistently rejects the notion that his suffering can have any meaning, either punishment for his past sins or the trial of his faith, against the three theologians who bombard him with possible meanings—and, surprisingly, God takes his side at the end, claiming that every word Job spoke was true, while every word the three theologians spoke was false.[3]

And it is in the context of this assertion of the meaninglessness of Job's suffering that we should insist on the parallel between Job and Christ, on Job's suffering announcing the Way of the Cross: Christ's suffering is *also* meaningless, not an act of meaningful exchange. The difference, of course, is that, in the case of Christ, the gap that

separates the suffering, desperate man (Job) from God is transposed into God Himself, as His own radical splitting or, rather, self-abandonment. This means that we should risk a much more radical reading of Christ's "Father, why hast thou forsaken me?" than the usual one: since we are dealing here not with the gap between man and God, but with the split in God Himself, the solution cannot be for God to (re)appear in all His majesty, revealing to Christ the deeper meaning of his suffering (that he was the Innocent sacrificed to redeem humanity). Christ's "Father, why hast thou forsaken me?" is not a complaint to the *omnipotent* capricious God-Father whose ways are indecipherable to us, mortal humans, but a complaint that hints at an *impotent* God: it is rather like a child who, having believed in his father's powerfulness, discovers with horror that his father cannot help him. (To evoke an example from recent history: at the moment of Christ's Crucifixion, God-the-Father is in a position somewhat similar to that of the Bosnian father, made to witness the gang-rape of his own daughter, and to endure the ultimate trauma of her compassionate-reproachful gaze: "Father, why did you forsake me?" In short, with this "Father, why hast thou forsaken me?," it is God-the-Father who, in effect, dies, revealing His utter impotence, and thereupon rises from the dead in the guise of the Holy Spirit.)

Why did Job keep his silence after the boastful appearance of God? Is not this ridiculous boasting (the pompous battery of "Were you there when . . ." rhetorical questions: "Who is this whose ignorant words / Smear my design with darkness? / Were you there when I planned the earth, / Tell me, if you are so wise?" (Job 38:2–5)) the very mode of appearance of its opposite, to which one can answer by simply saying: "OK, if you can do all this, *why did you let me suffer in such a meaningless way?*" Do not God's thundering words make his silence, the absence of an answer, all the more palpable? What, then, if this was what Job perceived, and what kept him silent: he remained silent neither because he was crushed by God's overwhelming presence, nor because he wanted thereby to indicate his continuous resistance, that is, the fact that God avoided answering Job's question, but because, in a gesture of silent solidarity, he perceived the divine impotence. God is neither just nor unjust, simply impotent. What Job suddenly understood was that *it was not him, but God Himself, who was actually on trial in Job's calamities*, and He failed the test miserably. Even more pointedly, I am tempted to risk a radical anachronistic reading: Job foresaw God's own future suffering—"Today it's me, tomorrow it will be your own son, and there will be no one to intercede for him. What you see in me now is the prefiguration of your own Passion!"[4]

Since the function of the obscene superego supplement of the (divine) Law is to mask this impotence of the big Other, and since Christianity *reveals* this impotence, it is, quite logically, the first (and only) religion radically to leave behind the split between the official/public text and its obscene initiatory supplement: there is no hidden, untold story in it. In this precise sense, Christianity is the religion of Revelation: everything is revealed in it, no obscene superego supplement accompanies its public message. In Ancient Greek and Roman religions, the public text was always supplemented by secret initiatory rituals and orgies; on the other hand, all attempts to treat Christianity in the same way (to uncover Christ's "secret teaching" somehow encoded in the New Testament or found in apocryphal Gospels) amounts to its heretical reinscription into the pagan Gnostic tradition.

Apropos of Christianity as "revealed religion," we should thus ask the inevitable stupid question: what is actually revealed in it? That is to say: is it not a fact that *all* religions reveal some mystery through the prophets, who carry the divine message to humankind; even those who insist on the impenetrability of the *dieu obscur* imply that there is some secret that resists revelation, and in the Gnostic versions, this mystery is revealed to the select few in some initiatory ceremony. Significantly, Gnostic reinscriptions of Christianity insist precisely on the presence of such a hidden message to be deciphered in the official Christian text. So what is revealed in Christianity is not just the entire content, but, more specifically, that *there is nothing—no secret—behind it to be revealed*. To paraphrase Hegel's famous formula from *Phenomenology*: behind the curtain of the public text, there is only what we put there. Or—to formulate it even more pointedly, in more pathetic terms—what God reveals is not His hidden power, only His impotence as such.

Where, then, does Judaism stand with regard to this opposition? Is it not true that God's final appearance in the Job story, in which He boasts about the miracles and monsters He has generated, is precisely such an obscene fantasmatic spectacle destined to conceal this impotence? Here, however, matters are more complex. In his discussion of the Freudian figure of Moses, Eric Santner introduces the key distinction between symbolic history (the set of explicit mythical narratives and ideologico-ethical prescriptions that constitute the tradition of a community—what Hegel would have called its "ethical substance") and its obscene Other, the unacknowledgeable "spectral," fantasmatic secret history that actually sustains the explicit symbolic tradition, but has to remain foreclosed if it is to be operative.[5] What Freud endeavors to reconstitute in *Moses and Monotheism* (the story of the murder of Moses, etc.) is such a spectral history that haunts the space of Jewish religious tradition. One becomes a full member of a community not simply by identifying with its explicit symbolic tradition, but only when one also assumes the spectral dimension that sustains this tradition, the undead ghosts that haunt the living, the secret history of traumatic fantasies transmitted "between the lines," through the lacks and distortions of the explicit symbolic tradition—as Fernando Pessoa puts it: "Every dead man is probably still alive somewhere." Judaism's stubborn attachment to the unacknowledged violent founding gesture that haunts the public legal order as its spectral supplement enabled the Jews to persist and survive for thousands of years without land or a common institutional tradition: they refused to give up their ghost, to cut off the link to their secret, disavowed tradition. The paradox of Judaism is that it maintains fidelity to the founding violent Event precisely by *not* confessing, symbolizing it: this "repressed" status of the Event is what gives Judaism its unprecedented vitality.

Does this mean, however, that the split between the "official" texts of the Law, with their abstract legal asexual character (Torah—the Old Testament; Mishna—the formulation of the Laws; and Talmud—the commentary on the Laws, all of them supposed to be part of the divine Revelation on Mount Sinai), and Kabbalah (that set of deeply sexualized obscure insights, to be kept secret—take for instance, the notorious passages about the vaginal juices), reproduces within Judaism the tension between the pure symbolic Law and its superego supplement, the secret initiatory knowledge? A crucial line of separation is to be drawn here between the Jewish fidelity to the disavowed ghosts and the pagan obscene initiatory wisdom accompanying public ritual: the disavowed Jewish spectral narrative does not tell the obscene story of God's impenetrable omnipotence, but its exact opposite: the story of His *impotence* concealed by the standard pagan obscene supplements. The secret to which the Jews remain faithful is the horror of the divine impotence—and it is this secret that is "revealed" in Christianity. This is why Christianity could occur only after Judaism: it reveals the horror first confronted by the Jews. Thus it is only through taking this line of separation between paganism and Judaism into account that we can properly grasp the Christian breakthrough itself.

This means that Judaism in forcing us to face the abyss of the Other's desire (in the guise of the impenetrable God), in refusing to cover up this abyss with a determinate fantasmatic scenario (articulated in the obscene initiatic myth), confronts us for the first time with the paradox of human freedom. There is no freedom outside the traumatic encounter with the opacity of the Other's desire: freedom does not mean that I simply get rid of the Other's desire—I am, as it were, thrown into my freedom when I confront this opacity as such, deprived of the fantasmatic cover that tells me what the Other wants from me. In this difficult predicament, full of anxiety, when I know *that* the Other wants something from me, without knowing *what* this desire is, I am thrown back into myself, compelled to assume the risk of freely determining the coordinates of my desire.

According to Rosenzweig, the difference between Jewish and Christian believers is not that the latter experience no anxiety, but that the focus of anxiety is displaced: Christians experience anxiety in the intimacy of their contact with God (like Abraham?), while for Jews, anxiety arises at the level of the Jews as a collective entity without a proper land, its very existence threatened.[6] And perhaps we should establish a link here with the weak point of Heidegger's *Being and Time* (the

"illegitimate" passage from individual being-toward-death, and assuming one's contingent fate, to the historicity of a collective): it is only in the case of the Jewish people that such a passage from individual to collective level would have been "legitimate."

How, then, does the Christian community differ from the Jewish one? Saint Paul conceives of the Christian community as the new incarnation of the chosen people: it is Christians who are the true "children of Abraham." What was, in its first incarnation, a distinct ethnic group is now a community of free believers that suspends all ethnic divisions (or, rather, cuts a line of separation *within* each ethnic group)—the chosen people are those who have faith in Christ. Thus we have a kind of "transubstantiation" of the chosen people: God kept his promise of redemption to the Jewish people, but, in the process itself, he changed the identity of the chosen people.[7] The theoretical (and political) interest of this notion of community is that it provides the first example of a collective that is not formed and held together through the mechanism described by Freud in *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism* (the shared guilt of the parricide)—are not further examples of this same collective the revolutionary party and the psychoanalytic society? "Holy Spirit" designates a new collective held together not by a Master-Signifier, but by fidelity to a Cause, by the effort to draw a new line of separation that runs "beyond Good and Evil," that is to say, that runs across and suspends the distinctions of the existing social body. The key dimension of Paul's gesture is thus his break with any form of communitarianism: his universe is no longer that of the multitude of groups that want to "find their voice," and assert their particular identity, their "way of life," but that of a fighting collective grounded in the reference to an unconditional universalism.

How, then, does the Christian subtraction relate to the Jewish one? That is to say: is not a kind of subtraction inscribed into the very Jewish identity? Is this not why the Nazis wanted to kill all Jews: because, among all the nations, the Jews are "the part that is no part," not simply a nation among nations, but a remainder, that which has no proper place in the "order of nations"? And, of course, that is the structural problem of the State of Israel: can one form, out of this remainder, a State like the others? It was Rosenzweig who made this point:

> But Judaism, and it alone in all the world, maintains itself by subtraction, by contraction, by the formation of ever new remnants. . . . In Judaism, man is always somehow a survivor, an inner something, whose exterior was seized by the current of the world and carried off while he himself, what is left of him, remains standing on the shore. Something within him is waiting.[8]

Thus the Jews are a remainder in a double sense: not only the remainder with regard to the other set of "normal" nations, but also, in addition, a remainder with regard to themselves, a remainder in and of themselves—the rest, that which remains and persists after all the persecutions and annihilations. These two dimensions are strictly correlated: if the Jews were to be a remainder only in the first (external) sense, they would simply constitute another self-identical ethnic group. So when the Jews are conceived of as a remainder, we should be very precise in defining this with regard to what they are a remainder of: of themselves, of course, *but also of humanity as such*, insofar as it was abandoned by God. It is as such, as "out of place," that the Jews hold the place of universal humanity as such. And it is only against this background that the Pauline "transubstantiation" of the Chosen People (no longer only Jews—a particular ethnic group—but anyone, irrespective of his or her origins, who recognizes himself or herself in Christ) can be properly understood: Paul, as it were, just switches back to the universality—that is, for him, the Christians are the remainder of humanity. *We all, the whole of humanity, considered as redeemed, constitute a remainder*—of what?

Here, we should return to the Hegelian point that every universal Whole is divided into its Part (particular species) and its Remainder. The Part (particular as opposed to universal) is the obscene element of existence—on the level of the law, for example, the obscene unwritten supplement that sustains the actual existence of universal Law, Law as an operative power. Take the tension between universal and particular in the use of the term "special": when we say "We have special

funds!," it means illegal, or at least secret funds, not just a special section of public funds; when a sexual partner says "Do you want something special?," it means a non-standard "perverted" practice; when a policeman or journalist refers to "special measures in interrogation," it means torture or other similar illegal pressures. (And were not the units in the Nazi concentration camps that were kept apart, and used for the most horrifying job of killing and cremating thousands, and disposing of the bodies, called *Sonderkommando*, special units?) In Cuba, the difficult period after the disintegration of the Eastern European Communist regimes is referred to as the "special period."

Along the same lines, we should celebrate the genius of Walter Benjamin, which shines through in the very title of his early essay "On Language in General and Human Language in Particular." The point here is not that human language is a species of some universal language "as such," which also comprises other species (the language of gods and angels? animal language? the language of some other intelligent beings out there in space? computer language? the language of DNA?): there is no actually existing language other than human language—but, in order to comprehend this "particular" language, one has to introduce a minimal difference, conceiving it with regard to the gap which separates it from language "as such" (the pure structure of language deprived of the insignia of human finitude, of erotic passions and mortality, of struggles for domination and the obscenity of power). The particular language is thus the "really existing language," language as the series of actually uttered statements, in contrast to formal linguistic structure. This Benjaminian lesson is the lesson missed by Habermas: what Habermas does is precisely what one should not do—he posits the ideal "language in general" (the pragmatic universals) directly as the norm of actually existing language. So, along the lines of Benjamin's title, one should describe the basic constellation of the social law as that of the "Law in general and its obscene superego underside in particular."... The "Part" as such is thus the "sinful" unredeemed and unredeemable aspect of the Universal—to put it in actual political terms, every politics which grounds itself in the reference to some substantial (ethnic, religious, sexual, lifestyle . . .) particularity is by definition reactionary. Consequently, the division introduced and sustained by the emancipatory ("class") struggle is not the one between the two particular classes of the Whole, but the one between the Whole-in-its-parts and its Remainder which, within the Particulars, stands for the Universal, for the Whole "as such," as opposed to its parts.

Or, to put it in yet another way, we should bear in mind here the two aspects of the notion of remnant: the rest or remainder as what remains after subtraction of all particular content (elements, specific parts of the Whole), and the rest or remainder as the ultimate result of the subdivision of the Whole into its parts, when, in the final act of subdivision, we no longer get two particular parts or elements, two Somethings, but a Something (the Rest) and a Nothing. In this precise sense, we should say that, from the perspective of Redemption (of the "Last Judgment"), the unredeemed part is irrevocably lost, thrown into nothingness—all that remains is precisely the Remainder itself. This, perhaps, is how we should read the motto of the proletarian revolution "We were nothing, we want to become All"—from the perspective of Redemption, that which, within the established order, counts as nothing, the remainder of this order, its part of no part, will become All. . . .

The structural homology between the old Jewish or Pauline messianic time and the logic of the revolutionary process is crucial here: "The future is no future without this anticipation and the inner compulsion for it, without this 'wish to bring about the Messiah before his time' and the temptation to 'coerce the kingdom of God into being'; without these, it is only a past distended endlessly and projected forward."[9] Do not these words fit perfectly Rosa Luxemburg's description of the necessary illusion which pertains to a revolutionary act? As she emphasizes against the revisionists, if we wait for the "right moment" to start a revolution, this moment will never come—we have to take the risk, and precipitate ourselves into revolutionary attempt, since it is only through a series of "premature" attempts (and their failure) that the (subjective) conditions for the "right" moment are created.[10]

Agamben maintains that Saint Paul became readable only in the twentieth century, through Walter Benjamin's "Messianic Marxism": the clue to Paul's emergency of the "end of time" approaching is provided by the revolutionary state of emergency. This state of emergency is to be strictly opposed to today's liberal-totalitarian emergency of the "war on terror": when a state institution proclaims a state of emergency, it does so by definition as part of a desperate strategy to avoid the true emergency, and return to the "normal course of things." Recall a feature of all reactionary proclamations of the "state of emergency": they were all directed against popular unrest ("confusion"), and presented as a decision to restore normalcy. In Argentina, in Brazil, in Greece, in Chile, in Turkey, the military proclaimed the state of emergency in order to curb the "chaos" of overall politicization: "This madness must stop, people should return to their everyday jobs, work must go on!"

In some sense, we can in fact argue that, today, we are approaching a kind of "end of time": the self-propelling explosive spiral of global capitalism does seem to point toward a moment of (social, ecological, even subjective) collapse, in which total dynamism, frantic activity, will coincide with a deeper immobility. History will be abolished in the eternal present of multiple narrativizations; nature will be abolished when it becomes subject to biogenetic manipulation; the very permanent transgression of the norm will assert itself as the unconditional norm. . . . However, the question "When does ordinary time get caught in the messianic twist?" is a misleading one: we cannot deduce the emergence of messianic time through an "objective" analysis of historical process. "Messianic time" ultimately stands for the intrusion of subjectivity irreducible to the "objective" historical process, which means that things can take a messianic turn, time can become "dense," *at any point.*

The time of the Event is not another time beyond and above the "normal" historical time, but a kind of inner loop within this time. Consider one of the standard plots of time-travel narratives: the hero travels into the past in order to intervene in it, and thus change the present; afterward, he discovers that the emergence of the present he wanted to change was triggered precisely *through* his intervention—his time travel was already included in the run of things. What we have here, in this radical closure, is thus not simply complete determinism, but a kind of absolute determinism which includes our free act in advance. When we observe the process from a distant vantage point, it appears to unfold in a straight line; what we lose from sight, however, are the subjective inner loops which sustain this "objective" straight line. This is why the question "In what circumstances does the condensed time of the Event emerge?" is a false one: it involves the reinscription of the Event back into the positive historical process. That is to say: we cannot establish the time of the explosion of the Event through a close "objective" historical analysis (in the style of "when objective contradictions reach such and such a level, things will explode"): there is no Event outside the engaged subjective decision which creates it—if we wait for the time to become ripe for the Event, the Event will never occur. Recall the October Revolution: the moment when its authentic revolutionary urgency was exhausted was precisely the moment when, in theoretical discussion, the topic of different stages of socialism, of the transition from the lower to a higher stage, took over—at this point, revolutionary time proper was reinscribed into linear "objective" historical time, with its phases and transitions between phases. Authentic revolution, in contrast, always occurs in an absolute Present, in the unconditional urgency of a Now.

It is in this precise sense that, in an authentic revolution, predestination overlaps with radical responsibility: the real hard work awaits us on the morning after, once the enthusiastic revolutionary explosion is over, and we are confronted with the task of translating this explosion into a new Order of Things, of drawing the consequences from it, of remaining faithful to it. In other words, the truly difficult work is not that of silent preparation, of creating the conditions for the Event of the revolutionary explosion; the earnest work begins *after* the Event, when we ascertain that "it is accomplished."[11]

The shift from Judaism to Christianity with regard to the Event is best encapsulated in terms of the status of the Messiah: in contrast to Jewish messianic expectation, the basic Christian stance is that *the* ex-

pected *Messiah has already arrived*, that is, that we are already redeemed: the time of nervous expectation, of rushing precipitately toward the expected Arrival, is over; *we live in the aftermath of the Event: everything—the Big Thing—has already happened.*[12] Paradoxically, of course, the result of this Event is not atavism ("It has already happened, we are redeemed, so let us just rest and wait . . ."), but, on the contrary, an extreme urge to act: it has happened, *so now we have to bear the almost unbearable burden of living up to it, of drawing the consequences of the Act.* . . . "Man proposes, God disposes"—man is incessantly active, intervening, but it is the divine act which decides the outcome. With Christianity, it is the reverse—not "God proposes, man disposes," but the order is inverted: "God (first) disposes, (and then) man proposes." It is waiting for the arrival of the Messiah which constrains us to the passive stance of, precisely, waiting, while the arrival functions as a signal which triggers activity.

This means that the usual logic of the "cunning of reason" (we act, intervene, yet we can never be sure of the true meaning and ultimate outcome of our acts, since it is the decentered big Other, the substantial symbolic Order, which decides) is also strangely turned around—to put it in Lacanian terms, it is humanity, not God, which is the big Other here. It was God Himself who made a Pascalian wager: by dying on the Cross, He made a risky gesture with no guaranteed final outcome, that is, He provided us—humanity—with the empty S_1, Master-Signifier, and it is up to humanity to supplement it with the chain of S_2. Far from providing the conclusive dot on the i, the divine act stands, rather, for the openness of a New Beginning, and it is up to humanity to live up to it, to decide its meaning, to make something of it. It is as in Predestination, which condemns us to frantic activity: the Event is a pure-empty sign, and we have to work to generate its meaning. "The Messiah is here"—this summarizes the terrible risk of Revelation: what "Revelation" means is that God took upon Himself the risk of putting everything at stake, of fully "existentially engaging Himself" by, as it were, stepping into His own picture, becoming part of creation, exposing Himself to the utter contingency of existence. Here I am tempted to refer to the Hegelian-Marxian opposition of formal and material subsumption: through the Event (of Christ), we are *formally* redeemed, subsumed under Redemption, and we have to engage in the difficult work of actualizing it. The true Openness is not that of undecidability, but that of living in the aftermath of the Event, of drawing out the consequences—of what? Precisely of the new space opened up by the Event.

What this means, in theological terms, is that it is not we, humans, who can rely on the help of God—on the contrary, *we must help God*. It was Hans Jonas who developed this notion, referring to the diaries of Etty Hillesum, a young Jewish woman who, in 1942, voluntarily reported to a concentration camp in order to be of help there, and share the fate of her people: "Only this one thing becomes more and more clear to me: that you cannot help us, but that we must help you, and in so doing we ultimately help ourselves. . . . I demand no account from you; you will later call us to account."[13] Jonas links this stance to the radical idea that God is not omnipotent—the only way, according to him, to explain how God could have allowed things like Auschwitz to happen. The very notion of creation implies God's self-contraction: God had first to withdraw into Himself, constrain his omnipresence, in order first to create the Nothing out of which he then created the universe. By creating the universe, He set it free, let it go on its own, renouncing the power of intervening in it: this self-limitation is equivalent to a proper act of creation. In the face of horrors like Auschwitz, God is thus the tragic impotent observer—the only way for Him to intervene in history was precisely to "fall into it," to appear in it in the guise of His son.

Such a fall by means of which God loses His distance and becomes involved, steps into the human series, is discernible in a classic joke from the German Democratic Republic in which Richard Nixon, Leonid Brezhnev, and Erich Honecker confront God, asking Him about the future of their countries. To Nixon, God answers: "In 2000, the USA will be Communist!" Nixon turns away and starts to cry. To Brezhnev, He says: "In 2000, the Soviet Union will be under Chinese control." After Brezhnev has also turned away and started to cry, Honecker finally asks: "And how will it be in my beloved GDR?" God turns away and starts to cry. . . . And here is the ultimate version: three

Russians who share the same cell in Lubyanka prison have all been condemned for political offenses. While they are getting acquainted, the first says: "I was condemned to five years for opposing Popov." The second says: "Ah, but then the Party line changed, and I was condemned to ten years for supporting Popov." Finally, the third one says: "I was condemned for life, and I *am* Popov." (And is it necessary to add that there really was a senior Bulgarian Komintern functionary named Popov, a close collaborator of George Dimitrov himself, who disappeared in the purges of the late 1930s?) Can this not be elevated into a model for understanding Christ's suffering? "I was thrown to the lions in the arena for believing in Christ!" "I was burned at the stake for ridiculing Christ" "I died on a cross, and I *am* Christ!". . . Perhaps this moment of stepping into the line, this final reversal by means of which the founding Exception (God) falls into His own creation, as it were, is inserted into the series of ordinary creatures, is what is unique to Christianity, the mystery of incarnation, of God (not only appearing as a man, but) becoming a man.

This compels us to detach the Christian "love for one's neighbor" radically from the Levinasian topic of the Other as the impenetrable neighbor. Insofar as the ultimate Other is God Himself, I should risk the claim that *it is the epochal achievement of Christianity to reduce its Otherness to Sameness:* God Himself is Man, "one of us." If, as Hegel emphasizes, what dies on the Cross is the God of beyond itself, the radical Other, then the identification with Christ ("life in Christ") means precisely the suspension of Otherness. What emerges in its place is the Holy Spirit, which is not Other, but the community (or, rather, *collective*) of believers: the "neighbor" is a member of our collective. The ultimate horizon of Christianity is thus not respect for the neighbor, for the abyss of its impenetrable Otherness; it *is* possible to go beyond—not, of course, to penetrate the Other directly, to experience the Other as it is "in itself," but to become aware that there is no mystery, no hidden true content, behind the mask (deceptive surface) of the Other. The ultimate idolatry is not the idolizing of the mask, of the image, itself, but the belief that there is some hidden positive content beyond the mask.[14]

And no amount of "deconstruction" helps here: the ultimate form of idolatry is the deconstructive purifying of this Other, so that all that remains of the Other is its place, the pure form of Otherness as the Messianic Promise. It is here that we encounter the limit of deconstruction: as Derrida himself has realized in the last two decades, the more radical a deconstruction is, the more it has to rely on its inherent undeconstructible condition of deconstruction, the messianic promise of Justice. This promise is the true Derridean object of belief, and Derrida's ultimate ethical axiom is that this belief is irreducible, "undeconstructible." Thus Derrida can indulge in all kinds of paradoxes, claiming, among other things, that it is only atheists who truly pray—precisely by refusing to address God as a positive entity, they silently address the pure Messianic Otherness. Here one should emphasize the gap which separates Derrida from the Hegelian tradition:

> It would be too easy to show that, measured by the failure to establish liberal democracy, the gap between fact and ideal essence does not show up only in . . . so-called primitive forms of government, theocracy and military dictatorship. . . . But this failure and this gap also characterize, *a priori* and by definition, *all* democracies, including the oldest and most stable of so-called Western democracies. At stake here is the very concept of democracy as concept of a promise that can only arise in such a *diastema* (failure, inadequation, disjunction, disadjustment, being "out of joint"). That is why we always propose to speak of a democracy *to come*, not of a future democracy in the future present, not even of a regulating idea, in the Kantian sense, or of a utopia—at least to the extent that their inaccessibility would still retain the temporal form of a future present, of a future modality of the living present.[15]

Here we have the difference between Hegel and Derrida at its purest: Derrida accepts Hegel's fundamental lesson that one cannot assert the innocent ideal against its distorted realization. This holds not only for democracy, but also for religion—the gap which separates the ideal concept from its actualization is already inherent to the concept itself: just as Derrida claims that "God already contradicts Himself," that any positive conceptual determination of the divine as a pure messianic promise already betrays it, one should also say that "democracy already

contradicts itself." It is also against this background that Derrida elaborates the mutual implication of religion and radical evil:[16] radical evil (politically: "totalitarianism") emerges when religious faith or reason (or democracy itself) is posited in the mode of future present.

Against Hegel, however, Derrida insists on the irreducible excess in the ideal concept which cannot be reduced to the dialectic between the ideal and its actualization: the messianic structure of "to come," the excess of an abyss which can never be actualized in its determinate content. Hegel's own position here is more intricate than it may appear: his point is not that, through gradual dialectical progress, one can master the gap between the concept and its actualization, and achieve the concept's full self-transparency ("Absolute Knowing"). Rather, to put it in speculative terms, his point is to assert a "pure" contradiction which is no longer the contradiction between the undeconstructible pure Otherness and its failed actualizations/determinations, but the thoroughly immanent "contradiction" which precedes any Otherness. Actualizations and/or conceptual determinations are not "traces of the undeconstructible divine Otherness," but simply traces marking their in-between. Or, to put it in yet another way, in a kind of inverted phenomenological *epoche*, Derrida reduces Otherness to the "to-come" of a pure potentiality, thoroughly deontologizing it, bracketing its positive content, so that all that remains is the specter of a promise; and what if the next step is to drop this minimal specter of Otherness itself, so that all that remains is the rupture, the gap as such, which prevents entities from attaining their self-identity? Remember the French Communist philosophers' criticism of Sartre's existentialism: Sartre threw away the entire content of the bourgeois subject, maintaining only its pure form, and the next step was to throw away this form itself—is it not that, *mutatis mutandis*, Derrida threw away all the positive ontological content of messianism, retaining nothing but the pure form of the messianic promise, and the next step is to throw away this form itself? And, again, is this not also the passage from Judaism to Christianity? Judaism reduces the promise of Another Life to a pure Otherness, a messianic promise which will never become fully present and actualized (the Messiah is always "to come"); while Christianity, far from claiming full realization of the promise, accomplishes something far more uncanny: the Messiah is here, he has arrived, the final Event has already taken place, *yet the gap (the gap which sustained the messianic promise) remains. . . .*

Here I am tempted to suggest a return to the earlier Derrida of *différance*: what if (as Ernesto Laclau, among others, has already argued[17]) Derrida's turn to "postsecular" messianism is not a necessary outcome of his initial "deconstructionist" impetus? What if the idea of infinite messianic Justice which operates in an indefinite suspension, always to come, as the undeconstructible horizon of deconstruction, already obfuscates "pure" *différance*, the pure gap which separates an entity from itself? Is it not possible to think this pure in-between *prior* to any notion of messianic justice? Derrida acts as if the choice is between positive onto-ethics, the gesture of transcending the existing order toward another higher positive Order, and the pure promise of spectral Otherness—what, however, if we drop this reference to Otherness altogether? What then remains is either Spinoza—the pure positivity of Being—or Lacan—the minimal contortion of drive, the minimal "empty" (self-)difference which is operative when a thing starts to function as a substitute for itself:

> What is substituted can also appear itself, in a 1:1 scale, in the role of the substitute—there only must be some feature ensuring that it is not taken to be itself. Such a feature is provided for by the threshold which separates the place of what is substituting from what is being substituted—or symbolizes their detachment. Everything that appears in front of the threshold is then assumed to be the ersatz, as everything that lies behind it is taken to be what is being substituted.
>
> There are scores of examples of such concealments that are obtained not by miniaturization but only by means of clever localization. As Freud observed, the very acts that are forbidden by religion are practiced in the name of religion. In such cases—as, for instance, murder in the name of religion—religion also can do entirely without miniaturization. Those adamantly militant advocates of human life, for example, who oppose abortion, will not stop short of actually murdering clinic personnel. Radical right-wing opponents of male homosexuality in the USA act in a similar way. They organize so-called "gay bashings" in the course of which they beat up and finally rape gays. The

> ultimate homicidal or homosexual gratification of drives can therefore also be attained, if it only fulfils the condition of evoking the semblance of a counter-measure. What seems to be "opposition" then has the effect that the x to be fended off can appear itself and be taken for a non-x.[18]

What we have here, yet again, is the Hegelian "oppositional determination": in the figure of the gay-basher raping a gay, the gay encounters himself in its oppositional determination; that is to say, tautology (self-identity) appears as the highest contradiction. This threshold can also function as the foreign gaze itself: for example, when a disenchanted Western subject perceives Tibet as a solution to his crisis, Tibet loses its immediate self-identity, and turns into a sign of itself, its own "oppositional determination." In contrast with gay-bashing rape, where the homosexual desire is satisfied in the guise of its opposite, here, in the case of a Western Tibet-worshipper, the utter *rejection* of Tibet, the betrayal of Tibetan civilization, is accomplished in the guise of its opposite, of admiration for Tibet. A further example is provided by the extreme case of interpassivity, when I tape a movie instead of simply watching it on TV, and when this postponement takes a fully self-reflected form: worried that something will go wrong with the recording, I anxiously watch TV while the tape is running, just to be sure that everything is working, so that the film will be there on the tape, ready for a future viewing. The paradox here is that I *do* watch the film, even very closely, but in a kind of suspended state, without really following it—all that interests me is that everything is really there, that the recording is all right. Do we not find something similar in a certain perverse sexual economy in which I perform the act only in order to be sure that I can really perform it in the future? Even if the act is, in reality, indistinguishable from the "normal" act done for pleasure, as an end in itself, the underlying libidinal economy is totally different.

So here again we encounter the logic of reflexive determination, in which watching a movie appears as its own oppositional determination—in other words, the structure is again that of the Möbius strip: if we progress far enough on one side, we reach our starting point again (watching the movie, a gay sex act), but on the obverse side of the band. Lewis Carroll was therefore right: a country *can* serve as its own map insofar as the model/map is the thing itself in its oppositional determination, that is, insofar as an invisible screen ensures that the thing is not taken to be itself. In this precise sense, the "primordial" difference is not between things themselves, nor between things and their signs, but between the thing and the void of an invisible screen which distorts our perception of the thing so that we do not take the thing for itself. The movement from things to their signs is not that of replacement of the thing by its sign, but that of the thing itself becoming the sign of (not another thing, but) itself, the void at its very core.[19] This gap can also be the gap which separates a dream from reality: if, in the middle of the night, one has a dream about a heavy stone or animal sitting on one's chest, and causing pain, this dream, of course, reflects the fact that one has a real pain in one's chest—it invents a narrative to account for the pain. The trick, however, is not just to invent a narrative, but to invent a more radical one: it can happen that, while one has a pain in one's chest, one has a dream about *having a pain in one's chest*—being aware that one is dreaming, the very fact of transposing the pain into the dream, has a calming effect ("It's not a real pain, it's just a dream!").

And this paradox brings us to the relationship between man and Christ: the tautology "man is man" is to be read as a Hegelian infinite judgment, as the encounter of "man" with its oppositional determination, with its counterpart on the other side of the Möbius strip. Just as, in our everyday understanding, "law is law" means its opposite, the coincidence of the law with arbitrary violence ("What can you do? Even if it is unjust and arbitrary, the law is the law, you have to obey it!"), "man is man" indicates the noncoincidence of man with man, the properly *inhuman* excess which disturbs its self-identity—and what, ultimately, is Christ but the name of this excess inherent in man, man's ex-timate kernel, the monstrous surplus which, following the unfortunate Pontius Pilate, one of the few ethical heroes of the Bible (the other being Judas, of course), can be designated only as "Ecce homo"?

APPENDIX

IDEOLOGY TODAY

Repulsive anti-intellectual relatives, whom one cannot always avoid during holidays, often attack me with common provocations like "What can you, as a philosopher, tell me about the cup of coffee I'm drinking?" Once, however, when a thrifty relative of mine gave my son a Kinder Surprise egg and then asked me, with an ironic, patronizing smile: "So what would be your philosophical comment on this egg?," he got the surprise of his life—a long, detailed answer.

Kinder Surprise, one of the most popular confectionery products on sale in Europe, are empty chocolate eggshells wrapped in brightly colored paper; when you unwrap the egg and crack the chocolate shell open, you find inside a small plastic toy (or small parts from which a toy can be put together). A child who buys this chocolate egg often unwraps it nervously and just breaks the chocolate, not bothering to eat it, worrying only about the toy in the center—is not such a chocolate-lover a perfect case of Lacan's motto "I love you, but, inexplicably, I love something in you more than yourself, and, therefore, I destroy you"? And, in effect, is this toy not l'objet petit a at its purest, the small object filling in the central void of our desire, the hidden treasure, *agalma*, at the center of the thing we desire?

This material ("real") void at the center, of course, stands for the structural ("formal") gap on account of which no product is "really that," no product lives up to its expectations. In other words, the small plastic toy is not simply different from chocolate (the product we bought); while it is materially different, it fills in the gap in chocolate itself—that is to say, it is on the same surface as the chocolate. As we know from Marx, a commodity is a mysterious entity full of theological caprices, a particular object satisfying a particular need, but at the same time the promise of "something more," of an unfathomable enjoyment whose true location is fantasy—all advertising addresses this fantasmatic space ("If you drink X, it will not be just a drink, but also . . ."). And the plastic toy is the result of a risky strategy actually to materialize, render visible, this mysterious excess: "If you eat our chocolate, you will not just eat chocolate, but also . . . have a (totally useless) plastic toy." Thus the Kinder egg provides the formula for all the products which promise "more" ("Buy

a DVD player and get five DVDs for free," or, in an even more direct form, more of the same—"Buy this toothpaste and get a third extra for free"), not to mention the standard trick with the Coca-Cola bottle ("Look on the inside of the metal cover, and you may find that you are the winner of one of our prizes, from another free Coke to a brand-new car"): the function of this "more" is to fill in the lack of a "less," to compensate for the fact that, by definition, a product never delivers on its (fantasmatic) promise. In other words, the ultimate "true" product would be the one which would not need any supplement, the one which would simply fully deliver what it promises—"you get what you paid for, neither less nor more."[1]

This reference to the void in the middle of a desert, the void enveloped by a desert, has a long history.[2] In Elizabethan England, with the rise of modern subjectivity, a difference emerged between the "substantial" food (meat) eaten in the great banqueting hall, and the sweet desserts eaten in a small separate room while the tables were being cleared ("voided") in the banqueting hall—so the small room in which these desserts were eaten was called the "void." Consequently, the desserts themselves were referred to as "voids"; furthermore, they imitated the void in their form—sugar cakes in the shape of, usually, an animal, empty in the middle. The emphasis was on the contrast between the "substantial" meal in the large banqueting hall and the insubstantial, ornamental dessert in the "void": the "void" was a "like-meat," a fake, a pure appearance—for example, a sugar peacock which looked like a peacock without being one (the key part of the ritual of consuming it was to crack the surface violently to reveal the void inside). This was the early-modern version of today's decaffeinated coffee or artificial sweeteners, the first example of a food deprived of its substance, so that, in eating it, one was, in a way, "eating nothing." And the further key feature is that this "void" was the space of deploying "private" subjectivity as opposed to the "public" space of the banqueting hall: the "void" was consumed in a place where one withdrew after the public ceremony of the official meal; in this separate place, one was allowed to drop official masks and let oneself participate in the relaxed exchange of gossip, impressions, opinions, and confessions in their entire scope, from the trivial to the most intimate. The opposition between the substantial "real thing" and the trifling ornamental appearance which enveloped only the void thus overlapped with the opposition between substance and subject—no wonder that, in the same period, the "void" also functioned as an allusion to the subject itself, the Void beneath the deceptive appearance of social masks. This, perhaps, is the first, culinary, version of Hegel's famous motto according to which one should conceive the Absolute "not only as Substance, but also as Subject": you should eat not only meat and bread, but also good desserts.

Should we not link this use of "void" to the fact that, at exactly the same historical moment, at the dawn of modernity, "zero" as a number was invented—a fact, as Brian Rotman has pointed out, linked to the expansion of commodity exchange, of the production of commodities, into the hegemonic form of production, so that the link between void and commodity is there from the beginning.[3] In his classic analysis of the Greek vase in "Das Ding," to which Lacan refers in his *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Heidegger also emphasizes how the vase as an emblematic Thing is formed around a central void, that is, serves as the container of a void[4]—so it is tempting to read the Greek vase and the *Kinder* chocolate egg together as designating the two moments of the Thing in the history of the West: the sacred Thing at its dawn, and the ridiculous merchandise at its end: the *Kinder* egg is our vase today. Perhaps, then, the ultimate image condensing the entire "history of the West" would be that of the Ancient Greeks offering to the gods, in a vase . . . a *Kinder*-egg plastic toy. Here we should follow the procedure, practiced by Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, of condensing the entire development of Western civilization into one simple line—from prehistoric magical manipulation to technological manipulation, or from the Greek vase to the *Kinder* egg. Along these lines, the thing to bear in mind is that the dawn of Ancient Greek philosophy occurred at the same time (and place) as the first rise of commodity production and exchange—one of the stories about Thales, the first philosopher, is that, to prove his

versatility in "real life," he got rich on the market, and then returned to his philosophy. Thus the double meaning of the term "speculation" (metaphysical and financial) is operative from the very beginning. So, perhaps, one should risk the hypothesis that, historically, the Greek vase to which Heidegger refers *was already a commodity*, and that it was this fact which accounted for the void at its center, and gives this void its true resonance—it is as a commodity that a thing is not only itself, but points "beyond itself" to another dimension inscribed into the thing itself as the central void. Following Beistegui's deployment of the secret hegemony of the notion of *oikos* as closed "house" economy in Heidegger—that is, of Heidegger's ignorance of market conditions, of how the market always-already displaces the closed *oikos*[5]—one could thus say that the vase as *das Ding* is the ultimate proof of this fact.

No wonder, then, that there is a homology between the *Kinder* egg, today's "void," and the abundance of commodities that offer us "X without X," deprived of its substance (coffee without caffeine, sweetener without sugar, beer without alcohol, etc.): in both cases, we seem to get the surface form deprived of its core. More fundamentally, however, as the reference to the Elizabethan "void" indicates, is there not a clear homology between this structure of the commodity and the structure of the bourgeois subject? Do subjects—precisely insofar as they are the subjects of universal Human Rights—not also function like these *Kinder* chocolate eggs? In France, it is still possible to buy a dessert with the racist name "*la tête du nègre* [the nigger's head]": a ball-like chocolate cake with an empty interior ("like the stupid nigger's head")—the *Kinder* egg fills in this void. The lesson of it is that we *all* have a "nigger's head," with a hole in the center—would not the humanist-universalist reply to the *tête du nègre*, his attempt to deny that we all have a "nigger's head," be precisely something like a *Kinder* egg? As humanist ideologists would put it: we may be infinitely different—some of us are black, others white; some tall, others small; some women, others men; some rich, others poor, and so on—yet, deep inside us, there is the same moral equivalent of the plastic toy, the same *je ne sais quoi*, an elusive X which somehow accounts for the dignity shared by all humans—to quote Francis Fukuyama:

> What the demand for equality of recognition implies is that when we strip all of a person's contingent and accidental characteristics away, there remains some essential human quality underneath that is worthy of a certain minimal level of respect—call it Factor X. Skin, color, looks, social class and wealth, gender, cultural background, and even one's natural talents are all accidents of birth relegated to the class of nonessential characteristics. . . . But in the political realm we are required to respect people equally on the basis of their possession of Factor X.[6]

In contrast to transcendental philosophers who emphasize that this Factor X is a sort of "symbolic fiction" with no counterpart in the reality of an individual, Fukuyama heroically locates it in our "human nature," in our unique genetic inheritance. And, in effect, is not the genome the ultimate figure of the plastic toy hidden deep within our human chocolate skin? It can be white chocolate, standard milk chocolate, dark chocolate, with or without nuts or raisins—inside it, there is always the same plastic toy (in contrast to the *Kinder* eggs, which are the same on the outside, while each has a different toy hidden inside). And, to cut a long story short, what Fukuyama is afraid of is that, if we tinker too much with the production of the chocolate egg, we might generate an egg without the plastic toy inside—how? Fukuyama is quite right to emphasize that it is crucial that we experience our "natural" properties as a matter of contingency and luck: if my neighbor is more beautiful or intelligent than I am, it is because he was lucky to be born like that, and even his parents could not have planned it that way. The philosophical paradox is that if we take away this element of lucky chance, if our "natural" properties become controlled and regulated by biogenetic and other scientific manipulations, we lose the Factor X.

Of course, the hidden plastic toy can also be given a specific ideological twist—for instance, the idea that, after we get rid of the chocolate, in all its ethnic variations, we always encounter an

American (even if the toy was, in all probability, made in China). This mysterious X, the inner treasure of our being, can also reveal itself as an alien intruder, even an excremental monstrosity. The anal association here is fully justified: the *immediate* appearance of the Inner is formless shit.[7] The small child who gives his shit as a present is, in a way, giving the immediate equivalent of his Factor X. Freud's well-known identification of excrement as the primordial form of gift, of an innermost object that the small child gives to his or her parents, is therefore not as naive as it may appear: the point that is often overlooked is that this piece of myself offered to the Other oscillates radically between the sublime and (not the ridiculous, but, precisely) the excremental.

This is why, for Lacan, one of the features which distinguishes man from the animals is that, with humans, the disposal of shit becomes a problem: not because it has a bad smell, but because it issued from our innards. We are ashamed of shit because, in it, we expose/externalize our innermost intimacy. Animals do not have a problem with it because they do not have an "interior," as humans do. Here I should refer to Otto Weininger, who called volcanic lava "the shit of the earth."[8] It comes from *inside* the body, and this inside is evil, criminal: "The Inner of the body is very criminal."[9] This is the same speculative ambiguity as we encounter with the penis, organ of both urination *and* procreativity: when our innermost being is directly externalized, the result is disgusting. This externalized shit is the precise equivalent of the alien monster that colonizes the human body, penetrating it and dominating it from within, and, at the climactic moment of a science-fiction horror movie, breaks out of the body through the mouth, or directly through the chest. Perhaps a better example even than Ridley Scott's *Alien* is Jack Sholder's *Hidden*, in which the wormlike alien creature forced out of the body at the end directly evokes anal associations (a gigantic piece of shit, since the alien compels humans penetrated by It to eat voraciously, and belch in an embarrassingly disgusting way).[10]

How does Israel, one of the most militarized societies in the world, succeed in rendering this aspect practically invisible, and presenting itself as a tolerant, secular, liberal society?[11] The ideological presentation of the figure of the Israeli soldier is crucial here; it parasitizes on the more general ideological self-perception of the Israeli individual as ragged, even vulgar, but a warm and considerate human being. We can see here how the very distance toward our ideological identity, the reference to the fact that "beneath the mask of our public identity, there is a warm and frail human being, with all its weaknesses," is the fundamental feature of ideology. And the same goes for the Israeli soldier: he is efficient, ready to accomplish the necessary dirty work on the very edge of (or even beyond) legality, because this surface conceals a profoundly ethical, even sentimental, person. . . . This is why the image of the weeping soldier plays such an important role in Israel: a soldier who is ruthlessly efficient, but nonetheless occasionally breaks down in tears at the acts he is compelled to perform. In psychoanalytic terms, what we have here is the oscillation between the two sides of *objet petit a*: shit and the precious *agalma*, the hidden treasure: beneath the excremental surface (vulgar insensitivity, gluttony, stealing towels and ashtrays from hotels, etc.—all the clichés about Israelis propagated by Israeli jokes), there is a sensitive core of gold. In terms of our *Kinder* chocolate example, this means that the chocolate-brown shit is on the outside, enveloping the precious treasure hidden within it.

Factor X guarantees not only the underlying identity of different subjects, but also the continuing identity of the same subject. Twenty years ago, *National Geographic* published their famous photo of a young Afghani woman with fierce bright-yellow eyes; in 2001, the same woman was identified in Afghanistan—although her face was changed, worn out by her difficult life and heavy work, her intense eyes were instantly recognizable as the factor of continuity. Two decades ago, however, the German Leftist weekly journal *Stern* conducted a rather cruel experiment which, in a way, empirically undermined this thesis: it paid a group of destitute homeless men and women to be thoroughly washed, shaved, and then delivered to the top fashion designers and hairdressers; in one issue, the journal then published two large parallel photos of each person: as a destitute homeless man

or woman, dirty and unshaven; and dressed by a top designer. The result was somewhat uncanny: although it was clear that we were looking at the same person, the effect of the different dress, and so on, was that our belief that, beneath different appearances, there is one and the same person was shaken. Not only were their appearances different: the deeply disturbing effect of these changes of appearance was that we, the spectators, somehow perceived a different personality beneath the appearances. *Stern* was bombarded with readers' letters accusing the journal of violating the homeless people's dignity, of humiliating them, submitting them to a cruel joke—what was undermined by this experiment, however, was precisely the belief in Factor X, in the kernel of identity which accounts for our dignity, and persists through any change of appearance. In short, this experiment, in a way, empirically proved that we all have a "nigger's head," that the core of our subjectivity is a void filled in by appearances.

So let us return to the scene of a small child violently tearing apart and discarding the chocolate ball in order to get at the plastic toy—is he not the emblem of so-called "totalitarianism," which also wants to get rid of the "inessential" historical contingent coating in order to liberate the "essence" of man? Is not the ultimate "totalitarian" vision that of a New Man arising out of the debris of the violent annihilation of the former corrupted humanity? Paradoxically, then, liberalism and "totalitarianism" share the belief in Factor X, the plastic toy in the midst of the human chocolate coating. The problematic point of this Factor X that makes us equal in spite of our differences is clear: beneath the deep humanist insight that, "deep within ourselves, we are all equal, the same vulnerable humans," is the cynical question "why bother to fight against surface differences when, deep down, we already *are* equal?"—like the proverbial millionaire who poignantly discovers that he feels the same passions, fears, and loves as a destitute beggar.

However, does the ontology of subjectivity as lack, the pathetic assertion that we all have "a nigger's head," really provide the final answer? Is not Lacan's basic materialist position that *the lack itself has to be sustained by a minimum of material leftover*, by a contingent, indivisible remainder which has no positive ontological consistency, but is simply a void embodied? Does not the subject need an irreducible pathological supplement? This is what the formula of fantasy ($ – a, the divided subject coupled with the object-cause of desire) indicates. Such a convoluted structure (an object emerges as the outcome of the very operation of cleansing the field of all objects) is clearly discernible in what is the most elementary rhetorical gesture of transcendental philosophy: that of identifying the essential dimension (Factor X) by erasing all contingent content. Perhaps the most seductive strategy with regard to this Factor X is to be located in a favorite twentieth-century intellectual exercise: the urge to "catastrophize" the situation: whatever the actual situation, it had to be denounced as "catastrophic," and the better it appeared, the more it encouraged this exercise—in this way, irrespective of our "merely ontic" differences, we all participate in the same ontological catastrophe. Heidegger denounced the present age as that of the highest "danger," the epoch of accomplished nihilism; Adorno and Horkheimer saw in it the culmination of the "dialectic of enlightenment" in the "administered world"; Giorgio Agamben defines the twentieth-century concentration camps as the "truth" of the entire Western political project. Recall the figure of Max Horkheimer in 1950s West Germany: while denouncing the "eclipse of reason" in the modern Western consumer society, he *simultaneously* defended this same society as the sole island of freedom in the sea of totalitarianisms and corrupt dictatorships all around the globe. It was as if Winston Churchill's old ironic quip about democracy (the worst political regime, but none of the others is any better) was repeated here in a serious form: Western "administered society" is barbarism in the guise of civilization, the highest point of alienation, the disintegration of the autonomous individual, and so forth—however, all other sociopolitical regimes are worse, so that, in comparison, one nonetheless has to support it. . . . I shall propose a radical reading of this syndrome: what if what these unfortunate intellectuals cannot bear is the fact that they lead a life which is basically happy, safe, and comfortable, so that, in order to justify their

higher calling, they have to construct a scenario of radical catastrophe? And, in fact, Adorno and Horkheimer are oddly close to Heidegger here:

> The most violent "catastrophes" in nature and in the cosmos are nothing in the order of *Unheimlichkeit* in comparison with that *Unheimlichkeit* which man is in himself, and which, insofar as man is placed in the midst of beings as such and stands for beings, consists in forgetting being, so that for him *das Heimische* becomes empty erring, which he fills up with his dealings. The *Unheimlichkeit* of the *Unheimischkeit* lies in that man, in his very essence, is a *katastrophe*—a reversal that turns him away from the genuine essence. Man is the only catastrophe in the midst of beings.[12]

The first thing that cannot fail to strike a philosopher here is the implicit reference to the Kantian Sublime: just as, for Kant, the most violent eruptions in nature are nothing in comparison with the power of the moral Law, for Heidegger, the most violent catastrophes in nature and social life are nothing in comparison with the catastrophe which is man himself—or, as Heidegger would have put it in his other main rhetorical figure, the essence of catastrophe has nothing to do with ontic catastrophes, since the essence of catastrophe is the catastrophe of the essence itself, its withdrawal, its forgetting by man. (Does this also apply to the Holocaust? Is it possible to claim, in a nonobscene way, that the Holocaust is nothing in comparison with the catastrophe of the forgetting of being?) The (ambiguous) difference is that while, for Kant, natural violence expresses the sublime dimension of the moral Law in a negative way, for Heidegger, the other term of the comparison is the catastrophe that is man himself. The further ambiguous point is that Kant sees a positive aspect of the experience of the catastrophic natural eruptions: in witnessing them, we experience in a negative way the incomparable sublime grandeur of the moral Law; while for Heidegger, it is not clear that we need the threat (or fact) of an actual ontic catastrophe in order to experience the true catastrophe that pertains to human essence as such in a negative way. (Is this difference linked to the fact that, in the experience of the Kantian Sublime, the subject assumes the role of an observer perceiving the excessive natural violence from a safe distance, not being directly threatened by it, while this distance is lacking in Heidegger?)

It is easy to make fun of Heidegger here—there is, however, a "rational kernel" to his formulations. Although Adorno and Horkheimer would dismiss these formulations with scathing laughter, are they not caught in the same predicament? When they delineate the contours of the emerging late-capitalist "administered world [*verwaltete Welt*]," they are presenting it as coinciding with barbarism, as the point at which civilization itself returns to barbarism, as a kind of negative telos of the whole progress of Enlightenment, as the Nietzschean kingdom of the Last Men: "One has one's little pleasure for the day and one's little pleasure for the night: but one has a regard for health. 'We have invented happiness,' say the last men, and they blink."[13] At the same time, however, they nonetheless warn against more direct "ontic" catastrophes (different forms of terror, etc.). The liberal-democratic society of Last Men is thus literally the worst possible, the only problem being that all other societies are even worse, so that the choice seems to be between Bad and Worse. The ambiguity here is irreducible: on the one hand, the "administered world" is the final catastrophic outcome of the Enlightenment; on the other, the "normal" tenor of our societies is continually threatened by catastrophes, from war and terror to ecological disasters, so that while we should fight these "ontic" catastrophes, we should simultaneously bear in mind that the ultimate catastrophe is the very "normal" tenor of the "administered world" in the absence of any "ontic" catastrophe.[14] The aporia here is genuine: the solution of this ambiguity through some kind of pseudo-Hegelian "infinite judgment" asserting the ultimate coincidence between the subjects of late-capitalist consumerist society and the victims of the Holocaust ("Last Men are Muslims") clearly does not work. The problem is that no pathetic identification with the Muslims (the living dead of the concentration camps) is possible—one cannot say "We are all Muslims" in the same way as, ten years ago,

we often heard the phrase "We all live in Sarajevo," things went too far in Auschwitz. (And, in the opposite sense, it would also be ridiculous to assert one's solidarity with 9/11 by claiming: "We are all New Yorkers!"—millions in the Third World would say: "Yes!" . . .)

How, then, are we to deal with actual ethical catastrophes? When, two decades ago, Helmut Kohl, in order to sum up the predicament of those Germans born too late to be involved in the Holocaust, used the phrase "the mercy of the late birth [*die Gnade des späten Geburt*]," many commentators rejected this formulation as a sign of moral ambiguity and opportunism, implying that today's Germans can dismiss the Holocaust as simply outside the scope of their responsibility. However, Kohl's formulation does touch a paradoxical nerve of morality baptized by Bernard Williams "moral luck."[15] Williams evokes the case of a painter, ironically called "Gauguin," who left his wife and children and moved to Tahiti in order to develop his artistic genius fully—was he morally justified in doing this, or not? Williams's answer is that we can answer this question only *in retrospect*, after we have learned the final outcome of his risky decision: did he develop into an artist of genius, or not? As Jean-Pierre Dupuy has pointed out,[16] we encounter the same dilemma apropos of the urgency to do something about today's threat of various ecological catastrophes: either we take this threat seriously, and decide today to do things that, if the catastrophe does not occur, will appear ridiculous, or we do nothing and lose everything in the case of the catastrophe. The worst case is here the choice of a middle ground, of taking a limited number of measures—in this case, we will fail whatever happens (that is to say, the problem is that there is no middle ground when it comes to an ecological catastrophe: either it will happen or it won't).

Such a predicament would horrify a radical Kantian: it makes the moral value of an act dependent on thoroughly "pathological" conditions, that is, on its utterly contingent outcome—in short, when I make a difficult decision that involves an ethical deadlock, I can say only: "If I'm lucky, my present act *will have been* ethical!" However, is not such a "pathological" support of our ethical stance an a priori necessity—and not only in the common sense that, if we (most of us, at least) are to retain our ethical composure, we should have the luck of not being exposed to excessive pressures or temptations (a large majority of us would commit the worst betrayal were we to be tortured in a horrifyingly cruel way). When, in our daily lives, we retain our ethical pride and dignity, we act under the protection of the fiction that we would remain faithful to the ethical stance even under harsh conditions; the point here is not that we should mistrust ourselves, and doubt our ethical stance, but, rather, that we should adopt the attitude of the philosopher Don Alfonso in Mozart's *Così fan tutte*, who advises the two deceived lovers: "Trust women, but do not expose them to too many temptations!"

It is easy to discern how our sense of dignity relies on the disavowal of "pathological" facts of which we are well aware, but we nonetheless suspend their symbolic efficiency. Imagine a dignified leader: if he is caught on camera in an "undignified" situation (crying, throwing up . . .), this can ruin his career, although such situations are part of the daily life of each one of us. On a slightly different level, consider the high art of skilled politicians who know how to absent themselves when a humiliating decision is to be made; in this way, they are able to keep their followers' unconscious belief in their omnipotence intact, maintaining the illusion that, had they not accidentally been prevented from being there, they would have been able to save the day. Or, on a more personal level, imagine a young couple on their first date, the boy trying to impress the girl; then they meet a strong, bullying male who harasses the girl and humiliates the boy, who is afraid to square up to the intruder. Such an incident can ruin the entire relationship—the boy will avoid ever seeing the girl again, since she will forever remind him of his humiliation.

However, beyond the Brechtian fact that "morality is for those who are lucky enough to be able to afford it," there is a more radical gray zone best exemplified by the figure of *Musulmanen* ("Muslims") in the Nazi concentration camps: they are the "zero-level" of humanity, a kind of "living dead" who even cease to react to basic animal stimuli, who do not defend themselves when attacked, who

gradually even lose feelings of thirst and hunger, eating and drinking more out of blind habit than in response to some elementary animal need. For this reason, they are the point of the Real without symbolic Truth—that is to say, there is no way to "symbolize" their predicament, to organize it into a meaningful life-narrative. It is easy, however, to perceive the danger of these descriptions: they inadvertently reproduce, and thus attest, the very "dehumanization" imposed on the Muslims by the Nazis. This is why we should insist more than ever on their humanity, without forgetting that they are, in a way, dehumanized, deprived of the essential features of humanity: the line that separates "normal" human dignity and engagement from the Muslims' "inhuman" indifference is inherent to "humanity," which means that there is a kind of inhuman traumatic kernel or gap in the very midst of "humanity" itself—to put it in Lacanian terms, the Muslims are "human" in an ex-timate way. This means that, as Agamben was right to emphasize, the "normal" rules of ethics are suspended here: we cannot simply deplore their fate, regretting that they are deprived of basic human dignity, since *to be "decent," to retain "dignity," in front of a Muslim is in itself an act of utter indecency.* One cannot simply ignore the Muslim: any ethical stance that does not confront the horrifying paradox of the Muslim is by definition unethical, an obscene travesty of ethics—and once we actually confront the Muslim, notions like "dignity" are somehow deprived of their substance. In other words, "Muslim" is not simply the "lowest" in the hierarchy of ethical types ("they not only have no dignity, they have even lost their animal vitality and egotism"), but the zero-level that renders the whole hierarchy meaningless. Not to take this paradox into account is to participate in the same cynicism that the Nazis themselves practiced when they first brutally reduced the Jews to the subhuman level, and then presented this image as proof of their subhumanity—they extrapolated to the extreme the standard procedure of humiliation, in which I, say, take the belt off the trousers of a dignified person, thus forcing him to hold his trousers up with his hands, and then mock him for being undignified. In this precise sense, our moral dignity is ultimately always a fake: it depends on our being lucky enough to avoid the fate of the Muslim. This fact, perhaps, also accounts for the "irrational" feeling of guilt that haunted the survivors of the Nazi camps: what the survivors were compelled to confront at its purest was not the utter contingency of survival, but, more radically, the utter contingency of our retaining our moral dignity, the most precious kernel of our personality, according to Kant.

This, perhaps, is also the most important ethics lesson of the twentieth century: we should abandon all ethical arrogance, and humbly acknowledge how lucky we are to be able to act ethically. Or, to put it in theological terms: far from being opposed, autonomy and grace are intertwined—we are blessed by grace when we are able to act autonomously as ethical agents. And we have to rely on the same mixture of grace and courage when we are facing the prospect of a catastrophe. In his "Two Sources of Morality and Religion," Henri Bergson describes the strange sensations he experienced on August 4, 1914, when war was declared between France and Germany: "In spite of my turmoil, and although a war, even a victorious one, appeared to me as a catastrophe, I experienced what [William] James spoke about, a feeling of admiration for the facility of the passage from the abstract to the concrete: who would have thought that such a formidable event can emerge in reality with so little fuss?"[17] The crucial point here is the modality of the break between before and after: before its outbreak, the war appeared to Bergson to be "*simultaneously probable and impossible*: a complex and contradictory notion that persisted to the end";[18] afterward, it suddenly became both real *and* possible, and the paradox lies in this retroactive appearance of probability:

> I never pretended that one can insert reality into the past and thus work backwards in time. However, one can without any doubt insert there the possible, or, rather, at every moment, the possible insert itself there. Insofar as unpredictable and new reality creates itself, its image reflects itself behind itself in the indefinite past: this new reality finds itself all the time having been possible; but it is only at the precise moment of its actual emergence that it *begins to always have been,*

> and this is why I say that its possibility, which does not precede its reality, will have preceded it once this reality emerges.[19]

The encounter with the Real as impossible is therefore always missed: either it is experienced as impossible but not real (the prospect of a forthcoming catastrophe that, however probable we know it is, we do not believe will really happen, and thus dismiss it as impossible), or as real but no longer impossible (once the catastrophe happens, it is "renormalized," perceived as part of the normal run of things, as always-already having been possible). And, as Dupuy makes clear, the gap that makes these paradoxes possible is the gap between knowledge and belief: we *know* the catastrophe is possible, even probable, yet we do not *believe* it will really happen.[20]

What such experiences show is the limitation of the ordinary "historical" notion of time: at each moment in time, there are multiple possibilities waiting to be realized; once one of them actualizes itself, others are cancelled. The supreme case of such an agent of historical time is the Leibnizian God who created the best possible world: before creation, He had in His mind the entire panoply of possible worlds, and His decision consisted in choosing the best one among these options. Here, possibility precedes choice: the choice is a choice among possibilities. What is unthinkable within this horizon of linear historical evolution is the notion of a choice/act that retroactively opens up its own possibility: the idea that the emergence of a radically New retroactively changes the past—not the actual past, of course (we are not in the realms of science fiction), but past possibilities, or, to put it in more formal terms, the value of modal propositions about the past—exactly what happens in the case described by Bergson.[21]

Dupuy's point is that, if we are to confront the threat of a (cosmic or environmental) catastrophe properly, we need to break out of this "historical" notion of temporality: we have to introduce a new notion of time. Dupuy calls this time the "time of a project," of a closed circuit between past and future: the future is causally produced by our acts in the past, while the way we act is determined by our anticipation of the future, and our reaction to this anticipation. This circuit, of course, generates the host of well-known paradoxes of self-realizing prophecy: if we expect X to happen, and act accordingly, X will in fact happen. More interesting are the negative versions: if we expect/predict X (a catastrophe), and act against it, to prevent it, the outcome will be the same whether or not the catastrophe actually happens. If it happens, our preventive acts will be dismissed as irrelevant ("you can't fight destiny"); if it doesn't, *it will be the same*—that is, since the catastrophe (in which we did not believe, despite our knowledge) was perceived as impossible, our preventive acts will again be dismissed as irrelevant (recall the aftermath of the Millennium Bug!). Is this second option, then, the only choice to take as a rational strategy? We envisage a catastrophe, then act to prevent it, in the hope that the very success of our preventive acts will render the prospect that prompted us to act ridiculous and irrelevant—one should heroically assume the role of excessive panic-monger in order to save humanity. . . . However, the circle is not completely closed: back in the 1970s, Bernard Brodie pointed the way out of this deadlock of the closed circle apropos of the strategy of MAD (mutually assured destruction) in the Cold War:

> It is a strange paradox of our time that one of the crucial factors which make the [nuclear] dissuasion effectively function, and function so well, is the underlying fear that, in a really serious crisis, it can fail. In such circumstances, *one does not play with fate*. If we were absolutely certain that the nuclear dissuasion is one hundred per cent efficient in its role of protecting us against a nuclear assault, then its dissuasive value against a conventional war would have dropped to close to zero.[22]

The paradox here is a very precise one: the MAD strategy works not because it is perfect, but because of its very imperfection. That is to say, a perfect strategy (if one side nukes the other, the other will automatically respond, and both sides will thus be destroyed) has a fatal flaw: what if the attacking side counts on the fact that, even after its first strike, the opponent will continue to act as a rational agent?

His choice is now: with his country mostly destroyed, he can either strike back, thus causing total catastrophe, the end of humanity, or *not strike back*, thus enabling the survival of humanity and, thereby, at least the possibility of a later revival of his own country. A rational agent would choose the second option.

What makes the strategy efficient is the very fact that we can never be sure that it will work perfectly: what if a situation spirals out of control, for a variety of easily imaginable reasons (from the "irrational" aggressivity of one side to simple technological failures or miscommunications)? It is because of this permanent threat that neither side wants to come anywhere near the prospect of MAD, *so they avoid even conventional war*: if the strategy were perfect, it would, on the contrary, endorse the attitude "Let's fight a full-scale conventional war, since we both know that neither side will risk the fateful step toward a nuclear strike!" So the actual constellation of MAD is not "If we follow the MAD strategy, the nuclear catastrophe will not take place," but: "If we follow the MAD strategy, the nuclear catastrophe will not take place, *unless there is some unforeseeable accident*." And the same goes today for the prospect of ecological catastrophe: if we do nothing, it will happen, and if we do everything we can, it will not happen, *unless there is some unforeseeable accident*. This "unforeseeable factor *e*" is precisely the remainder of the Real that disturbs the perfect self-closure of the "time of the project"—if we write this time as a circle, it is a cut that prevents the full closure of the circle (exactly as Lacan writes *l'objet petit a*). What confirms this paradoxical status of *e* is that, in it, possibility and impossibility, positive and negative, coincide: *it renders the strategy of prevention effective precisely insofar as it hinders its full efficiency.*

So it is crucial not to perceive this "catastrophist strategy" in the old terms of linear historical causality: the reason this strategy works is not that, today, we are faced with multiple future possibilities and, within this multitude, we choose the option to act to prevent a catastrophe. Since the catastrophe cannot be "domesticated" as just another possibility, the only option is *to posit it as real*: "one has to inscribe the catastrophe into the future in a much more radical way. One has to render it *unavoidable*."[23]

Here we should introduce the notion of minimal "alienation" constitutive of the symbolic order and of the social field as such: although I know very well that my future fate, and that of the society in which I live, depends causally on the present activity of millions of individuals like me, I nonetheless believe in destiny, that is, I believe that the future is run by an anonymous power independent of the will and acts of any individual. "Alienation" consists in the minimal "objectivization" on account of which I abstract from my active role, and perceive historical process as an "objective" process that follows its path independently of my plans. (On a different level, the same goes for the individual agent in the market: while he is fully aware that the price of a product on the market depends (also) on his acts, his selling and buying, he nonetheless keeps the price of a product there fixed, perceiving it as a given quantity to which he then reacts.) The point, of course, is that these two levels intersect: in the present, I do not act blindly; I react to the prospect of what the future will be.

This paradox designates the symbolic order as the order of virtuality: although it is an order that has no existence "in itself," independently of individuals who relate to it—that is to say, as Hegel put it apropos of the social substance, although it is actual only in the acts of individuals—it is nonetheless their *substance*, the objective In-itself of their social existence. This is how we should understand the Hegelian "In- and For-Itself": while it is In-itself, existing independently of the subject, it is "posited" as independent by the subject, that is, it exists independently of the subject only insofar as the subject acknowledges it as such, only insofar as the subject relates to it as independent. For this reason, far from indicating simple "alienation," the reign of dead specters over living subjects, this "autonomization" is coexistent with ethics: people sacrifice their lives for this virtuality. Dupuy is therefore right to emphasize that we should reject the simplistic Marxist "critique," which aims at "sublating"

this alienation, transforming society into a self-transparent body within which individuals directly realize their collective projects, without the detour of "destiny" (the position attributed to the Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness*): a minimum of "alienation" is the very condition of the symbolic order as such.

One should thus invert the existentialist commonplace according to which, when we are engaged in a present historical process, we perceive it as full of possibilities, and ourselves as agents free to choose among them; while, to a retrospective view, the same process appears as fully determined and necessary, with no room for alternatives: on the contrary, it is the engaged agents who perceive themselves as caught in a Destiny, merely reacting to it, while, retrospectively, from the standpoint of later observation, we can discern alternatives in the past, possibilities of events taking a different path. (And is not the attitude of Predestination—the fact that the theology of predestination legitimized the frantic activity of capitalism—the ultimate confirmation of this paradox?) This is how Dupuy suggests that we should confront the catastrophe: we should first perceive it as our fate, as unavoidable, and then, projecting ourselves into it, adopting its standpoint, we should retroactively insert into its past (the past of the future) counterfactual possibilities ("If we had done such and such a thing, the catastrophe we are in now would not have happened!") upon which we then act today. And is not a supreme case of the reversal of positive into negative destiny the shift from classical historical materialism into the attitude of Adorno's and Horkheimer's "dialectic of Enlightenment"? While traditional Marxism enjoined us to engage ourselves and act in order to bring about the necessity (of Communism), Adorno and Horkheimer projected themselves into the final catastrophic outcome perceived as fixed (the advent of the "administered society" of total manipulation and the end of subjectivity) in order to urge us to act against this outcome in our present.

Such a strategy is the very opposite of the US attitude in the "war on terror," that of avoiding the threat by striking preemptively at *potential* enemies. In Spielberg's *Minority Report*, criminals are arrested even before they commit their crime, since three humans who, through monstrous scientific experiments, have acquired the capacity to foresee the future, can exactly predict their acts—is there not a clear parallel with the new Cheney doctrine, which proclaims the policy of attacking a state or an enemy force even before this state develops the means to pose a threat to the United States, that is, already at the point when it *might* develop into such a threat?[24] And, to pursue the analogy even further, was not Gerhard Schröder's disagreement with US plans for a preemptive attack on Iraq precisely a kind of real-life "minority report," indicating his disagreement with the way others saw the future? The state in which we live now, in the "war on terror," is one of the endlessly suspended terrorist threat: the Catastrophe (the new terrorist attack) is taken for granted, yet endlessly postponed. Whatever actually happens, even if it is a much more horrific attack than that of 9/11, will not yet be "that." And it is crucial here that we accomplish the "transcendental" turn: the true catastrophe *already* is this life under the shadow of the permanent threat of catastrophe.

Terry Eagleton has drawn our attention to the two opposed modes of tragedy: the big, spectacular catastrophic Event, the abrupt irruption from some other world, and the dreary persistence of a hopeless condition, the blighted existence that goes on indefinitely, life as one long emergency.[25] This is the difference between the big First World catastrophes like September 11 and the dreary, permanent catastrophe of, say, Palestinians in the West Bank. The first mode of tragedy, the figure against the "normal" background, is characteristic of the First World; while in much of the Third World, catastrophe designates the ever-present background itself.

And this is how the September 11 catastrophe actually functioned: as a catastrophic figure that made us, in the West, aware of the blissful background of our happiness, and of the necessity to defend it against the foreigners' onslaught . . . in short, it functioned exactly according to Chesterton's principle of Conditional Joy: to the question "Why this catastrophe? Why can't we be happy all the time?," the answer is "And why *should* you be happy in all the time?"

September 11 served as proof that we *are* happy, and that others envy us this happiness. Along these lines, one should thus risk the thesis that, far from rousing the United States from its ideological sleep, September 11 was used as a sedative enabling the hegemonic ideology to "renormalize" itself: the period after the Vietnam War was one long, sustained trauma for the hegemonic ideology—it had to defend itself against critical doubts; the gnawing worm was continuously at work, and couldn't simply be suppressed; every return to innocence was immediately experienced as a fake . . . until September 11, when the United States was a victim, and thus allowed to reassert the innocence of its mission. In short, far from awakening us, September 11 served to put us to sleep again, to continue our dream after the nightmare of the last decades.

The ultimate irony here is that, in order to restore the innocence of American patriotism, the conservative US establishment mobilized the key ingredient of the Politically Correct ideology that it officially despises: the logic of victimization. On the basis of the idea that authority is conferred (only on) those who speak from the position of the victim, it followed the implicit reasoning: "We are victims now, and it is this fact that legitimizes us to speak (and act) from a position of authority." So when, today, we hear the slogan that the liberal dream of the 1990s is over; that, with the attacks on the World Trade Center, we were violently thrown back into the real world; that the easy intellectual games are over; we should remember that such a call to confront harsh reality is ideology at its purest. Today's "America, awake!" is a distant echo of Hitler's "Deutschland, erwache!," which, as Adorno wrote long ago, meant its exact opposite.

This regained innocence of American patriotism, however, is only one version of the standard procedure of liberals confronted with a violent conflict: the adoption of a safe distance from which all participants in the conflict are equally condemned, since "no one's hands are clean." One can always play this game, which offers the player a double advantage: that of retaining his moral superiority over those ("ultimately all the same") involved in the struggle, as well as that of being able to avoid the difficult task of committing himself, of analyzing the constellation and taking sides in it. In recent years, it has seemed as if the post–World War II anti-Fascist pact is slowly cracking: from historians-revisionists to New Right populists, taboos are disappearing. Paradoxically, those who undermine this pact refer to the very liberal universalized logic of victimization: sure, there were victims of Fascism, but what about other victims of the post–World War II expulsions? What about the Germans evicted from their homes in Czechoslovakia in 1945? Do they not also have some right to (financial) compensation?[26] This weird conjunction of money and victimization is one of the forms (perhaps even the "truth") of money fetishism today: while it is emphasized that the Holocaust was the absolute crime, everyone negotiates about appropriate *financial* compensation for it. One of the great topoi of the "deconstructionist" critique of ideology is that the notion of the autonomous, free, and responsible subject is a legal fiction whose function is to construct an agent to whom the responsibility for socially unacceptable acts can be attributed, thus obfuscating the need for a closer analysis of the concrete social circumstances that give rise to phenomena perceived as deplorable. When an unemployed African-American who has suffered a series of humiliations and failures steals in order to feed his family, or explodes in uncontrollable violence, is it not cynical to evoke his responsibility as an autonomous moral agent? However, the old rule about ideology applies here too: the symmetrical inversion of an ideological proposition is no less ideological—are we not dealing today with the opposite tendency to put the blame (and thus legal responsibility) on external agencies? Here is an Associated Press report from July 26, 2002:

> *Obesity Cited in Fast Food Suit*—A man sued four leading fast food chains, claiming he became obese and suffered from other serious health problems from eating their fatty cuisine. Caesar Barber, 56, filed a lawsuit Wednesday in Bronx Supreme Court, naming McDonald's, Wendy's, Burger King, and Kentucky Fried Chicken. "They said '100 percent beef.' I thought that meant it was good for you," Barber told Newsday. "I thought the food was OK. Those people in the advertisements don't really tell you what's in the food. It's all fat, fat and more

> fat. Now I'm obese." Barber, who weighs 272 pounds, had heart attacks in 1996 and 1999 and has diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol. He said he ate fast food for decades, believing it was good for him until his doctor cautioned him otherwise.

The underlying message of this complaint is clear: I am not responsible, it is not my fault, I am just a passive victim of circumstances—and since it is not my fault, there *has* to be another person who is legally responsible for my misfortune. This is also what is wrong with so-called False Memory Syndrome: the compulsive endeavor to attribute present psychic troubles to some real experience of sexual abuse in the past. Again, the true stake of this operation is the subject's refusal to accept responsibility for his sexual investments: if the cause of my disorders is the traumatic experience of harassment, then my own fantasmatic investment in my sexual *imbroglio* is secondary, and ultimately irrelevant.

The question here is: how far can we go along this path? Quite a long way, according to recent news. Is it not significant that when the Holocaust has been mentioned recently in the media, it has, as a rule, been in the context of financial compensation, the amount the victims or their descendants should get from the legal successors of the perpetrators? And, since the Jews are the wronged group par *excellence*, it is not surprising that other wronged groups emulate them, and make similar claims—take the following AP report from August 17, 2002:

> *Rally for Slave Reparations*—Hundreds of blacks rallied in front of the Capitol on Saturday to demand slavery reparations, saying that compensation is long overdue for the ills of that institution. "It seems that America owes black people a lot for what we have endured," Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan told the crowd. "We cannot settle for some little jive token. We need millions of acres of land that black people can build. We're not begging white people, we are just demanding what is justly ours."

And would it not be quite logical to envisage, along the same lines, the end of class struggle: after long and arduous negotiations, representatives of the working class and the global capital should reach an agreement on how much the working class should get as compensation for the surplus-value appropriated by capitalists in the course of history? So, if there seems to be a price for everything, why should we not go to the very end, and demand from God Himself payment for botching up the job of creation, and thus causing all our misery? And what if, perhaps, He has already paid this price by sacrificing His only son, Christ? It is a sign of our times that this option has already been considered in a work of fiction: in *The Man Who Sued God*, an Australian comedy (2002), Billy Connolly plays the owner of a seaside caravan park whose boat is destroyed in a freak storm; his insurance company tell him it's an act of God, and refuse to pay up. Enter a sharp-witted lawyer (Judy Davis), who comes up with a clever argument: If God destroyed his boat, why not sue God in the form of His representatives here on earth—the churches? Such a lawsuit puts the Church leaders in a tight spot: if they deny that they are God's representatives on earth, they all lose their jobs; they can't assert that God does not exist, because that would also destroy organized religion, and, furthermore, if God does not exist, what happens to the escape route of the "Act of God" clause that lets so many insurance sharks off the hook?

This *reductio ad absurdum* also clearly reveals what is fundamentally wrong with this logic: it is not too radical; it is not radical enough. The real task is not to get compensation from those responsible, but to deprive them of the position that makes them responsible. Instead of asking for compensation from God (or the ruling class, or . . .), we should ask this question: do we really need God? This implies something much more radical than it may appear: there is no one to turn to, to address, to bear witness to, no one to receive our plea or lament. This position is extremely difficult to sustain: in modern music, Webern was the first to be able to sustain this nonexistence of the Other: even Schoenberg was still composing for a future ideal listener, while Webern accepted that there is *no* "proper" listener.

Contrary to all appearances, this is what happens in psychoanalysis: the treatment is over when the patient accepts the nonexistence

of the big Other. The ideal addressee of our speech, the ideal listener, is the psychoanalyst, the very opposite of the Master-figure that guarantees meaning; what happens at the end of the analysis, with the dissolution of transference—that is to say, the fall of the "subject supposed to know"—is that the patient accepts the absence of such a guarantee. No wonder psychoanalysis subverts the very principle of reimbursement: the price the patient pays for the treatment is, by definition, capricious, "unjust," with no possible equivalence between it and the services rendered for it. This is also why psychoanalysis is profoundly anti-Levinasian: there is no face-to-face encounter between patient and analyst, since the patient lies on the couch and the analyst sits behind him—analysis penetrates the deepest mysteries of the subject by bypassing the face. This avoiding of the face-to-face encounter enables the patient to "lose face," and blurt out the most embarrassing details. In this precise sense, the face is a fetish: while it appears to be a manifestation of the imperfect vulnerable abyss of the person behind the object-body, it conceals the obscene real core of the subject.

Is not Christianity here, then, the very opposite of psychoanalysis? Does it not stand for this logic of reimbursement brought to its extreme: God Himself pays the price for all our sins? This is why any attempt to depict the Christian God as an undemanding entity of pure mercy whose message is "I want nothing from you!" fails miserably—we should not forget that these are the exact words used by the Priest to designate the court in Kafka's *Trial*: "The court wants nothing from you." When the falsely innocent Christlike figure of pure suffering and sacrifice for our sake tells us: "I don't want anything from you!," we can be sure that this statement conceals a qualification ". . . except *your very soul*." When somebody insists that he wants nothing that we have, it simply means that he has his eye on what we *are*, on the very core of our being. Or, on a more anecdotal level, is it not clear that when, in a lovers' quarrel, the woman answers the man's desperate "But what do you want from me?" with "Nothing!," this means its exact opposite, a demand for total surrender beyond any negotiated settlement?[27] "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth"—is this not precisely what we *should* do in order to discern if we are dealing with a genuine gift, or a secretly instrumentalized one? You are given a present, yet a close look quickly tells you that this "free" gift is aimed at putting you in a position of permanent debt—and perhaps this applies especially to the notion of gift in the recent theological turn of deconstruction, from Derrida to Marion.

The point of this book is that, at the very core of Christianity, there is another dimension. When Christ dies, what dies with him is the secret hope discernible in "Father, why hast thou forsaken me?": the hope that there *is* a father who has abandoned me. The "Holy Spirit" is the community deprived of its support in the big Other. The point of Christianity as the religion of atheism is not the vulgar humanist one that the becoming-man-of-God reveals that man is the secret of God (Feuerbach et al.); rather, it attacks the religious hard core that survives even in humanism, even up to Stalinism, with its belief in History as the "big Other" that decides on the "objective meaning" of our deeds.

In what is perhaps the highest example of Hegelian *Aufhebung*, it is possible today to redeem this core of Christianity only in the gesture of abandoning the shell of its institutional organization (and, even more so, of its specific religious experience). The gap here is irreducible: either one drops the religious form, or one maintains the form, but loses the essence. That is the ultimate heroic gesture that awaits Christianity: in order to save its treasure, it has to sacrifice itself—like Christ, who had to die so that Christianity could emerge.