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## ***A POSTMODERNIST RESPONSE TO 9-11: SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK, OR THE JOUISSANCE OF AN ABSTRACT HEGELIAN***

*Persons attempting to find a thesis in it will be shot.*

**After Mark Twain**

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### **I. The Pleasures of Ideological Criticism**

If Lifton represents the liberal *modernist* left secure in the humanistic ethical guarantees from which it views history, Slavoj Žižek represents the new *post-modernist* left in all the energy and conceptual audacity of its effort to formulate strikingly new concepts and boldly go where we could not as long as our thought was hedged in by the need to preserve the guarantees. Žižek is (arguably) the most important theorist on the left today. And the most prolific. Books come from him faster than articles do from the rest of us. And every one of them is dazzling in its insights, both in the dense theoretical formulations that come at particularly charged moments of each text with stunning amalgamations of Hegel, Kant, Lacan, and Marx and in the continuous stream of insights into popular culture, the media, and the topics of the day that drip from his pen like sap from a tree in Maine in May. That latter accounts for Žižek's immense popularity. Here is a theorist who understands all the difficult thinkers from the inside but who is also a good read, a writer of great wit who peppers discussion of even the most abstruse philosophic issues with examples drawn from the latest film or the latest monstrosity of popular culture.<sup>1</sup> Even those readers who

doze off when Žižek turns to Hegel on the logic of the retroactive or Lacan on the *sinthome* read on under the spell of *enjoyment*, unconcerned whether it all adds up to anything or whether a coherent position could be abstracted from it. The value of the text is sufficient unto the pleasure of minds delighted by the *performative* nature of Žižek's style, by a high-wire performance that is always dazzling even if it always arrives at conclusions that have now become predictable and formulaic. So what, the thrill of the ride is all that matters, the random insights, not the abstract frame. To read Žižek is to be reminded of Hegel's discussion of *Rameau's Nephew*. Here is the manic dance of an intellect on fire with its own energetics. To ask Žižek to confine himself to the development of a coherent argument would be like asking Al Pacino to play Hamlet reducing the part to the single note of affectless melancholy. The easiest conclusion one can reach about Žižek, and the easiest way to read him, is that his books offer a rambling hodge-podge of isolated insights, some dazzling, others preposterous, some heartfelt, others dashed off to amaze, startle, court controversy... anything just to keep the discourse moving in its metonymic stream as if in Žižek we have the Jack Kerouac of philosophy, an *écriture* unable to arrest the flow of digressions within digressions, a writing not in search of a thesis but in an effort to perpetually delay the melancholy moment when mania is asked to collect its results. To demand coherent development of a thesis is to kill the play of thought, to rob it of the dynamic from which all insights come, even the ones that Žižek probably dismissed as he wrote them but that he can't bother to reexamine at a later hour. This is a reasonable approach to take to Žižek's work but a flawed one, I'll show, because for all his diffuseness Žižek is a rigorously systematic thinker.

*Welcome to the Desert of the Real* is no exception, though the surface diffuseness of the text makes this book one of Žižek's most maddening performances. Written in the immediate aftermath of 9-11, it is as if the text itself embodies the shock of that trauma, mimicking the general condition of all of us in our inability to put our discourse into some frame and not clutch wildly at the random thought of the moment in the hope of finding some relief, the bare beginnings of some comprehension. Closer scrutiny, however, reveals a coherent argument of great originality and power. My purpose will be to articulate that argument in order later to identify the contradictions of the theory from which it derives. The key to such a reading is simple. Like Kristeva's subject *in process/on trial* Žižek's is a thought in motion, available to us—and one suspects to Žižek—only at the end of each chapter where he always ties things down in a way that enables us to go through the chapter again and, as Eliot says of experience, know it for the first time. To illustrate this thesis I will follow the discussion of each chapter of the book with a summary statement of the theses it develops. That sequence will reveal the unity of the argument that *Desert* develops.

The book begins with a brief introduction. There Žižek sets forth the thesis he promises the book will develop. If we are to attain a genuinely *antagonistic* relationship to ideology we must reject the false choice that has been imposed on us in the wake of 9-11: the choice between terror and democracy.

#### **A. 9-11 and/as Independence Day**

*“Let’s face it, we’ve always been at the movies”*

***Pynchon, Gravity’s Rainbow***

Chapter I then develops a new wrinkle on an utterly predictable occurrence. Namely, that the reigning commonplaces of postmodernism would become the wisdom that many so-called leftists of the academy would proclaim as the true meaning of 9-11. *Everything has become a spectacle. Reality is fantastically textual.* This is the inviting prospect of joining a glib thinker like Baudrillard in the assertion that nothing happened on 9-11<sup>2</sup>. Everything’s a simulation of a simulation. Žižek has been accused of endorsing precisely that view in this chapter. Actually he’s after something far more complex. As any student of popular culture can testify, we had dreamed of this Event for a long time. How else account for a blockbuster film such as *Independence Day*. Long available on DVD one can only imagine its frequent screening in the caves of Tora Bora. But as Žižek knows there’s also something that stands in a dialectical relation to endless simulation: our passion for the Real and our incessant search for it. My favorite example, a middle-aged woman interviewed on TV who said she’d come all from way from Florida on her vacation to eat at the Mezzaluna restaurant and visit the place where Ron and Nicole were killed because “I want to be where Reality is.” 9-11 was supposedly the coming of that rough beast on a global scale. Žižek’s insight is that this claim exemplifies the primary error that ideology has imposed on us with respect to 9-11. To put it in Lacanian terms –and mark this as the first entry of the theoretical superstructure into Žižek’s argument-- on 9-11 the Traumatic Real didn’t enter our world. What entered instead was *the image that was already at work structuring the fantasy whereby we protected ourselves from reality.* The reality, of course, is capitalism. For all the intellectual pyrotechnics Žižek is never coy when it comes to church dogmatics. Every time he risks interpretive closure he does so by citing a Marxist commonplace. These assertions are so pat that they remind one of the canonical ending of Luckac’s essays where he reminds the reader how everything he’s said squares with the thought (sic) of Josef Stalin. As Žižek says, massive assaults on our country are the mainstay of popular movies like *Independence Day* because they both reveal and conceal capitalism’s just desserts: the chickens coming home to roost. The pleasure of such films is the pleasure that

comes from letting the guilt of the system suffer just punishment as prelude to its triumphant re-assertion.

There's nothing new about the foregoing, as Žižek would be the first to admit. What's significant is the thesis he derives from it. Popular collective fantasies reveal the obscene underside, the unacknowledged dirty truths, on which the system depends and which everyone acknowledges at some level of their consciousness before evolving the ideological blinders that enable one to deny what is thereby propagated. Žižek's best example of this is the long-standing relationship of the Catholic Church to its pedophile clergy. The obscene underside of the system is fully acknowledged, protected, and extended by official policies.

What's new here is the central thesis Žižek derives from such observations. The task of ideological examination and critique is to formulate the entire body of *obscene unwritten rules of the system*. This is a magnificent project. I hasten to add that (sadly) Žižek makes no effort in *Desert* to carry it out. It should also be noted that the only thing that distinguishes this from the long tradition of Marxist ideological critique is the addition of the word *obscene*. The task here proposed is paramount Žižek contends because ideology cannot be combated directly since such discussions are controlled *a priori* by underlying ideological assumptions and beliefs, those who attempt to engage ideology in this way are inevitably lead into the deadlock of a forced choice, as in the option of terror or democracy that provided Žižek's starting point. To secure the possibility of *antagonism* a radical break with the system is required. Many of Žižek's finest moments in the book come from showing how so many on the left are trapped in the positions he demystifies.

Chapter one thus constitutes a rigorous sequence of thought in support of an ambitious program. To summarize its theses:

(2) 9-11 was not the entry of the Traumatic Real into our world. It was the arrival of the fantasy that protected us from admitting the truth about capitalism.

(3) That fantasy points to our task: to formulate the entire body of obscene unwritten rules of the system.

(4) Doing so is the only way to combat ideology. Otherwise one falls into the trap of those who don't realize how ideology controls the assumptions and ideas that structure discussion.

(5) Antagonism thus requires stepping totally outside the system.

Doing so is imperative, moreover, because otherwise what may be the rich possibility of our historical situation will be lost. Žižek is well aware that 9-11 happened. He is also aware of the essential fact: that Event only exists through the discourses developed in its wake. Here there is no choice. Unless we can develop a discourse outside the parameters set by ideology mystification will seize the day.

## B. The Media Made Me Do It

*"Paranoia is the ability to make connections."*

*Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow*

Chapter II begins by showing how the "paranoiac perspective" assumed so readily after 9-11 performed its ideological function in making a historical examination impossible. Any effort to inquire into the social circumstances behind the attacks opened one to the charge of justifying them. The same function was performed by invoking Evil as the only term of (non-) explanation. The deadlock was then in place when deep thinkers like George Will, William Bennett and a host of less well-known academics joined chorus in proclaiming that 9-11 put an end to the Age of Postmodern Irony. The recovery of reference and a new seriousness beckoned. Seriousness, we quickly learned, required embracing not only the claim that "nothing will ever be the same" after 9-11 but with it the empirically false idea, even within its proximate time-frame, that 9-11 is an act of horror unlike all others. With the ideological space of discourse thus defined everything moved to what Žižek correctly cites as the perfect example of the *forced choice*, the first of three that the chapter identifies and submits, I think, to withering critique. If one condemns the attacks one justifies American global capitalism. If one dares talk about the causes behind Bin Laden's ire one blames the victim. As a way out of this trap and thus an example of how to step outside ideology and toward antagonism, Žižek invokes the Hegelian category of *totality*. (Mark this as the second appearance of the underlying theoretical framework.) "Adopt both positions simultaneously." Doing so leads to the first of many eloquent ethical gestures in the book. To the horrified "how could this happen here?" totalization brings the ethically transcendent yet densely historical question, "how could this happen anywhere?"

That perspective enables Žižek to show how easily many on the left were led by the *forced choice* of being *for* or *against* terror into the trap Cheney, Ashcroft, and others were quick to capitalize on by claiming *to question this choice is to support terror*. Thereby a discourse was rendered impossible and with it the chance to see that the real choice we face is not between democracy (American) or fundamentalism (Islamic)<sup>3</sup> but between capitalism and its other. This, the second invocation by Žižek of doctrinaire Marxism is marked, however, by a historical problem; namely, how locate this vanishing other? (Žižek will later make a series of unsuccessful and increasingly bizarre efforts to constitute this term.) The more immediate task, however, is to underscore the ethical gains of the chapter by advancing two ideas that seem to me hardly new, though the mystifications imposed on us after 9-11 probably makes their re-assertion mandatory. (1) Employing the category of

Justice after 9-11 requires the recognition that there is no innocent gaze.<sup>4</sup> (2) Critical thinking requires the rooting out of all ideological mystifications. The latter is, as Žižek will soon show, a lesson that the left desperately needs, since it remains blind to all the ways in which it is manipulated by the ruling ideology.

The Chapter thus adds 5 planks to the developing thesis of the book.

(6) Being trapped in false choices is what prevents the move outside ideology necessary for antagonism.

(7) The Hegelian category of totality offers a way out of this deadlock.

(8) Following it gives birth to a radical ethic.

(9) It also uncovers history. For forced choices blind us to the real choice. It alone addresses the truth of our historical situation.

(10) Getting to it by overcoming all ideological mystifications is our primary duty.

### C. On Not Being Politically Correct

*“Boys and girls, all I want is for you to be happy.”*

Hickey in *The Iceman Cometh*

Chapter III offers concrete training in that task through a castigation of the left for sacrificing *desire* to Happiness. (The Lacanian term desire marks the third appearance of Žižek’s underlying theoretical framework.) For now think of it as an absolute dialectical unrest. The betrayal of desire for Happiness is the *bad faith* of left, liberal, democratic thought. That bad faith takes the form of the repeated gestures of tolerance, openness, pluralism and the endorsement of policies that one knows have no chance of being enacted and to which one is actually opposed, since their passage would affect one’s privileged position, but which one supports because they make one feel morally righteous.

Developing this theme enables Žižek to wreak havoc on the world of the Political Correct left. The need to extend Happiness to everyone is the underlying principle to which all other principles are sacrificed. (On this point Žižek has some telling remarks on Jurgen Habermas’ fidelity to the Enlightenment.) The result is the co-opting of every possibility of antagonism into a reinforcement of the system. The particularly apt example Žižek cites here is multiculturalism, which turns all cultures into commodities and curiosities lumped together under the umbrella of a tolerant pluralism that does away with the primary fact of history: antagonism. Žižek’s argument here is reminiscent of the earlier and more incisive concept of “repressive tolerance” developed by Herbert Marcuse (1969)<sup>5</sup>. As Marcuse showed, the system is supremely tolerant. It tolerates whatever contributes to the maintenance of the system. Tolerance has a limit, however, and one quickly discovers it the

moment one says anything authentically subversive. The cry “be reasonable” then silences the voice of dissent.

Democracy for Žižek is the Master-Signifier for all such practices. Žižek has little interest in defining this term historically or seeing all the ways in which it is internally contested.<sup>6</sup> For him it functions as a call to arms. The left must formulate an alternative to democracy. That necessity becomes the only choice open to us once we see that “rightist populism and liberal political correctness” are not opposed positions but “two sides of the same coin.”

The way out of that bind lies, for Žižek, in “remaining true as to one’s desire;” i.e., by realizing that desire, unlike Happiness, is radically disruptive. The concept of desire thus complements the Hegelian concept of totality that broke the deadlock of the previous chapter. Desire is dialectic incarnate, that which overturns all ossified concepts. And such is his adherence to it that Žižek endorses as central to the *ethic* it generates—and as the antithesis to tolerance—a willingness to embrace excess in any and all forms. Mania is not just a property of Žižek’s style; it frequently generates his content. In that spirit the Chapter concludes its overture to the ethical with this revealing image: against the Fascist with a human face (an image that for Žižek includes both the right and liberals on the left) we need the freedom fighter with an inhuman face.

To summarize, the Chapter offers the following developments of Žižek’s thesis.

(12) Liberal political correctness is the primary mystification we must overcome.

(13) To do so we must expose the category of Happiness and all the ways our investment in it makes antagonism impossible.

(14) Desire, in contrast, is the radically disruptive principle that we must constitute as a political force.

(15) An *a priori* blessing is thus bestowed on any act that can be analogized to the dynamics of desire. (He wasn’t there, but Žižek would have been at home in the Southern California of the sixties.)

#### **D. The Gospel According to John Ashcroft**

*“You must make a friend of horror...horror and moral terror.”*

Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now*

Chapter IV clears the way for Žižek’s radical ethic by connecting, in a single critique, the two things that stand in the way.

(1) Liberal democratic gradualism blinds us to the void at the center of the system. The truth of American society is the absence of any genuine subjectivity. *Interpassivity* not intersubjectivity defines us. This concept, which is one of Žižek’s most original contributions

to modern thought, is illustrated by phenomena such as canned laughter; the machine both cues us and does the job of responding for us.<sup>7</sup> The popular film *The Matrix*: thus for Žižek grasps the truth of contemporary history: “in our innermost being we are the instruments of the Other’s (Matrix’s) *jouissance*.” This idea is anathema to liberal democratic thinkers because it violates all the humanistic pieties. The result of allegiance to such essentialistic, a-historical ideas is, Žižek argues, a consistent misappropriation of radical European thinkers, the most recent example being Agamben’s *Homo Sacer*. The same mistake occurs repeatedly. A European thought emphasizing “the closure of every democratic emancipatory project” is “reinscribed” into the belief in a “gradual and partial widening of democratic space.” Such space, Žižek argues, is a mystification.

(2) No better proof of this contention exists than “The War on Terror,” which Žižek proceeds to examine with great insight. As Voltaire might have put it, if 9-11 did not exist it would be necessary to invent it so perfectly does it fill the void left by the end of the Cold War. To conceal its contradictions every system must create an Enemy on whom all discontents can be projected in order to justify any repressive action deemed necessary; as in Ashcroft’s argument that in order to fight terror we must give him a blank check to limit our freedoms. To nail down this point Žižek repeats what is perhaps the most important lesson he learned from Lacan, a lesson on which his breakthrough book *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989) was based. The Enemy is the *point de captation* required for the unification of ideology. The Jew performed that function for Hitler; the terrorist does the same for Bush and Co. Terror is elevated as “the hidden universal equivalent of all social evils.” Nothing else need or can be said about it or anything associated with it. The telling example Žižek cites is the 2002 Ad Campaign that propounded the superegoic reason to say no to drugs: those who buy drugs provide money for terrorists. (Also to the Banking system, the CIA and the Government but we won’t go into that.)<sup>8</sup> Fixated on terror as an englobing abstraction, every other historical cause vanishes like mist on a golf course at dawn.

This is the dilemma—or opportunity—Žižek sees for the left. There is no way to work within the system. And no way to get out of it save through a radical disruptive actions. Such acts are what is needed more than anything, even if they involve “a gesture of radical and violent simplification” as well as the considerable nostalgia that Žižek here invests in those romantic currents within Marxism that were criticized by the very Lenin Žižek recently claimed as a model.

In moving toward the radical act Chapter 4 adds the following essential steps to Žižek’s argument.

(16) The liberal idea of a gradual widening of democratic space is a myth and a bankrupt model for radical politics.

(17) It fails to address where we must begin: with the contradictions of the system as they are made evident by ideology and, specifically, by the *point de caption*.

(18) For its function is to force us to locate all evil outside the system. The War on Terror is a perfect illustration.

### **E. But Who Knows Where or When?**

*“What Rough Beast its hour come round at last”*

*W.B. Yeats*

Chapter V is devoted to Žižek’s radical ethic. He begins with an example that sets forth the basic requirement of this ethic with great clarity. In 2002 hundreds of Israeli reservists (some highly decorated) organized a refusal to serve in the occupied territories. That action illustrates two primary criteria for the ethic Žižek seeks. It must be (1) a moment of true Justice that (2) interrupts the cycle in which everyone is trapped. Žižek then proposes a method to assure such events. Take something like “the War on Terror” and universalize it. One thereby exposes the nationalism behind it, thereby changing “the very co-ordinates of a conflict” in a way that moves us from the deadlock of false positions toward the liberation of something else, which I deliberately leave vague for the moment. To cite one of Žižek’s best examples, here are two false positions on the Israel-Palestinian conflict: (1) liberal Israelis who support Sharon and (2) Western liberal intellectuals who support Hamas. Resisting the trap of such forced choices leads us, Žižek argues, to a position outside the conflict. Rather than offering a radically new program of action, however, sustaining this possibility quickly becomes the assertion of the oldest truth of doctrinaire Marxism. Once the parties to such conflicts realize that their shared enemy is Capitalism they’ll move to the solidarity of the only solution. Žižek calls it “Islamic socialism,” though its not clear whether the term is meant to shock with its preposterousness or whether it indicates the desperate and Utopian nature of Žižek’s thinking. But things get worse. Examining actual political movements within the Middle East would lead Žižek far deeper into the empirical and concretely historical than he ever cares to go. Refusing such discipline tips the hand of the *a priori* deductive necessity that controls Žižek’s thought, leading to a preposterous proposition. “Islamic socialism,” Žižek argues, is a reality that may emerge “precisely because Islam harbours the ‘worst’ potentials of the Fascist answer to our present predicament. That’s why “ it could also turn out to be the site for the ‘best.’” Žižek can, however, cite nothing concrete in support of this flight into magical thinking. As we’ll see in Part II, he doesn’t have to. Historical possibility derives for him from somewhere else.

Despite several flights of fancy the Chapter does, however, contribute an important plank to the argument.

(19) A radical ethic must break the cycle in which everyone is trapped by changing the very co-ordinates of the conflict.

#### **F. Did Anyone Say Praxis?**

*“Dancing in the dark, til the tune ends, where dancing in the dark”*

Cole Porter

The concluding chapter returns to 9-11 in order to show how the radical political ethic developed in the book applies to its subject.

There are, he argues, two ways to react to traumatic events. One is the way of the super-ego, which exploits them to fill gaps in the system, as the Bush Administration did in declaring a global war on “terror.” The other way is the ethical response. As a final example of it Žižek cites the beautiful and powerful act of the Jewish ballerina who agreed to dance for her captors in Auschwitz only to use the occasion to seize a machine gun and kill several of them before herself perishing. Such an example is salutary, though how it translates into the terms of organized political action remains glaringly unspecified. Casting around in search of an equivalent resistance to Bush’s preemptive unilateralism all Žižek can find is absence in the place from which he thinks resistance should come: Europe. Perhaps *“Wachtet Europa”* is the true purpose of the Chapter, and its real function not to offer us examples of the radical act but to show, with due apologies to Bob Dylan, that we don’t need a Weatherman because there’s no Wind. Except, Žižek reminds us, from the radical Right, which he correctly sees as the only serious political force today. Liberal democracy co-opted in its thinking by the very system it would oppose offers us only one insight: that nothing will happen as long as we think along the lines it maps. Longing for an alternative Žižek continues to dream of the radical act. He may not be able to point to it, but he knows what it would be: a break with the system that would lack all guarantees, including a guarantee against its own excesses. This is both the inescapable danger and the sublime exhilaration of the act. Sworn foe to mystification, in proposing this solution Žižek indulges in a striking mystification of his own. Some of us spent the 60’s in unsuccessful devotion to this one.

But whatever its defects in terms of *praxis*, the chapter provides the final steps of Žižek’s argument.

(20) Applying the Lacanian logic developed in the book to 9-11 reveals that there are two responses to trauma: the super-ego one that reinforces the system and the ethical one that shatters it.

(21) The latter is the call Žižek issues to Europe in hopes of awakening it to its role as the foe of U.S. imperialism.

(22) The radical act is also a call to each of us individually: to imagine acts that would break with the system, shatter the liberal-democratic consensus, and move us into a realm of new possibilities.

Every reader will, I think, concur from the summary offered here that *Desert* is one of the most important analyses yet developed of 9-11. It is also, I will show, an analysis severely limited by the method that underlies it.

Calling for the radical act is, as Žižek knows and would be the first to admit, a far cry from having it. Those who are quick to point out the unexceptional and even nostalgic nature of Žižek's solution miss the most important point. This solution is a function of Žižek's own deadlock, a direct result of the brand of Hegelian-Lacanian theorizing he's developed. To demonstrate this I turn from *Desert* to a brief sketch of Žižek's general theoretical framework. Despite the manic intensity of his procedure, everything Žižek does derives with deductive, logical necessity from a rigorous framework. That is perhaps the irony of Žižek's position in contemporary thought. The manic play of an intellect that consistently dazzles with the discovery of new insights conceals the fact that everything Žižek says is deduced from a few fixed, *a priori* and dialectically related concepts. Those readers uninterested in philosophic issues can skip the rest of this chapter. Or wait to read it until after finishing chapters 7-10 where I lay out the way of thinking about the psyche and history that underlies this critique.

## II. How to Become a Critical Critic

*"I operate on things, not in them; you won't see me getting caught up in it."*

The philosopher Teddy in Pinter's *The Homecoming*

Here's a brief primer on how to know everything *a priori*. Follow the Magna Carta of 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy. Begin with language. Everything we experience is structured by it. Indeed, who we are as subjects is a function of our inscription in it. It speaks us. Existential inwardness is the grand illusion. Going inside in search of myself all I'll ever find is language, writing me, determining me, creating in what I mistakenly regard as my most personal feelings and intimate experiences nothing but an illustration of its laws. The task of thought is to map this prison-house. To develop a systematic theory of the structure of language and then show how that structure informs all the other structures whereby we think and make sense of the world. Thus, if language is binary so will the world be, with social, political and cultural structures so many instances of that linguistic condition. The same applies to thought in all its forms. The logic of language is the meaning of meaning. Categorical thought is merely, in fact, the most advanced development of this logic, the point where it can become aware of itself as a total system of possibilities that can now be

comprehended in terms of its inherent dynamic and its basic contradictions. The payoff of thinking along these lines is considerable. One knows a priori how to explain any event—such as 9-11—as well as the discourses to which it gives birth.

Providing such a guarantee is, for Žižek, the achievement of Hegel's Logic and the reason why it provides one of the two foundations of his thought.<sup>9</sup> In the Logic Hegel provides a method for attaining an *a priori* standpoint that is beyond mystification, one that reveals the limitations and contradictions of all other positions while comprehending them as moments in the movement to the perspective that it alone attains.<sup>10</sup> As Žižek sees it, thanks to Hegel we know the laws to which all thinking is bound.<sup>11</sup> As a result, we can enter any controversy, such as responses to 9-11, and assimilate all partial positions to a perspective that transcends and corrects phenomena. And that's just a beginning. Hegel offers the possibility of something far more grandiose. For the Logic maps the possibilities of experience itself. All that human beings do and suffer can not only be explained by the *Logic*, it can be *deduced* from it. All that's needed is someone bold enough to map this logic onto the corpus of Freudian thought and *Voilà*, we'll have it, a synoptic understanding of the Psyche itself in terms of structures (indeed, finally, mathemes) that pre-exist and determine each individual psyche within a range of variations that are also determined a priori. Providing that articulation is the achievement of Jacques Lacan and the source of his appeal as the other thinker on whom Žižek bases his thought. Lacan, in effect, offers a way to make the later Hegel finally appear concrete again. Using Hegel's dialectical logic Lacan generates a series of categories (*object a*, the sinthome, Das Ding, the Three Registers as borromean knot) that do for the psyche—and for psychoanalysis—what the *Logic* did for thought in general: an *a priori* mapping or schematization of its structures and laws. This possibility depends on a single assumption, which grounds Lacan's project. Psyche, like language, must be conceived as a signifying system. By teaching us how to so understand it Lacan provides what minds in love with the a priori crave. In treating a particular patient one already knows all that one needs to know; for once someone speaks (and Lacan never tires reminding us that Freud called analysis "the talking cure") they reveal in their language—its slips, its fixations, its overdeterminations, its prime signifiers—the key to their psyche; i.e., to what they too could know if they made the linguistic turn away from experience with all its emotional confusions toward an understanding of the ways in which language speaks us.

Once we master Hegel and Lacan all intellectual work is essentially done. Culture, history, politics, the newest film, the latest fad are but opportunities for application. Or what amounts to *deduction*. Since all phenomena in the human cultural order are translations of a priori laws into temporal terms, any topic one considers—including 9-11 — will be but an occasion to put the System into play in order to demonstrate that it alone explains what no one else has been able to fathom. Such performances can be opaque and self-consciously

surreal as they often are in Lacan's writings and *Seminaire* or dazzling in the manic energy of their apparent embrace of all phenomena as in Žižek, but in both cases the same operation maintains. Faced with the messy world of particulars nothing will suffice but a fit of abstraction. That's the discreet charm of this program, the seductive lure of the siren song it brings to the study of history and culture.

What is true for the psyche must also be true for history. It too must be something we can understand once we map the correct dialectical coordinates onto it. What Marx did for the economic laws of history in *Kapital* can thus be extended to all the operations that define the Socio-political system. This is, in fact, the goal of a theory of *ideology*: to formulate the general laws underlying all the particular operations whereby ideology maintains its control over collective consciousness. The marriage of Hegel and Lacan is precisely what this project requires since the task is *to formulate a psycho-logic of the social*<sup>2</sup>. Not just the laws that bind the mass of interpellated subjects to the social order, but that order itself as a Collective Subject determined by laws which, as good marxists, we will show point to its inevitable collapse. This is the purpose in each application of Hegel-Lacan to Society or what Žižek calls The Symbolic Order: to show that the *hole* in the Symbolic defines it, making *The Trauma of The Real* the destiny to which it is repeatedly delivered. Constructing such a theory of ideology is the considerable achievement of *The Sublime Object of Ideology* and the many subsequent books in which Žižek has refined a program which offers critics of ideology a strikingly new focus. The task is to identify then analyze the *fantasies* or *fantasms* that underlie and support ideology. The long sought marriage of Marx and Freud is thereby finally ours through the ministrations of Lacan and Hegel. A Lacanian examination of fantasms takes us to the heart of the political Unconscious. In the fantasms that underlie the Symbolic order one can discern the psychological needs and disorders of the whole. The high priori road is thereby complete. And it turns out that it's what we always hoped it would be: the yellow brick road that enables us to claim we've mastered every trauma, every contingency of existence. In Lacan the project of the Enlightenment is recovered. The dream of reason is realized: we now know a priori all that is possible and, of more importance, that nothing can exceed or escape the framework we've constructed. Any phenomena will but serve to illustrate what is already known. The effort of Chapters 1-4, in contrast, was to get from fantasms to deeper underlying conflicts in order to show how those psychotic pressures interact with specific historical events to give a new historical direction to a collective psyche that is tied to specific economic forces.

Before proceeding let me stand back for a moment from the postmodern fixation on language (of which Žižek's theorizing is but one instance) and "tease out" an ironic reflection on this linguistic theme of infinite variations, all of which happily move within the confines of the same hermetic circle, which is drawn the moment one decides that *Language is all there*

is. For then wherever one turns the same condition maintains. We might “experience” something but until we put it into language it remains evanescent. Once we do, language imposes its rules on what we may have thought was outside it. On reflection, in fact, the apparent difference vanishes. We always experience through language. The very stream of consciousness is a verbal process. There is no immediacy of lived experience. The philosophy of language holds the key to everything. Its history, however, is like all philosophic histories. Each thinker (deSaussure, Chomsky, Austin) claims to reveal its essence, determining and therefore limiting what *makes sense* only to be overturned by the next theorist, with the one who deconstructs all who went before crowned heavyweight champion in the academy of pure mind.<sup>13</sup> Which may suggest that philosophy is an ouroboros eager for its own tail. Or, to formulate a heretical hypothesis that could free us from the deductive rigidity of *a priori* theories, maybe inquiry into the structure of language should end with a question not a program. What is language? Perhaps it’s that which remains open to fundamental transformations that are determined by conditions that are in fact beyond it. Why privilege rational, categorical conceptions of language? Why relegate Literature to “semi-grammatical utterance” (Chomsky) or non-serious speech (Searle)? Maybe James Joyce is the one who reveals what language is, can do, and what experience can be if we are rich in our *use* of language and not reductive. For when we are *tropped head and bare falls witless* in our *seemetry of impassible abjects alcoharently* joined in a *notional gullery* where each phrase yields *two thinks at a time* (and where to euphemize is to euthanize), the effort *to idendefine the individione* will come to the one end that is always present: *Whoever heard of such a think?*

In terms of method we now know that what happens to 9-11 in a book like *Desert* is the same thing that happens to everything Žižek touches. For Žižek events such as 9-11 exist only when they’ve been transformed into abstract categories. Real historical traumas must become The Trauma of the Real. Which is always the same it turns out. It’s that momentary experience we have whenever our signifying system breaks down. Yet such is the anxiety this “experience” creates that we must perforce rush to complete the circle of our thought and name this thing in what amounts to a Cratylean pointing in which speech is rendered speechless. It’s come again, as we knew it would-- The Trauma of The Real. That is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know. And having said it we rush quickly to another examination of another phenomenon in order to come again to this same conclusion, as we must, since that’s our methodology enables us to do.

The program Žižek derives from Lacan-Hegel is thus both systematic and fairly simple. The signifying system is defined by its effort to give us the illusion of a fullness of meaning. It does so, however, by excluding something. That something comes whenever we’re struck speechless by an event, by something that can’t be incorporated within the

smoothly running terms of the Symbolic. But rather than make that experience the overture to a concrete thinking that would enter into the traumatic and sustain it by finding the psychoanalytic method needed to constitute its meaning, all Žižek can say is that we've again run up against that excess before which meaning collapses. Because he's moving in a circle there is for Žižek something uniquely satisfying in that moment. It's the *jouissance* of the critical critic. It comes whenever knowledge corresponds to the *lethal jouissance* of the world. Or, to put it more concretely, whenever Žižek can seize the chance, to the delight of his non-theoretical readers, to make large ethical claims for any form of excess, just as long as it inverts the dominant order.<sup>14</sup>

By dialectical necessity Žižek's thought always moves to the same abstract end. Every analysis discovers again the Trauma of the Real; once it is invoked nothing more needs to or can be said. The Trauma of The Real is the noumena, the transcendental signified. All particular traumas—whether of the individual or the collectivity—serve but to illustrate its overpowering “presence.” Such a system works perfectly because the one thing that could challenge and reverse it has been eliminated *a priori*. That thing is the thing Kierkegaard reclaimed the first time the System announced its completion: *the inwardness of individual agents in their existential struggle to engage the concrete conflicts of their situation in order, to put it in Hegelian terms, to discover what happens when existence becomes the medium in which one moves so that in constituting a trauma (not resolving it or abstractly invoking it) one discovers both history and one's situatedness in it*. The high priori road is of no help in this endeavor because *existence* is precisely what the fixation on language eliminates. The disappearance of existential subjectivity is perhaps the deepest way to read the movement of thought from structuralism through post-structuralism. It also indicates the irony of its irony. For such a movement constitutes a repetition *in reverse* of the most famous passage in the dialectical progression of Hegel's *Phenomenology*—the movement from stoicism and skepticism to the unsublatable reality of Unhappy Consciousness—or existence. Thanks to Levi-Strauss (and others) that principle was banished in a reversion to stoicism. Derrida (and others) then returned us to skepticism, but without being able to complete the passage back to existence because fixation on language entails dependence on a trope that must be hypostatized. Irony. Irony is that which needs must ironize itself and thereby everything else. In Lacan and Žižek one finds another permutation of that necessity.

But then that's the lure of such thought. It offers a way to transcend the messy business of existence while claiming that one has revealed its laws.<sup>15</sup> Kierkegaard and the existential pathos is put back in its place by those who have mastered the cynical truth of things. Human beings aren't tragic existential agents. They're props in a comedy they can't comprehend. The only meaningful attitude toward it is irony. Irony—the way of becoming

demystified by specifying the ways in which everyone else is of necessity mystified. One can't overcome the *aporias* of signification; one can only acquiesce in the superior awareness that comes from knowing that none of it could be otherwise. For to know that assures the one thing that's necessary. One will never get caught up in it. One will always operate on it, not in it. And whenever anxiety supervenes, one will find in the signifying system a deliverance more powerful than the appeal of older religions. As Chapter 7 will show, this connection identifies the contradiction shared by the Right and the Left: the persistence of a religious search for that Master discourse that will overcome historical contingency.

Adherents to the postmodernist faith find in Jacques Lacan another ultimate Master who has triumphed over existence itself by formulating the laws that control all those who never grasp the truth: that their existence is never theirs. Like everything else, existence is, Lacan informs us, nothing but the translation of pure logic into temporal terms. "If I am a psychoanalyst I am also a man, and as a man my experience has shown me that the principle characteristic of my own human life and, I am sure, that of the people who are here—and if anybody is not of this opinion I hope that he will raise his hand—is that life is something that goes, as we say in French, *a la derive*. Life goes down the river, from time to time touching a bank, staying for a while here and there, without understanding anything—and it is the principle of analysis that nobody understand anything of what happens. The idea of the unifying unity of the human condition has always had on me the effect of a scandalous lie."<sup>16</sup>

Having invoked concrete experience throughout this critique, my duty is to develop it as a concrete alternative to the model that Lacan and Žižek offer. Moreover, to show that it is precisely what we've lacked in our efforts to fathom 9-11 and its ideological aftermath in the Amerikan collective historical unconscious.

### III. The Missed Encounter

*"Organs Without Bodies is not a "dialogue" between these two theories [Lacan-Žižek and Deleuze] but something quite different: an attempt to trace the contours of an **encounter** between two incompatible fields. An encounter cannot be reduced to symbolic exchange: what resonates in it, over and above the symbolic exchange, is the echo of a traumatic impact. While dialogues are commonplace, encounters are rare."*

**Slavoj Žižek**

#### A.. Who Thinks Abstractly?<sup>17</sup>

What follows constitutes an attempt to establish a systematic contrast between Lacanian thought and another way to think about the psyche. (Both, I should add, share a critique of the ego and the subsequent attempts of American psychoanalysts to put that old

essentialsitic wine in new bottles.) The contrast developed here, unlike the one with Lifton, occurs with an area of considerable agreement. What I'll try to show, however, is that each of Lacan's central ideas stops short precisely because, like Hegel, the only kind of mediation he can conceive is rational mediation: i.e., that mediation permitted by the logic of language, which, as Lacan like other postmodernists shows, is in effect the impossibility of mediation with the consequent arresting of the psyche in certain *aporias* of signification. There is, however, another kind of mediation and in terms of the psyche it is the one that counts. I term it *agonistic* or *dramatic self-mediation*. As we'll see, it enables us to restore the movement of Lacan's categories to an understanding that supercedes them. To put it in quasi-Hegelian terms, Lacan's formulas *arrest* the psyche at what is merely its first moment. The contrasting formulations I will offer restore its progression toward something they cannot contain. That thing, as we'll see, is existential subjectivity concretely *mediating* the very *formulations* through which Lacan seeks to dissolve it.

One way to think of this contrast is in terms of a shared effort to sustain what is most radical in the traditions on which Žižek and I both base our thought. Lacan and Žižek offer a radical reorientation of thought based on the application of Hegelian dialectics to psychoanalysis. My effort will be to show, in contrast, that there is another Hegel and another Freud who can serve as models for a thought that will become concrete precisely where Lacan and Žižek are necessarily abstract. Bear with me reader. The contrast is not merely theoretical. On it turns the possibility of recovering both experience and history.

Through his reading of the *Logic* Žižek offers us one Hegel. There is another Hegel, however, who ironically Žižek might have discovered had he pushed his reading one step further. This is the Hegel recovered when one moves from the *Logic* back to the *Phenomenology*<sup>18</sup>. and then *repeats* the problematic of that work by reading Hegel against Hegel. For the *Phenomenology* offers more than the first appearance of the great existential experiences and themes that would haunt subsequent thinkers (desire, Master-slave, recognition, unhappy consciousness). It also indicates the need to reject the *foreclosure* Hegel imposes on these experiences so that he can assure a rational march to Absolute Knowledge. Repeatedly in the *Phenomenology* Hegel opens a tragic dimension of existential experience which he then refuses to sustain because his sole concern is to show its contribution to the development of Reason. Rational mediation thus consistently imposes itself on the more concrete dynamics of existential self-mediation. This is the flaw and the limit of the *Phenomenology*, its failure to sustain the concreteness Hegel claims as the goal of his thought. One proof of this is what emerges when a genuinely phenomenological thinker such as Sartre renews Hegelian themes in the great, tragic explorations of experience developed in *Being and Nothingness*. Another is provided by Hegel himself in the notorious problem of transitions. Hegel claims that every transition in the

*Phenomenology* is one of necessity in keeping with the stated purpose of the work to trace the necessary movement of experience from the simplest position to the absolute standpoint. Commentators have uniformly agreed, however, that many of Hegel's transitions are "transitions of sentiment;" or what amounts to the same thing, one's of logical and rational rather than experiential necessity. The threat to Hegel's project is that the phenomenological investigations will get bogged down in the concrete dramas of existence. The experience of Unhappy Consciousness may, for example, be inexhaustible and unoblatable. That's why whenever experience is in danger of becoming too complex, Hegel abruptly transcends upward to the next stage of rationality. What's left behind is what must be recovered, a field of exploration into the dynamics of subjectivity that Hegel deserves credit for having opened but which we can constitute only if we resist the *desire* to impose rational, a priori methods of mediation upon it. Overcoming the phenomena is, of course, the rationale behind the shift to *Logic* that fascinates both Hegel and Žižek. That desire is already far too present in the *Phenomenology*. Often termed a *panlogicism*, the truth of everything vital in the work points instead toward what may be termed a *pantragicism*. To immerse oneself in the experiences Hegel opens up is to immerse oneself in the tragic or, in terms of the critique of Žižek, in *traumatic experiences* that can and must be sustained and deepened through agonistic self-mediations. That, as we'll see, is the true route to the concrete. It begins with the recognition that one's true anxiety is not over one's situatedness in language, but over the concrete awareness that one's existence is irretrievably *at issue* in the inner disorders that bind one's psyche to very personal conflicts that must be engaged and that can't be transcended by convincing oneself that all anxiety is about The Trauma of The Real.

A similar reorientation applies to the effort I share with Lacan to preserve what is most radical and disruptive in Freud against all attempts to domesticate his thought. The following system of contrasts will show, however, that the existential position I'll articulate becomes concrete at precisely the point where Lacan necessarily remains abstract. In effect what follows forms a series of *concretizations* which restore the *dialectical movement* of experience by liberating the existing subject from the brilliance of Lacan's effort to dissolve it. Lacanian thought, as we'll see, constitutes a systematic attempt to displace a tragic understanding of the psyche. Its contradictions, however, retain the traces of the displaced experience it thereby points us toward.<sup>19</sup>

Here, then, a brief survey and critique of Lacan's thought in terms of its most basic *categories*. These categories which are arranged in a dialectical progression interconnect in numerous ways, but for reasons of space I leave that argument implicit in order to keep the focus on the contrast between Lacan's concepts and the ones I advance. For it is here that the issue of the concrete is engaged in a way that will enable us to move from fixed

postmodernist dogmas back to a way of thinking about the psyche that we must recover if we're to comprehend what has happened historically since 9-11.

## B. A Critique of Lacanian Psychoanalysis

### 1. The Unconscious

*The Unconscious is structured like a language.* This is perhaps Lacan's most important formulation, the one from which he has drawn the most radical implications through his deft use of deSaussure and his unbridled effort to write in a manner that is gnomic, equivocal, and surreal as befits a *style* that endeavors to mimic the operations of the unconscious; if, that is, the unconscious is that self-deconstructing linguistic process that frustrates all attempts to arrest its energetics.<sup>20</sup> But what if it isn't? What if a better theory might be stated thus: *the Unconscious is structured like a tragic drama that has been arrested in media res.* This contrast is crucial because it turns on the difference between ironic understanding and existential self-mediation. Lacan's definition of the Unconscious resolves the psyche into the passive by-product of a language that "speaks us" and that prosecutes its desires independent of all efforts to mediate them. The second definition establishes agonistic self-mediation as the basis of a subjectivity that lives out the bitter truth of experience: conflict deferred proceeds inevitably to a traumatic breakdown; what we refuse to know about ourselves is what we do—to the other; anxiety is thus the *signal* that opens the subject to its inner world and not the force that mandates flight from it.

This difference rests on a philosophic one: that between symbolic mediation, which is the only kind possible in Lacan's linguistic world, and dramatic self-mediation. In the former everything derives deductively from the logic of signification, the mapping of that logic being the object of thought. Dramatic self-mediation, in contrast, takes up the conflicts and emotions that define one's actual relationship to oneself and others and submits them to an *agon* of change through *action*. That process counters Lacan's assertion that "*desire is the desire of the other*" with the reply that existentializes it: *desire is the internalization of the contradictions and conflicts of the other's desire as the barrier to and origin of the effort to attain independent agency by overcoming the "voices" (both pre-oedipal and superegoic) that assault one from within.* This contrast entails two radically different theories—and experiences—of subjectivity. In Lacan, subject is the discourse of the Other; i.e., our subjection to the *impasses* to which signification condemns us and the neurotic fixations that result from every attempt to defy Symbolic Law. For me, in contrast, subjectivity is an inwardness defined by experiential conflicts that must be mediated because they constitute our existential and interpersonal situatedness as agents who through action give determination to our being.

## 2. The Three Registers

The best way to illustrate this pivotal difference is through a contrast with the three categories that structure Lacan's thought: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. Lacan's *imaginary* is a world of narcissism and aggression, of subjects condemned to the impossible effort to comprehend, let alone satisfy, the other's desire; subjects who thus mirror the conditions of their paralysis in a circle of violence that cannot be broken. Because it is a world lacking the possibility of existential mediation, all mediation must come from somewhere else. Enter the structuralist Lacan, the theorist of the *Symbolic Order*, for whom Language and its hypostatization provides the only structure of mediation that can deliver the thereby oedipalized subjects from both the imaginary and the threat of psychosis. The iron laws of Language have the additional value of providing a new way to secure the central dogmas of classical Freudianism—castration, the Oedipus complex, sexual difference—by making them structures that derive *a priori* from the laws of signification. After mapping this order, Lacan undertakes a revolution within his own thought. The transformation comes once the Symbolic receives its proper name—Ideology. Lacanian structuralism then emerges as a way-station on the road to something that exceeds structuralism. The Symbolic order, it turns out, is defined by the attempt to conceal a void at its center. Enter the *Real* as the traumatic kernel that exceeds symbolization, the force of *jouissance* before which all linguistic attempts to fix meaning collapse. Despite its romantic aura, the Real functions as the final abstraction that completes the circle of Lacanian thought in the only way that an abstract dialectic can achieve completion: through the production of an entire new system of concepts—*objet a*, the sinthome, the drive, agalma, etc—which are generated *deductively* through the simple inversion of the system of concepts that defines the Symbolic Order.

Lacan is at pains to argue that his categories stand in a dialectical relationship of mutual complication.<sup>21</sup> I think it can be shown, however, that they actually trace the circularity of a progressively abstract series of displacements. The basic error occurs at the beginning in the deliberate swerve of Lacan's thought away from its considerable initial debt to Melanie Klein. The Lacanian imaginary is a frozen structure incapable of mediation because its entire rationale is flight from a prior order of experience which Lacan, unlike Klein, refuses to explore. As Klein show, pre-oedipal conflicts are one's in which one's existence is at issue. Though she has her own way of displacing the primary implication of her discoveries, the pre-oedipal world Klein describes is one of humiliation and cruelty that turn on what happens when the internalization of the other's destructiveness generates emotional conflicts that make the struggle to avoid inner deadening the primary organizer of the psyche<sup>22</sup>. Lacan's *mirror-stage* is a flight from the emotional turbulence and agonistics of

that situation through a displacement of its aggressivity into the frustrations of a paralysis. If one recovers all that Lacan thereby displaces the result is the discovery of a *dynamic existential unconscious*, as opposed to Lacan's linguistic one, an unconscious defined by pre-oedipal conflicts and anxieties that must be confronted because the very possibility of life or death, of psychic integration or psychotic dissolution, hangs in the balance. The Lacanian Imaginary is an effort to resolve that agon in a frozen realization of one of its possibilities. It is as if, without knowing it, Lacan is saying "if I can mirror the other and realize their desire I can escape the spectre of their destructiveness and the anxiety of my own conflicted feelings toward the other and toward myself." From this perspective the Lacanian Symbolic emerges, in turn, not as the Imaginary's mediation through linguistic *intervention* but as its reification through the enforcement as cultural Law of the rigid conventions of meaning that bind socialized subjects to one another in collective flight from existential anxieties. Such beings are, of course, haunted by a return of the repressed. They get the one they deserve in the Lacanian Real. For romantic proclamations notwithstanding, the Real constitutes a return of all that one has failed to confront in one's inner world now rendered massive, impersonal, and overwhelming as a result of one's persistent flight from it.

The actual relationship of the three categories that structure Lacan's thought is therefore not a dialectical one (as Lacan and Žižek claim) but, rather, the process of displacement whereby flight from dramatic self-mediation begets a formalism of pure linguistic relationships from which all experiential possibilities are derived through *deductions* that are void of any meaning other than their linguistic self-reference. The system forms, in short, a vast and impersonal tautology. Actual anxiety is thereby silenced. A language of anxiety is replaced by anxiety over language. Little wonder that the final condition to which Lacanian thought aspires is the superior irony of those who are demystified of all illusions about human subjectivity and human agency; and yet who claim to liberate and remain true to a desire that has itself been reduced to a sheer energetics devoid of agency and fatally tied via the *objet a* (of which more shortly) to the reification of an initial condition that cannot be mediated.

To this way of thinking I offer the alternative of tragic self-mediation. Recognition and reversal (though not I hasten to point out in their Aristotelian meaning) are the prime movers in this process because it is defined by the two moments that constitute the movement of a genuine psychoanalysis: (1) the recognition of how the conflicts one refuses to face structure one's life and (2) the effort to act within the agon that is thereby recovered in a way that will bring about a complete reversal in the very structure of one's psyche. If anxiety is for Lacan the force that motivates a system of displacements, anxiety is, for a tragic sensibility, what Keats called "the wakeful anguish of the soul."<sup>23</sup> As such it is the overture to

the dialectic process that defines the inwardness of what I term the *melancholic subject*. Anxiety is the signal not to flee but to attend to one's inner world. One can only do so, however, if one is willing to suffer the burden of depression, which is no less than the burden of confronting the truth about the feelings toward the other and oneself that define one's inner world. (The great example, of course, is the transformation Hamlet goes through from the false piety of his original vow of fealty to the paternal super-ego to the process of existential individuation that overturns everything he once believed—especially about himself.) The possibility of self-mediation depends on the ability of the human being to live within and thereby deepen the revelatory power of depression. This contrast to Lacan's thought may be the most revealing because the greatest lacunae in the Lacanian edifice is the absence of any theory, let alone consideration, of depression. In Lacan's nosology (his classification of neuroses and their etiologies) there are only five possibilities or subject-positions: the hysteric, the obsessional, the pervert, the phobic, and the psychotic. This is so because those possibilities are the ones that can be deduced from the laws of signification. Having no standing in that logic, depression is ushered from the stage and with it the possibility of an inwardness capable of sustaining those emotions and conflicts that light up the true conditions of our inner world. In the attempt to displace this dynamic of the psyche, Lacan's thought oscillates between obsessional and hysteric mechanisms. Obsessional mentation tries to get everything pinned down, fixed forever in a system of clear and distinct structural concepts and mathemes, but then the whole edifice falls apart in the return of a hysteria that must be displaced in a renewed effort to fashion a "world in the head," a world of "words words words" as verbal magic promising conceptual deliverance from a situation that cannot be faced. Here too Žižek is Lacan's true son. Or, to put it in terms of the missed encounter, Žižek and I have the same subject—traumatic anxiety—but while my effort is to constitute its experiential meaning, everything Žižek does is an attempt to flee that prospect. This is the true source of the mania that defines his procedure. If one keeps moving, constantly showing how much one can say about whatever topic comes to mind, one can forever forestall the day when everything stops and all that one has refused to know about oneself knocks on the door. To displace the anxiety of that prospect—in fact to keep anxiety confined to its most immediate form—Žižek, like Lacan, alternates between obsessional and hysterical mentation. Obsessional: the need to reassert the same set of abstract *a priori* truth (i.e., the Trauma of the Real) at the end of each discussion. Hysteria: the need to immediately begin again and keep the dance of intellect moving at a fantastic clip. For the secret that drives and haunts obsessionalism is the attempt to deny something that one already knows. That's why the moment one proves to oneself beyond the shadow of a doubt that one has triumphed over the thing one wants to deny the whole process begins again. Fortunately one thereby escapes the fear that haunts one. For to confront what one knows yet needs to deny is to open oneself to the necessity of depression, which is that experience

where all displacements cease and one is overwhelmed by the actual emotional burdens of one's inner world.

### 3. Desire

*"The paradox is this: when we fall in love we are seeking to rekindle all or some of the people to whom we were attached; on the other hand, we ask our beloved to correct all of the wrongs that these earlier parents or siblings inflicted on us. So that love contains within it the contradiction: the attempt to return to the past and the attempt to undo the past."*

Lewis Levy (Martin Bergmann) in Woody Allen's ***Crimes and Misdemeanors***<sup>24</sup>

There are two ways to constitute the dynamic of desire that Hegel uncovered in the *Phenomenology*. Desire, as Hegel shows, is the dialectical unrest that informs subjectivity. For desire is defined by a dissatisfaction that demands progressive self-overcoming. I desire this. I achieve it only to realize "that's not it." I desire something else, something more. I'm defined by perpetual dissatisfaction, and contra the capitalist commodification of this condition reflecting on desire leads to one inevitable conclusion: "self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness."<sup>25</sup> That conclusion, in turn, establishes the fundamental dilemma of human relations, since dissatisfaction with commodities is nothing to the dissatisfactions that love activates. Concrete relations with others are marked by perpetual struggle.<sup>26</sup>

There are two ways to think about the origin of the psyche. For Lacan, desire always produces dissatisfaction because desire is and remains the desire of the other. My desire thus proves my continuing subjection to the other. Subjection is how desire is formed and how it operates. I am what I represent for another signifier; how I am signified by them as an expression of their desire. A double trap results. I can never fulfill the others demand nor fathom the enigma of their desire. Nor can I every break free of it and constitute an independent desire of my own. It is impossible to give the other what would complete them or stop trying to do so.<sup>27</sup> (It's worth noting that the other is in the same trap with respect to their desire. Enigma and infinite regress are here two sides of the same coin.)

But what if desire isn't the bedrock Hegel and Lacan claim, but itself the displacement of a darker and more exacting condition? That possibility offers another way to look at the origin of the psyche. The projection of the mother's conscious and unconscious conflicts is the founding condition that delivers the psyche over to the necessity of self-mediation. The effort to fulfill the m/other's desire is an attempt to avoid confronting the conflicted feelings that are the deep and lasting impact of that experience. The psyche is defined by *primary emotions*. These, the true issue of our earliest experiences, deliver us over to existing as a subject threatened with self-dissolution. Love one learns is not unqualified; like a Greek bearing gifts, it comes with a host of messages defining what one

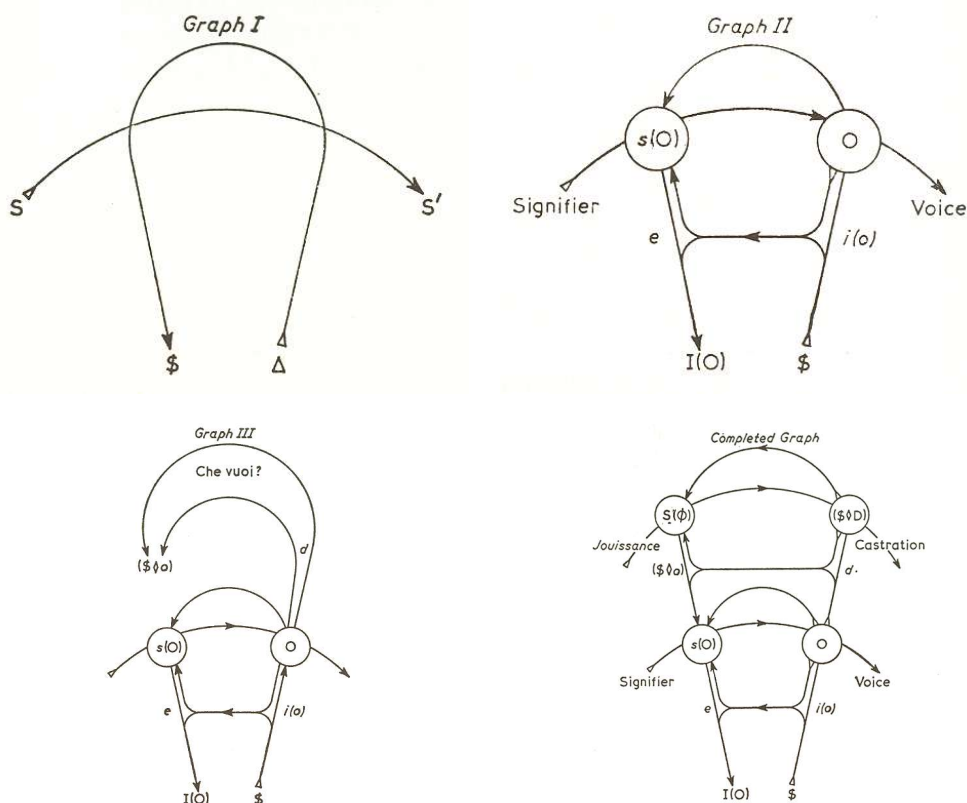
must do and become to prove worthy of it –and what will happen if one doesn't. The depressive's fear—that hate will prove stronger than love —is the defining experience of childhood. What the other desires that one *be* is a function of their unconscious conflicts. "Be what I need you to be so that my emotional needs are fulfilled." This message is communicated to the child in a number of ways: the approval given and the approval withheld; the use of humiliation and cruelty as tools of instruction; the terror of an abandonment that would prove destructive—the withdrawal of love; the persecution internalized that assaults one whenever one tries to say No to parental demand. The internalization of such experiences creates the clash of primary emotions that define the child's inner world, a world of conflict that turns on feelings of desperate love and violent hatred -- and beneath both a struggle to persist in being as a subject by overcoming the destructiveness one has internalized. To be a subject is to suffer nameless dread, catastrophic anxiety, and a *wound* that goes to the heart of one's being. This is the reality that is prior to desire: the existential vulnerability of a subject at issue to itself as a result of experiencing a violent appropriation by the other. To be a subject is to exist as a *who* posing the question *why* in response to the cruelty of the other. But because the feelings connected to such experiences are overpowering we build a crypt around the *wound* that defines the psyche and atop that crypt we erect the world of desire. Desire is a displacement of the terror of humiliation and cruelty. It is how a subject flees itself, not how it confronts or expresses itself. In fact, both of the options it offers are traps. One can try to fulfill the other's desire, but only at the cost of the *resentment* one then feels. Or one can lose oneself by making oneself the stark inversion of the other's expectations. Either way entails flight from the actual existential task. Contra Lacan, the fact of the matter is that one can know the conflicts of the m/other's Unconscious as well as how one's own conflicts derive from one's insertion in that drama. And armed with that knowledge one can take up the task of reversal. But only if one is willing to endure the trauma that such an effort unleashes in one's psyche. Failure to do so, however, also reveals the inadequacy of the Lacanian paradigm. For one only remains fixated on the repetition of an attempt to fulfill an enigmatic desire when one fears or refuses to confront the actual feelings and conflicts that define one's relationship to the other. Or, to put it in even more concrete terms, one only remains bound to a frustrating and impossible desire as long as one refuses to confront one's complicity in the perpetuation of that frustration. Doing so, moreover, is not something one can escape by terming it impossible because from its inception desire is dialectical. It is both the desire of the other and the desire to liberate oneself from that desire. That is what one feels *immediately* the first time one experiences those questions that are only experienced in unspeakable pain. Why does my mother recoil whenever I hug her? What is it about my crying that terrifies her? Why does my father try to humiliate me? What is it about me that makes him hate me? "Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?" No, the

child doesn't pose these questions in these terms. It does so far more deeply and concretely. It lives them as traumatic experiences that will inform one's later response to the conflict.

#### 4. Subjectivity: As Subjection or as Existentialization

Anticipating the predictable charge from doctrinaire Lacanians that conflict is just another word for desire, the contrast developed above (though slight in terms of shared Hegelian principles) indicates a fundamental difference. It can be brought out most readily by contrasting the view of subjectivity articulated in the graphs developed in Lacan's greatest essay—"Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire"<sup>28</sup> with the order of subjectivity that those graphs render impossible. Both views, I should add, share the effort to liberate the subject from the substantialism and essentialism of ego psychology and all subsequent attempts within psychoanalysis to posit a stable self and self-identity.

For purposes of brevity I confine discussion of the 4 graphs to their conceptual meaning. The graphs trace a progressive de-centering of the subject. The position I present articulates, in contrast, the bases of existential liberation.



**Graph I:** I am subjected to the other and to what the other signifies me as. Hegel's mistake was to posit the autonomy of desire. Desire is the desire of the other. When I desire I desire what the other has determined me to desire. I think my desires are mine—the result of personal choices-- when they are really the other's. This is the primary subjection of the

subject. Narcissism, the belief in the ego and the search for identity are the ways we try to deny this condition. And thereby illustrate it. For the ego, as Lacan demonstrates, is the illusory coherence of a being totally dependent on adapting itself to the demands of the other. Qua subject, I am bound to a Signifier [“you’re a good boy who would never shame your mother”] which the other imposed on me or which I latched onto in an attempt to become the embodiment of their desire.

**Contra:** Desire is a displacement of the terror of confronting the emotions that define one’s true relationship to the other and the conflicts that are engaged the moment one tries to say No to the super-ego, which is the true voice or presence of the other in the psyche. Resistance to its demands delivers one over to the threat of psychic dissolution, which is only engaged if one manages to sustain an anxiety that begins on the other side of the fear of abandonment and the loss of the other’s love. Desire is a relief from the dread that this prospect brings; and a way to displace the conflicts it engages. The wound at the heart of the psyche is prior to desire. If liberation is to become possible, it is there that one must begin.

**Graph II:** The condition established in the first graph is played out in the larger world of Symbolic Identification or what Lacan terms the Big Other. The ideal ego seeks the approval of the ego-ideal. This involves a double subjection. The ideal ego is the self we try to become so that we’ll be likeable; that is, so that we’ll embody the signifiers that attract and realize the desire of others. This further alienation from the possibility of any independent desire introduces permanent insecurity. We view ourselves through the gaze of the other, but we can never be sure we’ve received it. The alienation of the *mirror stage* in which I first fell under the spell of the other is thus repeated in the attempt to fashion an identity that will appeal to the Big Other. The result is a further de-centering in which I become utterly dependent on others, on social recognition. The Hegelian dream of recognition thus devolves to the kind of thing one finds in academic careerism: the pursuit of a professional reputation—and with it an identity—through the incessant advertisement of one’s name recognition to others engaged in a similar pursuit. There’s no way to arrest this activity nor to see the void at its center because everything is controlled by a question one dare not ask: when you enact a role—and try with all your heart to be it—who are you enacting it for?

**Contra:** The second graph is an incisive charting of the fundamental trap that subjects fall into as long as they remain dependent on others for their “self-worth.” The reason people cling desperately to this is project, however, is the deliverance it offers from the dread of existence. It returns in the anxiety that comes whenever one finds oneself alone, alienated from the group or threatened with exclusion. We seek safety and security in the They because we live in terror of representing or pursuing anything that doesn’t have

the blessing of consensual validation and reflected appraisals. The social determination of the subject that is given schematic articulation in Lacan's second graph is for the most part the truth about human beings only because it displaces a prior problematic of existence.

**Graph III:** The condition articulated in the second graph reveals its binding power whenever the subject attempts to go inward. That act is defined for Lacan by the question *che vuoi?* That is, what does the big Other really want of me? Why am I what you (the big O) say that I am? Those questions haunt the subject, bringing with them a freight of doubt and anxiety. Have I fathomed the other's desire? Do I know what the Other really wants from me? Subjection to otherness has delivered the subject over to two intolerable questions. *Fantasy* is an attempt to provide an answer by filling up the gap that desire opens. We think of our fantasies as private and individualistic, but Lacan shows how completely this inwardness dances to no different drummer. Fantasy is not about what we desire, but about what the O/other desires and how we offer ourselves as the object that will fill that desire. I am what is lacking in you. I will complete you. And thereby attain the illusion of fulfilling myself. The effort entails, however, a fundamental contradiction. All fantasy is a response to "the unbearable enigma of the other's desire." *The fundamental fantasy*—the core one we repeat in endless variations—is an attempt to represent one's identity in terms of who one is for the other. But one can never be sure one's got it right. The irony of the situation is that in this we meet at least, though as ships in the night. For the other never knows either. I keep thinking the other has a desire that can be fulfilled when like me they're defined by a lack they're desperately trying to fill by becoming the lure to another's desire. The comedy of human relations derives from this fact. As does the lure of Hollywood, the dream factory of collective fantasy. Without the movies most people wouldn't have the slightest idea what they want or what kind of woman or man embodies the object of their desire.

**Contra:** We remain fixated on the world of public collective fantasies because it delivers us from confronting the actual anxieties and conflicts of our inner world. Fantasy is a text we refuse to submit to the very interrogation that it makes possible. For the deepest fantasies reveal not only *who* we are for the other, but what it costs to be a function of the other's desire. One sits at the window awaiting the long overdue return of one's wife or husband indulging again the fantasy of the accidental death that will deliver one magically into the bliss of one's freedom. Such a fantasy represents the frustrations of one's inner world as contradictions that demand *drama*. In fantasies of this order the question *who am I?* reveals the possibilities one dreads. Lacan neglects such fantasies because they point to an ongoing act existential self-reference at the heart of the psyche, with fantasy the way of enacting the very problems that Lacan consigns to silence. Fantasy reveals a subject defined by problems such as: how expel the bad object, not how secure the good one? How

survive under the pressure of thanatos in the psyche? How deal with the self-lacerations of a heart that feels a depth both of love and hate toward the same others? How overcome the staging within fantasy of one's death as something something that has already occurred? Such fantasies are attempts by the psyche to represent to itself the conflicts it must engage in order to free itself from all the ways it is dead and dying within. Fantasy, so understood, is the attempt to call oneself to account, to identify the actions that one must take within oneself.

**Graph IV:** As the furthest reach of Lacan's dialectic the 4<sup>th</sup> graph schematizes the difference between the Law of the Big Other and *jouissance* or *enjoyment*. The quickest way to get at the great complexity of this graph, to which I can't do fully justice here, is also the most concrete. Castration as symbolic law—of one's subjection to signifiers, most notably those that determine one's destiny as sexed being—establishes in us an opposition between the Big Other and *enjoyment*. The latter comes whenever the field of signifiers is permeated by a pre-symbolic stream of enjoyment or *jouissance*. Within the vast ocean of the Symbolic there are such islands. The erogenous zones for example. Those able to *traverse the fantasy* and experience *subjective destitution* attain a liberation that enables them to enter a realm of pure Drive that is beyond desire. Drive, however, has no human coordinates. It is not the experience of a subject. It is, rather, what one is transported into whenever the delays and detours of desire collapse and one experiences the pleasure of a pure pulsation of raw energy that is in excess of all symbolizing frames and that expends itself in a discharge or expenditure without reserve. As Žižek shows in *Desert*, many claims can be made for such an experience, primary among them the notion that one thereby recovers what one was alienated from by one's entry into the Symbolic.

**Contra:** In Lacan the pursuit of enjoyment or *jouissance* becomes the ultimate goal of the psyche because it delivers it from the tragic burdens that define it. For those subjects who take them up, enjoyment is always secondary to the duties one bears to oneself. Primary among them is the need to engage the conflicts of one's inner world in situations that will put one *at issue* and *at risk*. That task involves reversing the displacements of desire in order to tunnel into the crypt of one's deepest wounds. Life and death then hang in the balance, engaged in an agon that can end in self-dissolution. That agon is the situation most worth having, however, because it establishes an ethic grounded in a principle or "drive" that is beyond both the pleasure and reality principles. Existence, like *jouissance*, gets at something absolute in us that is defined by excess. The freedom of the human subject is grounded in the refusal to compromise the demands one places on oneself.

## 5. Trauma

There are two ways to conceive of and respond to traumatic experiences. Trauma is for Lacan that experience which is incessantly fled and always returns. That's the secret of signification. And its destiny: to repeatedly collapse of all symbolic systems before the return of The Trauma of The Real. Trauma is by definition that which cannot be signified. In a sense that's all one can say about it. But the collapse of speech is mere prologue to the swelling act of "experiencing" what trauma reveals: the emptiness of the Other. The game of desire ends. One is thus able to traverse the fantasy and experience the ultimate truth about subjectivity: *subjective destitution*. One then enters the impersonal world of the Drive and achieves the long sought, infinitely deferred *jouissance*. The collapse of the subject becomes the triumph of the impersonal. One co-exists with an absolute expenditure of pent up energies, an explosion of pure force beyond all signification. But this lasts only for a brief time. One has made contact with the *traumatic kernel* of one's being. But trauma, Lacan contends, cannot be confronted. It can only be "suffered." The minute we begin to speak with lose it again. Our speech, however, has now become the demystified consciousness of one who knows the *aporias* of the Symbolic and, of greater importance, what they conceal. Speech will now be (as in Lacan's writings) an ironic playing with something that one knows is empty.

My effort is to develop an antithetical understanding of trauma as the experience that reveals to the subject the deepest truths about its inner world. That formula formulates the fundamental difference with Lacan. There is no Trauma of the Real. There are only particular traumas and what they reveal is always radically concrete. Trauma is the experience that tears away all the lies that hide the subject from the truth about itself. In trauma the displacements that sustain the ego collapse. One is delivered over to what I term *primary emotions*. Such emotions engage the psyche in an agon with itself. The conflicts that define one's being return in all their intensity. The other is present again in its true visage. One is assaulted within by emotions in which one is at issue and at risk because there is now no inner distance between what one feels and *who* one is. The wound that defines the psyche is present as the demand to do what traumatic experience alone makes possible; not just know the truth of one's situation but act within in an effort to reverse it. For example, a sexually abused child whenever that trauma returns experiences again both the horror of the original betrayal and violation and the equally violent protest of one's outraged reaction to it. All the defenses that have softened that trauma—including the most terrifying one, that of justifying the abuser and blaming oneself—collapse. The drama that defines one's psyche is re-engaged or fled once again, depending on what one is able to summon oneself to do within the traumatic space. Those subjects able to sustain it (and one should never underestimate the terror accompanying that effort) recover the possibility of taking action within themselves and thereby reversing the traumatic condition of the psyche in the

only way one can: by bringing the clash of raw conflicted feelings to white heat, engaging the destructiveness one has internalized in a struggle to the death.

Engaging trauma in this way depends on making concrete precisely what is rendered impossible in Lacan's theory. The register of one's psyche that he argues can never be confronted (the traumatic kernel) is precisely where action begins. Trauma is the opportunity to take action within the crypt—i.e., at the deepest layer of the Unconscious—by engaging suffering in its actual moment. By sustaining the trauma one recovers those existential choices one made when one's being was first assaulted, but now within the possibility of a new edition. *For if and when, within trauma, one finds a new way to feel one creates a new way to be.* There are things we must tear out of our hearts in order to be free. When it is so engaged trauma becomes existentializing process. To anticipate a predictable objection, none of this entails a return to the Symbolic and its limits. On the contrary, a subject taking action within itself within the space of trauma has entered into another way of being. Think, for example, of the kind of drama Artaud calls for, an art that exceeds the Symbolic by creating images that "are true insofar as" they are "violent."<sup>29</sup> Whenever one creates such an image or, more concretely, when in trauma one suffers again the internal eruption of the images that epiphanize the wounds that define one's psyche, one exists in an order of experience that is outside the Symbolic. The traumatic process is the immersion of one's being in such an effort. So understood, trauma is not that which must be resolved by a return to the ego and its defenses, as the American mental health industry tells us. Nor is it what one transcends through an abstract articulation of its defining structures as in Lacan. It is that which is entered into, even welcomed, as the process through which a thereby existentialized psyche gives itself determination. The contrast formulated here turns, of course, on two distinct ways of experience and responding to anxiety.

## 6. Anxiety

By his own reckoning it is on the topic of anxiety that Lacan makes his fundamental contribution to psychoanalysis. Anxiety is the ur-emotion and through its displacement the source of all other emotions.<sup>30</sup> Its return, moreover, reveals the truth about the subject. We experience anxiety Lacan says whenever what he calls the *objet a* or *o(a)* approaches.<sup>31</sup> That is, whenever one experiences something that returns one to one's original experience, but with the unsolvable enigma of the others desire now experienced as the *lack* in the other, that lack one is impelled to try to fill but with no way to do so. In anxiety one "knows" this yet also knows that there is no way to get free of the effort. Anxiety thereby reveals the truth of the Unconscious. *Wherever I say I, I am o.* What I think of as most my own is precisely where one finds the overpowering presence of the other. Desire tries to escape that recognition only to be repeatedly delivered over to the truth desire strives to deny.

“Desire is loving where one isn’t wanted.”<sup>32</sup> Anxiety reveals the truth underlying that folly. For in anxiety one comes face to face with the *lack* in the other as the thing one can’t address to which nonetheless one is bound. In a sense, Lacan’s effort is to restore one category from the forgotten legacy of existentialism: the absurd. Anxiety is what Sisyphus experiences when he realizes the utter futility of it all. In Lacan’s hands that experience is not the source of a heroism of endurance. It’s the beginning of the *fading of the subject* before the insistence of a demand that one is powerless to resist whenever a *part object* sets desire in motion. Anxiety is the momentary recognition that one would arrest that process if one could. Only there is no I to do so. That’s the significance of the part object as *cause* of desire. The founding act of subjection defining the psyche binds it to certain part objects and signifiers that have their way with us whenever we find ourselves in their presence. The power of arresting this or understanding it is as remote as the chance that Swann can arrest all that is foreordained to happen to him (and similarly to Marcel, Saint-Loup, Charlus in the Proustian representation of the universal structures of desire) the moment he associates a vulgarian named Odette to Vinteuil’s sonata and sees in her face an uncanny resemblance to Boticelli’s painting of *Jethro’s Daughter*. Anxiety is the fading of the subject under the pull of forces that remain forever beyond mediation.

Lacan’s theory of anxiety brilliantly arrests its inherent dialectic, resolving into one term what I show are two terms locked in the conflict that defines them. Lacan’s position depends on substituting a secondary question for the primary one that anxiety poses. That question is: *Will I remain still-born or can I come to life by reversing the power that the other has over me?* Anxiety is the signal that this drama has been joined in some way. For all anxiety derives from a single condition: *it is what happens whenever we violate the demands of the super-ego and it responds by assaulting us*. Most people collapse under that assault, which is why anxiety usually serves as the motive for reinstating ego defenses. Those who are able to sustain anxiety, however, create the possibility of activating the agon that defines the psyche’s inner condition. For each time we refuse to capitulate to the super-ego we activate a greater aggression in response and with it the movement toward a situation in which the super-ego will reveal its true visage. Anxiety is not the overpowering presence of a single force—o(a). It’s the simultaneity of two forces met in the conflict that defines them. The truth of both is what emerges when that agon is sustained.

The super ego one then learns is that force in us that has the power to annihilate us. One also learns that the only viable response is to meet that aggression with an equal and greater aggression. Compromise is but another form of capitulation. There is only one way to deal with the super-ego. Agonistically. This is the possibility that anxiety joins, however briefly. *Anxiety is the psyche in conflict with itself at the inner register where everything is*

*decided*. When this drama is sustained the super-ego drops all pretenses of being loving and beloved, revealing itself as a force of internalized destructiveness that attacks every effort to move out from under the shadow of its demands. To put the contrast in Lacanian terms, anxiety is the overture not to capitulation but to deracination. That is the action one must perform in order to *be* or exist where “I am o.”

Anxiety, to conclude, can be the signal of the subject’s dissolution or the possibility of its re-constitution. The same is true of sexuality.

## 7. Sexuality

It is on this topic, of course, that the reader will most likely question the political relevance of the discussion. Chapter 7 will show concretely that understanding the radical Republican right is impossible apart from a disciplined psychoanalytic understanding of sexuality. The fixation of the Right on sexuality is well known. What we lack is an understanding of what this fixation signifies and, consequently, what the stakes of sexuality are an understanding both of history and the task of resistance. With Lacan, however, we have a thinker who restores sexuality to the center of psychoanalysis only to dissolve it in abstract formulae. In his hands it becomes a theory of the subject positions in which the Law of the Signifier, the Law of the Father, traps men and women. That law articulates for Lacan the truth of sex. Men are condemned by it to inhabiting the logic of *exclusion*: i.e., no man can represent the phallic function, though it seems all must try, which is why male relations so often fixate on attempts to psychologically castrate one another. The Phallic logic assigns Women a subtler position: that of the *not all* for whom the phallic function is not valid and who therefore always exist somehow outside its determinations

The upshot of all this is the absence of any comfort either from the kindness of strangers or the effort of long-term relationships, since with respect to intimacy we are never more than ships passing in the night. As Lacan puts it in another one of his shocking statements which aren’t all that shocking once one understands them, “*there is no sexual relation*.” The logic that the formulae of sexualization impose on men and women condemn them to the frustration of trying to effect the impossible, to establishing a relationship where there can only be an antagonism. As Joan Copjec puts it near the end of the seminal examination of Lacan’s thought on this issue: “Sexuality is the effect on the living being of impasses that emerge when it gets entangled in the symbolic order.”<sup>33</sup> Not surprisingly, Žižek gleefully deduces the glibbest conclusion from this line of thought. We never touch. When we “make love” all we experience is our fantasm. Even if we achieve orgasm together we’re always on different tracks, each individual running the solipsistic tape that plays on in the mind. In a curiously Cartesian way that is all that sex is for Lacan. At a poignant moment in Albee’s *A Delicate Balance*, the character Edna offers one realization of the wisdom that

comes with age: “to know...that the one body you’ve wrapped your arms around...the only skin you’ve ever known...is your own.”<sup>34</sup> What Edna doesn’t know is that for Lacan she remains a prisoner to the last mystification; that the cold kiss flesh bestows on itself is but another illusion of a touch that never occurs. Even here the only correct response to our condition is demystification and the grandiose pleasure that comes when one can draw conclusions that mock the travail in which the unenlightened labor, especially those who believe in the flesh as a form of intersubjective experience that is uniquely revelatory, even existentializing. For the consolation of being demystified is especially keen when it enables one to achieve a conceptual triumph over whatever anxieties one may have experienced sexually, with the added benefit of being able to mock those who continue to regard sex as something dangerous and inaugural when a proper understanding of its centrality shows it to be just another example of our paralysis.

There is, however, another approach that also restores sexuality to the center of psychoanalysis and in a far more concrete way. For reasons of length I must condense that phenomenological and existential approach here to a series of theses, which are arranged in a dialectical order of increasing complexity in order to show thereby how the experience that defines each is sustained and concretized in the one that follows. The sequence offers each reader a very personal understanding as well as the framework (as Chapter 7 will show) for the analysis of historical, cultural phenomena.

(1) Sexuality is the most traumatic experience because it is the one in which we incarnate the psychological conflicts that define us in the terms of an existential immediacy. The sexual body is the expression of our psycho-sexual “identity.”

(2) Sexuality has its origin in our experience of the way in which our being is affirmed yet appropriated in that prolonged sensual symbiosis with another’s psyche that constitutes our first love relationship. This is the original experience that establishes the possibility of our most intimate experiences. For sexual intimacy is the act in which the internalization of the m/other’s unconscious creates the conflicts that are necessarily incarnated whenever we make love.

(3) Personal history is sexual history. The key developments that shape the psyche turn on experiences where the original conflicts of intimacy either worsen because one capitulates to the super-ego or are reversed because one sustains a break with it. Sex is always disruptive because it touches, however momentarily, on the possibility of a relatedness that transcends mutual cruelty and Sartrean struggle.

(4) A theoretical understanding of sex thus derives from one of the few things that experience enables us to know with a Cartesian certainty. Sex is that area of human life where we are psychologically most vulnerable and can be hurt in ways that will prove irreversible. Perhaps that’s the real motive behind theoretical efforts to gain conceptual

mastery over it. Sex reveals to us things about ourselves we don't want to know. Recognizing that fact implies a Kantian question: what must the psyche be in its inner constitution for sex to have this power?

(5) Here then some implications of a drama that we cannot escape insofar as we are sexual beings:

--Sex is existentially dangerous. One can be wounded here in a way that effects one's power to be. Or affirmed in a way that addresses and perhaps heals that wound. This is why feeling desired is the greatest turn on and also the greatest threat. Defenses disappear.

--In sex the ego and rationality give way to a more concrete drama. In it we come know ourselves in a way that goes beyond their range of disclosure.

--Sex is often peremptory-- during key periods of life (adolescence, young adulthood, mid-life) and especially after a traumatic experience-- because it is a primary way that human beings restore an old "identity" or pursue a new one. In pursuing sex were after something that is always beyond satisfaction. The ungraspable phantom of erotic life is the psyche itself concretely engaging the conditions of its own self-overcoming.

--Touch is the inherent terror of sex. There is perhaps no experience more terrifying than to be touched in tenderness by someone one loves. For then there are no defenses to prevent what opens in one's psyche.

(6) There are three ways to experience one's sexuality: (a) *unconsciously*, when inhibitions, dysfunctions, symptoms, etc. manifest our allegiance to the super-ego; (b) *traumatically*, when there's a break with this and one is flooded with the conflicts that define one's sexuality; and (c) toward *active reversal*, when one sustains those conflicts in a body struggling to free itself sexually from a super-ego that now assaults it in the body, revealing its true identity: that of an erotic or libidinal tie that has become destructive and self-punitive.

(7) Sex is self-revelatory. One can say all sorts of fine things about oneself, play out the full range of multiple narrative identities, but in bed we give ourselves away. The way we make love tells the other who we are. Our desire isn't enigmatic or unfulfillable: it's immediately present. Dysfunctions, such as premature ejaculation and impotence, frigidity or vaginismus, aren't bodily behaviors; they're ways in which the anxieties of the unconscious conflicts that sex activates express themselves. The real terror of sex isn't Lacan's "there is no sexual relation." The terror is that relating here is utterly revealing. Though we devise innumerable ways to disguise or fake it sex is one of the acts in which it is impossible not to ooze betrayal. Sex necessarily engages our deepest feelings and conflicts, the effort to prevent its doing so is but one way in which the truth of this proposition is illustrated.

(8) Sexuality realizes the precise terms of our perpetual frustration as subjects or engages us in the possibility of fundamental reversal. The first project describes the ways in

which the conditions of object choice conform to the dictates of the super-ego. Perfect couples from this point of view are ones where the disorder of one person finds its perfect match in the disorders of the other. Falling in love happens, in short, when the unconscious finds someone who assures the repetition of the pattern to which one is wedded because it conforms to the disorder one refuses to confront. The second project is grounded in a radically different *relationship* to the other. Here love is not the effort to feed each other's disorder; or what amounts to the same thing, to try to provide what the other lacks so that as couple we can flee self-knowledge together by creating the illusion that we've completed each other. We are only worthy of love when we break with this pattern. Contra Lacan, *relating* then becomes the mutual effort to open the wound in the other and sustain that condition as that which enables us to relate most deeply to one another when we make love. Sex is then the effort of two subjects to root out everything that is inauthentic within them. Such an effort is the antithesis of the hatred and fear of sex that, as we'll see, drives the fundamentalist Right. Our countervailing task is to recover for our sexuality the full legacy of Romanticism's understanding of passion and wed it to a renewal and transformation of Freud's dialectic of Eros and Thanatos so that this dialectic, having shed all traces of the essentialistic, the cosmological, and the a- historical, will become the fundamental and radically historicized categories for understanding our historical situation. Constituting that dialectic is the overarching project of this book.<sup>35</sup>

### **C. The Goal of a Psychoanalytic Politics: The Ironic and the Tragic**

*This is the end, my friend, of all your plans, the end...*"

#### **The Doors**

Lacan defines the end and ethic of analysis as the possibility of "remaining true to one's desire."<sup>36</sup> This sounds good until one realizes that it amounts to persisting in an absurd quest that one did not determine and which cannot be fulfilled. The experience of subjective destitution—the pivotal experience to which analysis supposedly leads—is also a dead end. All it liberates one into is the blind, impersonal, repetitive circuit of the Drive: the *sinthome* as a pure *jouissance* addressed to no one in contrast to the *symptom* as a *ciphered message* addressed to the other; sheer excess as an experience that destroys all boundaries in a pure *enjoyment* that has no purpose but its own persistence. Contra the opinion of some, the Lacanian subject is not existentialized at the end of analysis. It's dissolved in the blind embrace of impersonal Drive or transcended in the superior irony of one who looks on human phenomena from the perspective of a God who is "indifferent, paring his fingernails."<sup>37</sup> Lacanian thought produces the fading of the subject, the dissolution of drama in that which cannot be mediated. A psyche committed to the possibility of

existential self-mediation engages a far different task. That task is to reverse the force of thanatos, the destructiveness of the super-ego, by making *deracination* the relationship one lives to oneself. The *act* that defines the psyche is the effort to engage in self-overcoming within the *crypt* of one's most deeply buried conflicts and anxieties. This is the traumatic place one must get to in oneself and then sustain at the cost of whatever suffering it brings. For it is only through this effort that an existential subjectivity uncovers and engages that *agon* in which one can lose the thing that is more important than one's life—one's reason for living. The condition that makes us human is that we can die within; and that we come to life only through the effort to reversing a thanatos that is at work in us long before there's anything there to oppose it. Existence is the upsurge of that opposition, the no to death that can only be lived concretely by immersing oneself in those experiences where one finds one's very being *at issue*.

I visited Prague in the Spring of 1970. While there I met a cab driver who had previously been employed as chief chemist in a high ranking Government office. Shortly after the tanks rolled in he quit the Communist party in protest. His new job was his reward. We spent an evening talking, largely about life in Prague and the forced jocularity of a populace busily engaged in trying to put a happy face on things. "*One only has one choice now,*" he said. "*to suffer tragically or to live life as a comedy.*" Lacan and Žižek represent the most eloquent examples of the latter choice. Like the Heideggerian forgetting of being, we've so lost contact with the other way that it strikes us as a nostalgic and no doubt sentimental regression to an archaic humanism naively blind to the truths of postmodernism. I would suggest that is so because we've lost contact with the tragic and everything in ourselves on which this possibility depends. There was a game that used to be played in the early days of *Saturday Night Live* called *Mas Macho*. The repeated question asked contestants with respect to the qualities of two actors was "Who is mas macho, Fernando Lamas or Ricardo Montalban?" Academic intellectuals have their own version of this game. It centers on the topic "who is most demystified?" That is, who has dispensed with the metaphysical illusion that one can demonstrate all other contenders for the title still depend upon. Though this game is a poor substitute for philosophy and for living it does provide a keen insight into what ideas will be accorded a hearing in the groves of academe. The criterion is simple: those ideas that can be turned into glib commonplaces capable of providing academic careerists the thing they most need: a chance to craft careers based on nothing but the demonstration of how clever one is in applying the latest dogma in order to sense the sense of intellectual superiority—over existence itself—that comes from this practice. The irony of irony is the god-term to which all gravitate without suspecting that victory in this game is foreordained to whoever fashions the latest proof that one can't step in the same river once. "Nobody does it better" than Slavoj Žižek, with more *élan* and with a greater sense that demystifying play is the route to what Adrian Leverkühn in Mann's *Doctor*

*Faustus* termed the *break-through*, into something beyond irony and exacting in a way it can never be. But whenever he gets close to this prospect Žižek quickly leaves; whereas *for us* the sovereign act in the life of the psyche only begins when one sustains the plunge into that which *measures* us because sustaining trauma we ourselves struggling to realize our innermost possibility. It is along this path that one recovers the tragic and with it the movement into the depths of those realms of experience into which, as Rilke saw, “irony never descends.”<sup>38</sup> “Spirit is the life that cuts back into life; with its suffering it increases its knowledge.”<sup>39</sup> This is the way of being we must regain if we’re to explore again our truest and deepest experiences rather than continuing to place a supreme value on those ways of thinking and being that delivers us from them.

#### **Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup> A delightful example is Žižek's analysis of the Japanese electronic toy, the tamagochi, in "Is It Possible to Traverse the Fantasy in Cyberspace" in *The Žižek Reader* (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 1999): 104-124.

<sup>2</sup> For Baudrillard's exceedingly glib take on 9-11 see *The Spirit of Terrorism* (New York: Verso, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> This is Samuel Huntington's disease, the grand ideological gesture whereby economic and geopolitical conditions are transformed into a "culture war" of moral and religious absolutes. The latest in Right Hegelianism.

<sup>4</sup> Derrida represents this position in a rethinking of the concept of trauma in the fine dialogue "Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides" that he contributes to Giovanna Borradori's *Philosophy In a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jurgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Herbert Marcuse "Repressive Tolerance" in Robert P. Wolf, Barrington Moore and Herbert Marcuse, *Critique of Pure Tolerance* (Boston: Beacon P, 1969).

<sup>6</sup> In the aforementioned dialogue, Derrida rethinks the concept of democracy with great incisiveness. See pp. 118-124.

<sup>7</sup> For Žižek's best formulation of this concept, see *The Plague of Fantasies* (New York: Verso, 1997), chapter 3.

<sup>8</sup> On these connections, see Michael C. Ruppert *Crossing the Rubicon* (Canada: New Society Publishers, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Hegel, however, provides only one example of this project. At an opposite extreme one could cite Carnap's *Logical Structure of the World*. And for a position in the middle, the structuralist formalism of binary logic of Levi-Strauss. Other chapters in this story would include all the forms of neo-Kantianism that have dominated modern thought, ranging from Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* to Kenneth Burke's pentad.

<sup>10</sup> Here too it would be mistake to think Hegel is the only one who offers such an understanding. The philosophic pluralism of Richard McKeon, for example, provides a synoptic understanding of all discursive possibilities schematized in an overarching pluralistic framework which acknowledges the "truth" of all of them. See his *Thought Action and Passion* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1954). Moreover, McKeon's position is far more open to the legitimacy of competing positions than Hegel's transcendental monism allows, despite the claim to honor the inherent truth of every position as a moment in the Hegelian system.

<sup>11</sup> Žižek's finest philosophic work, *For They Know Not What They Do* (New York: Verso, 1991) is devoted to this reading of Hegel. For a contrasting and more traditional reading of the *Logic*, see Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (London: Cambridge UP, 1975)

<sup>12</sup> Žižek's work thus stands in the methodological tradition of ideological critique established by Adorno and the Frankfurt school. The difference is that Žižek through the use of Hegel and Lacan takes up the task of wedding Marx and Freud at a far more theoretical level.

<sup>13</sup> For what is perhaps the last word from this perspective on the nature of subjectivity, see Derrida's final thoughts on Artaud, "to Unsense the subjectile," in *The Secret Art of Antonin Artaud* by Jacques Derrida and Paule Thevenin (Cambridge, Mass: MIT P, 1998): 61-157.

<sup>14</sup> The most extreme example is the claim Žižek makes for the exemplary ethical status of the actions of Bobby Perou in his analysis of David Lynch's *Wild at Heart* in "Fantasy As a Political Category: A Lacanian Approach," *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society* (vol. 1:2 (Fall, 1996), pp.77-85.

<sup>15</sup> This is precisely what Heidegger does in *Being and Time* through his distinction of the *existentiell* and *existentiale*, thereby preserving the formalism of the analytic of *Dasein* from what would happen if he let that analytic be the prelude to a concrete study of existential experience. That is the last thing Heidegger wants. Thus, ironically, his great book leads him away from existence rather than into it.

<sup>16</sup> Jacques Lacan, "Of Structure as an Inmixing of Otherness Prerequisite to Any Subject Whatever," Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, (eds.) *The Structuralist Controversy*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins P, 1972).

<sup>17</sup> This is the issue that Hegel discusses in the famous "Preface" to the *Phenomenology*. J.B. Baillie (trans.) *The Phenomenology of Mind* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1910).

<sup>18</sup> Hegel makes precisely this gesture at the end of both the *Logic* and the *Phenomenology*. It is required methodologically to complete the necessary circularity of his thought. It does not, however, deepen the examination of existence and experience.

<sup>19</sup> To put it in Hegelian or dialectical terms, what follows is the *Aufhebung* of Lacan, the movement whereby his thought and its important contribution to an understanding of the psyche is cancelled, preserved, and "uplifted."

<sup>20</sup> The necessity of imitating one's thought in one's writing style or *écriture* is frequently used to praise or justify the stylistic excesses of Derrida and Lacan, to my mind two of the worst writers I've read. In Lacan's case a simpler explanation may account for the contortions of his style. For Lacan every utterance must gesture in three directions simultaneously: contempt for other thinkers, self-aggrandizement, and the search for opacity. The alternative to such a style would be a prose dipped in acid and animated by an effort to act on the reader the way the sculpture *Archaic Torso of Apollo* acted on Rilke.

<sup>21</sup> The finest philosophic consideration of Lacan's thought in English, Richard Boothby's *Freud as Philosopher* (New York: Routledge, 2001) does a masterful job on this crucial issue.

<sup>22</sup> See especially Melanie Klein, *The Psychoanalysis of Children* (New York: Dell, 1975).

<sup>23</sup> John Keats, "Ode on Melancholy" *The Selected Poetry of Keats* (NY: NAL, 1966) p.254.

<sup>24</sup> Bergmann, who plays Levy in the movie, is a psychoanalyst and author of the fine book from which Levy's thoughts are derived: *The Anatomy of Loving* (NY: Columbia UP, 1987).

<sup>25</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology*, p. 231. Hegel's insight into the dynamic that defines love is a pure product of the concept of Reflection from which he deduces it. To be aware of limitations is to be already beyond them: such is the power and principle that defines a reflective self-consciousness for Hegel.

<sup>26</sup> The section "Concrete Relations With Others" in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (NY: Philosophical Library, 1956) pp.361-430 remains the most incisive and systematic application of Hegel's *Phenomenology* to intersubjectivity and human relations.

<sup>27</sup> In this connection mention should be made of Lacan's considerable and generally unacknowledged debt to Sartre and to Proust for his understanding of how desire generates the perpetual failure of human relations.

<sup>28</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection* (New York: Norton, 1977), pp. 292-325.

<sup>29</sup> Antonin Artaud, *Selected Writings*, p. 258.

<sup>30</sup> Jacques Lacan, *LeSeminaire. Livre X. L'Angoisse, 1962-63*. (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1994). This seminar should put to rest the contention that Lacan has no theory of emotions.

<sup>31</sup> The best articulation of Lacan's thought on this central category is in Boothby, pp. 242-296.

<sup>32</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Encore. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX.* (NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 1998), pp. 4-6, 144-146.

<sup>33</sup> Joan Copjec, "Sex and the Euthenasia of Reason," *Read My Desire* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT P, 1994), pp. 201-236.

<sup>34</sup> Edward Albee, *A Delicate Balance in The Plays. Vol.2.* (NY:Atheneum, 1981), p.164.

<sup>35</sup> The dialectical theory of Eros and Thanatos I'm developing is radically different from the Utopian and essentialistic theories advanced by Herbert Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization* and Norman O. Brown in *Life Against Death* in the 1960s. My effort is to make the concepts of Eros and Thanatos historical and utterly immanent in their development. Eros thus here provides no guarantee nor is sexuality conceived in instinctual terms as it is in Marcuse and Brown. Moreover, the submission of Eros to history suggests today that there may be little life left in that principle. The ability of Thanatos to annex and transform those realities considered independent of it, in contrast, grows apace. To put the contrast in more philosophic terms, Marcuse and Brown deploy Eros and Thanatos as comprehensive categories in order to construct an abstract dialectic grounded in a reductive, instinctual understanding of sexuality. As a result history is subsumed under two categories that never enter into any actual dialectic conflict. Instead, we are given the quasi-Utopian charms of those guarantees that can be provided by visionary metaphysics. The way we concretely experience life and death as pressures within us and the way in which this conflict binds us to and alienates us from actual historical processes is thereby sacrificed to abstract dialectics. On the difference between abstract and concrete dialectics, see *Inwardness and Existence*, pp.314-363. A final category could be added to the discussion of Lacan. The concept of the death drive that Lacan develops is, however, one of the weakest moment in his thought, a moment where his dependence on linguistics to generate the meaning of his categories forces him into a bizarre rereading of Freud's terms. Thanatos, in contrast, is the through-line of my thought. Contrasting the two positions would thus lead would lead far afield while contributing nothing essential to the critique of Lacan.

<sup>36</sup> For the development of this idea the most important text (and one of Lacan's finest) is *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 1992).

<sup>37</sup> The allusion, of course, is to Joyce/Stephen Dedalus' definition of the proper stance of the artist as articulated in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Lacan achieves a similar irony toward psychoanalysis through his demystification of the master-analyst as "subject supposed to know." He also thereby confirms the necessary contempt of the Master both for his own cult status and also for the inability of his followers to think for themselves.

<sup>38</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet* (Boston: Shambhala, 1984), p.33.

<sup>39</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (NY: Viking, 1966), p.63.