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With An Eye to Our Gaze

How to do a totality with failures

Today's "post-modern" thought seems dominated by the alternatives of dialectical totalization and dissemination. Is it possible to "mediate" the heterogeneous elements that we encounter in our experience, to posit them as ideal moments of a rational totality, or are we condemned to an interplay of fragments that cannot ever be totalized? The way one raises this question is of course far from being neutral, since it clearly gives predominance to the second term of the alternative: Following the post-modern pop-ideological topic on "the end of big stories," it silently assumes that every attempt at rational totalization is in advance doomed to fail, that there is always some leftover that eludes the totalizing seizure, and so on. The problem with this alternative is, however, not in the advance choice it implies, but in the fact that it falsifies the choice by crucially misrepresenting the authentic Hegelian notion of a rational totality.

Hegel knows very well that every attempt at rational totalization ultimately fails. This failure is the very impetus of "dialectical progress." His "wager" is located on another level, concerning so to speak, "squared totalization", i.e. the possibility to "make a system" out of the very series of failed totalizations, to enchain them in a rational way, to discern the strange "logic" that regulates the process by means of which the breakdown of a totalization itself begets another totalization. What is ultimately *Phenomenology of Spirit* if not the presentation of a series of aborted attempts by the subject to define the Absolute and thus arrive at the longed-for synchronism of subject and object? Which is why its final outcome ("absolute knowledge") does not bring about a finally found harmony, but entails rather a kind of reflective inversion: Hegel's *Phenomenology* confronts the subject with the fact that the true Absolute is nothing other than the logical disposition of its previous

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failed attempts to conceive the Absolute, i.e. with the vertiginous experience that Truth itself coincides with the path towards Truth.

Similar misunderstandings are usually aroused by the Marxist notion of the class struggle. True, class struggle is the "totalizing" moment of society, insofar as it is its structuring principle. This, however, does not mean that it is a kind of ultimate guarantee, authorizing us to grasp society as a rational totality wherein ("the ultimate meaning of every social phenomenon is determined by its position within the class struggle"). The ultimate paradox of the notion of "class struggle" is that society is "held together" by the very antagonism, the split, that forever prevents its closure in a harmonious, transparent rational Whole, i.e. by the very impediment that undermines every rational totalization. Although "class struggle" is nowhere directly given as a positive entity, it nonetheless functions in its very absence as the point of reference enabling us to locate every social phenomenon, not by relating it to class struggle as its ultimate meaning ("transcendental signified"), but by conceiving it as an(other) attempt to conceal and "patch up" the rift of the class struggle, to efface its traces. What we have here is the typical structural-dialectical paradox of an effect which exists only in order to efface the causes of its existence: i.e. of an effect which in a way "resists" its own cause.

In other words, class struggle is real in the strict Lacanian sense: a "hitch", an impediment which gives rise to ever new symbolizations by means of which one endeavours to integrate and domesticate it (the translation of the class struggle into the organic articulation of the "members" of the "social body", for example), but which simultaneously condemns these endeavours to ultimate failure. Class struggle is, therefore, if one refers to the Hegelian opposition of substance and subject, the subject (not the substance) of history *Substance is* the Universal qua positive space of mediation of its particular content, the receptacle containing all its particular wealth. Whereas the *subject is* the Universal insofar as it entertains a negative relationship towards its particular content, i.e. the unfathomable limit that forever eludes its particular effects. In short, the Marxist version of the Hegelian motto that the Absolute is to be conceived not only as substance, but also as subject, is that history is to be conceived, not only as the progression of the "economic basis" (the dialectic of productive forces and the relationship of production), but also as class struggle.¹

This kernel of the Real, encircled by failed attempts to symbolizetotalize it, is radically non-historical. History itself is nothing but a

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succession of failed attempts to grasp, conceive, specify this strange kernel. This is why, far from rejecting the reproach that psychoanalysis is non-historical, one has to acknowledge fully acknowledge the reproach and simply transform it from a reproach into a positive theoretical proposition. Therein, the difference between hysteria and psychosis consists: hysteria/history is more than a trivial word game. Hysteria is the subject's way of resisting the prevailing, historically specified form of interpellation or symbolic identification. Hysteria means failed interpellation. It means that the subject in the name of that which is "in him more than himself" - i.e. the object in himself - refuses the mandate which is conferred on him in the symbolic universe. As such, the object falls conditional with the dominant form of symbolic identification. That is, it is its reverse. While psychosis, the maintenance of an external distance from the symbolic order, is "unhistorical."

On the level of psychosis, then, it is not difficult for us to pose equality between psychotic outbursts reported in classical sources and contemporary clinical cases. To act as a "psychotic," in this sense, is unhistorical. However, an un-historic kernel of the Real is also present in history/hysteria. The ultimate mistake of historicism in which all historical content is "relativized," made dependent on "historical circumstances," that is to say, of historicism as opposed to historicity - is that it evades the encounter with the Real. Let us take the usual attitude of the university discourse towards the great "Masters of Thought" of our century, towards Heidegger, towards Lacan. Its first compulsion is to carry out an arrangement of their theoretical edifices into "stages" - Heidegger I (Being and Time) in contrast to Heidegger II ("Thought of Being").

Or the phenomenologically-Hegelian Lacan of the fifties; then the structuralist Lacan; then the Lacan of the "logic of the Real". In such an arrangement there is, of course, some pacifying effect. The thought is rendered transparent, properly classified. But we have, nevertheless, lost

something with such a disposition into "phases." We have lost what is actually crucial: the encounter with the Real. With Heidegger, we have lost the fact that Heidegger's various phases are only so many attempts to grasp, to indicate, to "encircle", the same kernel: the "Thing of thought" which he constantly tackles, dodges and returns to.² The paradox is, thus, that historicity differs from historicism by the way it presupposes some traumatic kernel which endures as "the same," non-historical. And so, various historical epochs are conceived as failed attempts to capture this kernel.

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The trouble with the alleged "Eurocentricity" of psychoanalysis is homologous. Today it is a commonplace to draw attention to the way Freud's myth in Totem and Taboo is based on the Eurocentric anthropology of his time: the anthropologies on which Freud relied were "unhistorical" projections of the modern patriarchal family and society into primeval times. It was only on this basis that Freud could construct the myth of the "primeval father". A breakthrough was only later achieved with Malinowski, Mead, etc., who demonstrated how sexual life in primitive societies was organized in a completely different way, such that we cannot, therefore, talk about an "Oedipus complex." Indeed, how inhibition and anxiety were not associated with sexuality. Things, thus, appear clear. We know where we are, where the "primitives" are. We have not reduced the Other. We have preserved its diversity.

Nevertheless, such a historicizing is false. In the simple distinction between our own, and past, societies we elude calling into question our own position; the place from which we ourselves speak. The fascinating "diversity" of the Other functions as a fetish by means of which we are able to preserve the unproblematic identity of our subjective position. Although we claim to "historically relativize" our position, we actually conceal its split. That is, we deceive ourselves as to how this position is already "decentered from within". What Freud called the "Oedipus complex" is such an "unhistorical" traumatic kernel (the trauma of prohibition on which the social order is based). Yet, the miscellaneous historical regulations of sexuality and society are none other than so many ways (in the final analysis always unsuccessful) of mastering this traumatic kernel. To "understand the Other" means to pacify it, to prevent the meeting with the Other from becoming a meeting with the Real that undermines our own position. We come across the Real as that which "always returns to its place" when we identify with the Real in the Other: that is to say, when we recognize in the deadlock, in the hindrance which made the Other fail, our own hindrance. That which is "in us more than ourselves".³

Thus, in contrast, the procedure by which we consciously treat it "antihistorically" - reduce the past to the present - is much more subversive than "entering the spirit of the past." Brecht made use of this procedure in *The Affairs of Mr Julius Caesar*, where Caesar's rise to power is presented in capitalist terms of the twentieth century: Caesar is concerned with stock-market movements and speculation with capital. He organises fascist style "spontaneous" demonstrations of the lumpenproletariat, etc. Such a procedure

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could be brought to self-reference when the contemporary image of the past is projected into the past. So, today, pre-Socratic times are known only in fragments which have survived a turbulent history. We inadvertently forget that Heraclitus and Parmenides did not write "fragments," but long, verbose philosophical poems. So it would really be some kind of subversive philosophical humor if we were to represent Heraclitus, let's say, as saying: "I can't write any good fragments today!" Or, on another level, the unknown sculptor of Milos would say: "I can't break the arm off my Venus today!" Relying on a similar "reductionist," "unhistorical" procedure, Adorno's and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*⁴ would read Odysseus retroactively, from the experience of contemporary technical-instrumental reason. Of course, such a procedure is "unhistorical." However, precisely through the feeling of the absurd which it awakens in us, it opens actual historical distance to us, just as with Hegel's claim - "The Spirit is a bone" - where the real effect of the absurd contradiction lies in the discord it awakens in the reader.

The speculative (lack of) identity

It is against this background that one has to grasp the fundamental paradox of the speculative identity as it was recently restated by Gillian Rose.⁵ In the dialectical judgement of identity, the mark of identity between its subject and predicate designates only and precisely the specific modality of their lack of identity. Let us recall the case evoked by Rose herself, that of the ultimate identity of religion and state, the Hegelian proposition that "In general religion and the foundation of the state is one and the same thing; they are identical in and for themselves." If we read this thesis in a nonspeculative way, as a description of the factual state of things, it can, of course, easily be "refuted." It applies only to theocracies, and even there, not without restraints. A way to save its legitimacy would, of course, be to read it as a statement that does not concern facts, but values: that is, as a statement about the *Ought/Sollen*. The ideal, perfect state would be a state founded in religion, and existing states can only approach this Ideal in a greater or lesser degree.

Yet Hegel's point lies elsewhere. Let us take a particular state, the medieval European feudal state, for example. Although directly founded in religion, this state was far from ideal. In it, the Christian

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content was cruelly perverted, finding expression in a distorted way. The ultimate ground for this deficiency is not, however, to be sought in the external social circumstances which prevented the adequate and full realization of the Christian values within the state institutions, but in the insufficiently articulated notion of Christian religion itself: In the Church's lifeless asceticism, its obsession with the religious Beyond, and its necessary reverse, the depravity of the Church qua social institution. According to Hegel, it was only with Protestantism that the Christian religion arrived at its truth. The deficiency is thus redoubled, "reflected-into-itself": the inadequacy of the actual state to the Christian religion qua its foundation corresponds to and has its ground in the inadequacy of the Christian religion itself to its own notion of itself.

Therein, the speculative identity of state and religion consists: in the overlap of the two lacks, in the co-dependence between the deficiency of the state (its lack of identity with religion) and the inherent deficiency of the determinate form of religion which this state refers to as to its foundation. State and religion are, thus, identical per negationem. Their identity consists in the correlation of their lack of identity with the inherent lack (deficiency) of the central term that grounds their relationship (religion). In other words, Hegel fully accepts the underlying premise

of the Kantian/Fichteian logic of *Sollen*, the fact that the identity of state and religion is always realized in an incomplete, distorted way, that the relationship of the universal Idea to its particular actualizations is a negative one. What this logic of *Sollen* - the infinite approach to the ultimately unattainable Ideal - overlooks, however, is that the very series of failed attempts to embody religion in the constitution of the state presents the actuality of their speculative identity. The "concrete content" of this identity is the logic which "regulates" their lack of identity, i. e. the conceptual constraint that links the gap separating the state from its religious foundation to the inherent deficiency of this foundation itself.⁶

The supreme case of such a "negative" relationship between the Universal and its particular exemplifications is, of course, the Oedipal parricide, this paradigm of crime, this crime *kat' exochen*, this act which every human being is guilty of by the mere fact that he or she is a being-of-language, insofar as we are able to speak only under the aegis of the paternal metaphor; i.e. of the dead (murdered) father who returns as his Name. Lacan's version of the cogito is accordingly "I am guilty, therefore I am." The very existence of man qua being-of-language implies a fundamental

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guilt and the so-called "Oedipus complex" is nothing but a way to avoid this guilt. The fact that, as Lacan put it, Oedipus himself had no Oedipus complex means precisely that he went to the extreme, to the utmost limit of human destiny, and fully assumed his guilt. The relationship of particular, "actual" crimes to this Crime par excellence is radically ambiguous. By means of assuming responsibility for a particular crime, the subject endeavours to blot out the guilt that stains his very existence. Our notorious "guilt feelings" are therefore nothing but a stratagem to deceive the big Other, to divert its attention from the real crime.⁷

Therein consists the negative relationship between the Universal and the Particular. The particular crime is here in order to conceal the Universality of Crime *kat' exochen*, i.e. there is a dialectical tension between the Universal and the Particular. The Particular disavows and subverts the Universal whose exemplification it is. As to the status of the Universal, Lacan is therefore not a nominalist but definitely a realist. The Universal is "real," not the pacifying medium that unites diverging particularities, but the unfathomable limit that prevents the Particular from achieving identity with itself. And it is precisely in the light of this paradox that it becomes manifest how "everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only as Substance, but equally as Subject"⁸: the entire "content" of the Substance consists in the series of failed, distorted ways the Substance (mis)recognizes itself. The best remedy against misapprehending the Hegelian thesis on substance as subject is to rely on the everyday, commonsensical notion of the "subjective," as when we say of some opinion that it represents a "subjective" (that is, distorted, partial) view of the Thing in question. "Substance as subject" also means that non-truth, error, is inherent in Truth itself. To resume Rose's perspicacious formula, substance "is untrue as subject". This is, again, what the speculative identity of substance and subject means. Their very lack of identity - the gap separating the subject from the substance - is strictly correlative to the inherent non-identity or split, of the substance itself. What better way to exemplify this speculative (non)identity of substance and subject than to refer again to Kafka's parable on the Door of the Law from his Trial, namely to the position of the "man from the country" (subject) who finds himself impotent and null in front of the impenetrable Palace of Law (substance)? It is as if the following passage from Hegel's Phenomenology was written as a kind of comment *avant la lettre* of Kafka's parable: "The disparity which exists in consciousness between the 'I' and the substance which is

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its object is the distinction between them, the negative in general. This can be regarded as the defect of both, though it is their soul, or that which moves them Now, although this negative appears at first as a disparity between the 'I' and its object, it is just as much the disparity of the substance with itself. Thus what seems to happen outside of it, to be an activity directed against it, is really its own doing, and Substance shows itself to be essentially Subject."⁹

In his bewilderment before the horrifying and magnificent Palace of the Law, what the "man from the country" fails to notice is that his externality to the Substance, the disparity between him and the Substance, is always-already the "disparity of the substance with itself." His gaze which perceives the Substance (the Palace of Law) from outside, as the unattainable, transcendent Mystery, is simultaneously the gaze by means of which the Substance perceives itself, appears to itself, as an unfathomable Mystery. How can one not recall here Hegel's dictum: that the secrets of the Egyptians were secrets for the Egyptians themselves? In other words, the door-keeper's final word to the dying man from the country ("... this door was intended only for you") is nothing but Kafka's paraphrase of the Hegelian speculative identity of substance and subject: the external gaze of the subject upon the inscrutable Substance is from the very beginning included in the Substance itself as an index of its disparity with itself. This is what escapes the position of "external reflection" (the position which perceives the Substance as an unattainable Thing-in-itself), how its externality to the Substance is a self-alienation of this Substance itself. That is, the way Substance is external to itself.

To explain this paradoxical "short-circuit" between externality and internal self-relationship, let us bring to mind a (falsely) "concrete" case, that of the "atomized" bourgeois subject who experiences himself as an abstract, isolated individual and views Society as a foreign, impenetrable Entity that rules his life like an all-powerful Destiny. What he overlooks is that his externality to Society is a product of this very Society, i.e. an index of how Society is in itself splintered and reduced to a network of abstract individuals "held together" by an external, mechanical coercion. It is not Society consistent with its notion of itself as a living community of individuals. To them their social bond does not appear as a foreign coercion but as part of their innermost "nature," opening up the field of the actualization of their most intimate potentials. In short, the surplus of Society over the individual (Society as unattainable, mysterious Thing-in-itself) is nothing but the inverted form of the

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appearance of its lack; of the fact that Society does not yet correspond to its notion of itself, but remains an external "mechanical" network linking individuals. The "transcendent" character of the Substance, its surplus eluding the subject's grasp, results from an illusion of perspective: from the subject's forgetting to include his own gaze in the picture.

Let us recall the enigmatic Sarah from John Fowles's *French. Lieutenant's Woman*, this social outcast stigmatized by her sinful past who fully enjoys her suffering. It is not sufficient to say that her enigma fascinates the novel's male hero. One has to go yet one more decisive step and ascertain that her enigma is staged in order to fascinate the hero's gaze. A similar strategy must be adopted a propos of Kafka's enigmatic and

horrifying agency of Power (the Court, the Castle). Its entire spectacle is staged in order to fascinate the gaze of those who endeavour in vain to penetrate its mystery: the horrifying and imposing edifice of Power, totally indifferent towards the miserable individual, feigns this indifference in order to attract his gaze. Insofar as Sarah is a hysteric who builds up her fantasy of the "French lieutenant" so that her desire is sustained as unsatisfied, she stages her hysterical theatre to attract the gaze of the bystanders, taking a lone walk in a state of oblivious trance on the breakwater during a stormy weather and relying upon the fact that her lone trance will be well noticed.

Now we can perhaps understand why, for Lacan, Hegel is "the most sublime of all hysterics." His elementary dialectical inversion consists precisely in such a reversal of transcendence into immanence that characterizes hysterical theatre. The mystery of an enigmatic apparition is not to be searched for beyond its appearance, but in the very appearance of mystery. This paradox is best expressed in the French phrase "*il me regarde en me donnant d voir le tableau*" /he looks at me by offering the picture to my view/. The ambiguity of the French verb "regarder" (concern; look at) is crucial here. It is precisely by offering to my view the picture of the horrifying and unattainable Mystery (of the Court, of the Castle, of the Woman, etc.) which does not care about me, that is, where, to refer again to a French expression, '*je n'y suis pour rien*' /I'm for nothing in it/" - that the Thing, the Substance, concerns me for it takes into account my gaze. The entire spectacle of Mystery is staged for this "nothing" of the subject's gaze.

There is a well-known true story about an anthropological expedition. The group tried to contact a wild tribe in the New Zealand jungle who allegedly danced a terrible war dance in

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grotesque masks. When they reached this tribe, they begged them to dance it for them. The dance did in fact match the description. So the explorers obtained the desired material about the strange terrible customs of the aborigines. However, shortly after, it was shown that this wild dance did not itself exist at all. The aborigines had only tried to meet the wishes of the explorers. In their discussions with them they had discovered what they wanted and had reproduced it for them. This is what Lacan means when he says the subject's desire is the desire of the Other: the explorers received back from the aborigines their own desire. The perverse strangeness which seemed uncannily terrible to them, was staged for their benefit. The same paradox is nicely satirized in *Top Secret* (Zucker, Abrahams and Abrahams, 1978), a comedy about Western tourists in (now the former) GDR. At the railway station or the border, they see a terrible sight through the window, brutal police, dogs, beaten children. However, once the inspection is over, the entire customs post shifts. The beaten children get up and brush the dust from themselves. In short, the whole display of "communist brutality" was laid on for Western eyes.

The Kafkaesque illusion of an all-powerful Thing paying no attention to us, indifferent to our gaze, is the inverse-symmetrical counterpoint to the illusion that defines the ideological interpellation, namely the illusion that the Other always-already looks at us, addresses us. When we recognize ourselves as interpellated, as the addressees of an ideological call, we misrecognize the radical contingency of finding ourselves at the place of interpellation; that is, we fail to notice how our "spontaneous" perception that the Other (God, Nation, etc.) has chosen us as its addressee results from the retroactive inversion of contingency into necessity. We do not recognize ourselves in the ideological call because we were chosen. On the contrary, we perceive ourselves as chosen, as the addressee of a call, because we recognized ourselves in it. The contingent act of recognition engenders retroactively its own necessity (the same illusion as that of the reader of a horoscope who "recognizes" himself as its addressee by taking contingent coincidences of the obscure predictions with his actual life as proof that the horoscope "speaks about him").

The Kafkaesque illusion is on the other hand far more cunning: while we perceive ourselves as external bystanders stealing a furtive glance into some majestic Mystery indifferent to us, we are blinded to the fact that the entire spectacle of Mystery is staged with an eye to our gaze. To attract and fascinate our gaze, the Other

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deceives us in inducing us to believe we were not chosen. Here, it is the true addressee himself who mistakes his position for that of an accidental bystander.¹⁰ What the two illusions have in common is that in both cases, the subject fails to notice how he himself posits the Other: By means of the very act of recognizing myself as the addressee of the ideological call, I (presup)posit the Other as the agency which confers meaning upon the contingency of the Real. By means of the very act of perceiving myself as the impotent, negligible, insignificant witness of the spectacle of the Other, I constitute its mysterious, transcendent character.

The psychoanalytical intersubjective relationship exhibits this aspect, passed over in silence by the Althusserian theory of interpellation, in its pure, so to speak, distilled form. In the act of transference, the analysand (presup) posits the Other (the analyst) qua "the subject supposed to know," that is, qua a guarantee that his contingent "free associations" will ultimately receive meaning. And the function of the analyst's "passivity" and "neutrality" is precisely to frustrate the analysand's demand for an interpellation, namely his expectation that the analyst will offer him a point of symbolic identification. In this way, the analyst forces the analysand to confront his own act of presupposing the Other.

Language and its limit

This negative relationship of the Universal and the Particular also offers a clue to the Hegelian distinction between boundary and limit. Boundary is the external limitation of an object, its qualitative confines which confer upon it its identity (an object is "itself" only within these confines, in so far as it fulfils a set of qualitative conditions). Whereas limit results from a "reflection-into-itself" of the boundary, emerging when the determinacy which defines the identity of an object is reflected into this object itself and assumes the shape of its own unattainable limit, of what the object can never fully become, of what it can only approach into (bad) infinity, one sees limit in what the object ought to (although it never actually can) become. In the course of the dialectical progression, every boundary proves itself a limit: A propos of every identity, we are sooner or later bound to experience how its condition of possibility (the boundary that delimits its conditions) is simultaneously its condition of impossibility.

National identification is an exemplary case of how an external border is reflected into an internal limit. Of course, the first step

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towards the identity of the nation is defined through differences from other nations, so via an external border. If I identify myself as an Englishman, I distinguish myself from the French, Germans, Scots, Irish, etc. However, in the next stage, the question is raised as to who among the English is "the real English," the paradigm of Englishness? Who is the Englishman who corresponds in full to the notion of English? Are they the remaining landed gentry? Factory workers? Bankers? Actually, in the political imagery of Thatcher's government, a revolution took place, with a shift in the centre of gravity of "the real Englishness." It is no longer the landed gentry who preserve the old traditions, but self-made men of the Parkinson type, those from the lower strata who have "made themselves" English. However, the final answer is of course that nobody is fully English, that every empirical Englishman contains something "non-English." Englishness thus becomes an "internal limit," an unattainable point which prevents empirical Englishmen from achieving full identity-with-themselves.

On another level, the same dyad can serve as a conceptual tool to define the break between traditional and modern art. The traditional work-of-art presents a well-rounded organic Whole upon which harmony is bestowed by means of its boundary separating it from its Outside. Whereas modernism, so to speak, internalizes this external boundary which thereby starts to function as limit, as the internal impediment to its identity, the work-of-art cannot attain its organic roundness anymore, cannot "fully become itself." It bears an indelible mark of failure and the Ought *!Sollen!*: Herefrom, its inherent ethical character. Already with Mallarmé, his entire writing is nothing but a series of failed attempts to produce "the Book." This constitutive failure is what justifies the definition of modern art as "experimental". Contrary to the prevailing doxa which conceives the advent of modern art as a break out of the Oedipal confines of the paternal metaphor, one has to recognize its fundamental feature in the emergence of the ethical agency of an irreparable symbolic debt which undermines the "regression" to the pre-Oedipal fetishism that pertains to the status of the traditional work of art.

The Lacanian notion of *llanguage* *llalangué*¹¹ concerns precisely the field of language insofar as it is "barred" by such an inherent limit which prevents it from constituting itself as a consistent Whole. That is to say: "llanguage" is language insofar as its external boundary that guarantees its identity-with-itself is reflected-into-it and assumes the shape of an inherent impediment

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that transforms its field into an inconsistent, "non-all" totality. Lacan's crucial point is, of course, that the logical sequence of it has to be reversed. *llanguage* is logically "primordial," and the way to make out of its inconsistent, non-universal field a closed and coherent totality is to "evict," exclude its inherent limit into an external boundary. To evoke the well-known ironic phrase, one has to speak of "all things possible and some others besides": of what has to be excluded so that the field of "all things possible" could constitute itself.

In other words, every Whole is founded on a constitutive Exception: what we cannot ever obtain is a complete set of signifiers without exception, since the very gesture of completion entails exclusion. Therein consists the fundamental paradox of the "logic of the signifier": from a non-all, non-universal collection, we constitute a Totality, not by adding something to it, but on the contrary, by subtracting something from it, namely the excessive "besides," the exclusion of which opens up the totality of "all things possible". A totality without exception serving as its boundary remains an inconsistent, flawed set which "doesn't hold together": a "non-all /pas-tout/" set. The truth, for example: It can be said to be "all" only in so far as it is conceived as adequate to an external object-boundary ("reality", "pure thought", etc.). To purport that Truth is "non-all" equals saying that it does not consist in an external relationship of the proposition to some external measure, but that it dwells within language itself; that it is an immanent effect of the signifier.

If, therefore, there is no (external) boundary to *llanguage*, this very absence of boundary is a token of the circular movement that characterizes the field of *llanguage*: Since the signifier lacks an external support, it ultimately relates only to itself. Therein consists the difference between the "arbitrariness" (of the sign) and the "differentiality" (of the signifier). We have to do with "arbitrariness" insofar as we can trace an external boundary with reference to which signs are "arbitrary" ("reality", "pure thought", "immediate sense-data", etc.). When this boundary disappears, when it cannot be constructed anymore, we find ourselves in the vicious circle that defines a differential order. A signifier is only its difference towards other signifiers, and since the same goes for all others, they cannot ever form a consistent Whole. The signifying set is doomed to turn in a circle, striving in vain to attain - what? Itself as pure difference. The inaccessible. For it is not - as in the case of sign - the "external reality," but the pure signifier itself:

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the difference separating and thus constituting them, their interdiction. The boundary of the sign is the "thing." The limit of the signifier is the "pure" signifier itself.¹²

And the Real, where is it in this circular movement of *llanguage*? Here distinction between reality and real can be used. Reality, as we have just seen, serves as the external boundary which enables us to totalize language, to make out of it a closed and coherent system. Whereas the Real is its inherent limit; that is, the unfathomable play which prevents it from achieving its identity with itself. The fundamental paradox of the relation between the Symbolic and the Real consists therein: The bar which separates them is strictly internal to the Symbolic, since it prevents the Symbolic from "becoming itself". The problem for the signifier is not the impossibility of its touching the Real, but its impossibility to "attain itself". What the signifier lacks is not the extra-linguistic object, but the Signifier itself as a non-barred, non-hindered One. Or, to put it in Hegelese: The signifier does not simply miss the object, it always-already "goes wrong" in relation to itself. And the object inscribes itself in the blank opened by this failure. The very positivity of the object is nothing but a positivization, an incarnation, of the bar which prevents the signifier from fully "becoming itself". This is what Lacan means when he says that "Woman doesn't exist": Woman qua object is nothing but the materialization of a certain bar in the symbolic universe: Witness don Giovanni.

The squabble about All

The figure of don Giovanni (from Mozart's opera, of course) is usually conceived as the embodiment of the wild, demonic lust which overwhelms every obstacle, which undermines every social convention, even the language code: in short, a kind of primordial force that threatens the very consistency of the social edifice. This view found its supreme expression in Kierkegaard's famous reading of *Don Giovanni* in his *Either-Or* where don Giovanni personifies the "esthetical stage"; the attitude of a subject living out his nature in self-consuming momentary enjoyment. The proper medium of this mode of life, regulated by the "pleasure principle," is, of course, music: a Dionysiac dance best exemplified by the "champagne aria" from Mozart's opera. To this "esthetical stage", Kierkegaard opposes the "ethical stage" where the subject rises up to the universal moral norm whose proper medium is the word (As

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Hegel pointed out, the meaning of words is always universal: even "here and now" mean every "hear and now"): that is, a mode of life regulated by the "reality principle". Yet such an interpretation fails to take into account the crucial dimension of don Giovanni. He is as far away as possible from being a self-infatuated, ruthless Narcissus enjoying the orgy of the moment, undermining every codified structure.

In the very heart of his impetus, we encounter a relationship to the (signifying) structure. True, don Giovanni wants to "have them all". But problems arise as soon as he is no longer content with taking women "one by one," as soon as he endeavours to arrange them into species and sub-species, thus changing their dispersed collection into a structured All. Suffice it to recall the symptomatic fact that the most famous piece of *Don Giovanni*, Leporello's air "Madamina, il catalogo a questo...", deals with cataloguing don Giovanni's conquests. His quest entangles itself into different deadlocks precisely when he attempts to seize them "all" on the basis of a single principle, such that he is forced to resort to different criteria of classification: first, the national criterion (in Italy six hundred and forty, etc., up to the "mille a tre" in Spain alone). Then, the criterion of social strata (countrywomen, housemaids, townswomen, countesses...). Finally, a kind of "reflection-into-itself" of the procedure, i.e. the enumeration of the criteria themselves (women of every grade, form and age...). After this first moment of satiation, Leporello, so to speak, changes the register and passes to the enumeration of the women's "immanent," "natural" characteristics, disposed in couples of opposites (blonde/ brunette, corpulent/slim, big/small) and described with reference to their "use value": When don Giovanni is cold in winter, he seduces a fat lady; when he needs tenderness, he approaches a delicate blonde, etc. The last couple in this series (old woman / young virgin) again introduces a level of "reflection-into-itself": "he conquers old women / for the pure pleasure of adding them to the list / whereas his predominating passion / are young virgins". It is not difficult to locate the paradox of this last opposition: as if all his conquests are not accomplished out of passion and for the sake of the list! In other words, it is as if the last couple holds the place, within the different species, of their genus as such.

As Karl Marx put it: "as if, next to and other than lions, tigers, hares, and all the other real animals that constitute in a group the different races, species, sub-species, families, etc., of the animal kingdom, existed, furthermore, the Animal, the individual incarna-

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tion of the animal kingdom."¹³ Or, as Leporello would put it, as if, next to and other than women who embody different qualities satisfying different needs, there existed, furthermore, the Woman; the individual incarnation of the feminine kingdom. This is the woman which, according to Lacan, "doesn't exist". This is why don Giovanni is condemned to eternal flight from one woman to another. Why then is this Woman, the general equivalent of women, split into "old" and "young"? As we have just seen, the "use value" of the "old" woman is that she can provide another name to the list. Precisely in so far as she is of no particular use, the "old" woman exhibits and personifies the "exchange value" of all other women, whereas the "young" ones incarnates its opposite; "usefulness," as such, in its non-specific, universal aspect.

It is therefore the homology with the world of commodities that provides the answer. The split is simply between "exchange value" (the symbolic equivalence of all women in so far as they are inscribed in the catalogue) and "use value" (the property they must have to satisfy don Giovanni's passion). The crucial point here is, however, that the very existence of this split implies the predominance of the "exchange value" (the signifier) over the "use value" (the passion). As with commodities, we are confronted with a fetishistic inversion; that is, "use value" is a mere form of appearance of "exchange value". In other words, the ultimate driving force of don Giovanni's conquest is not passion, but adding to the list. This is clearly ascertained in the above-mentioned "champagne aria," usually taken as the purest display of don Giovanni's "alleged" attitude of all-consuming enjoyment, devouring everything in its chaotic whirlpool. And the progression of the aria seems to confirm it. However, at its very peak, at this climactic moment of the formless Dionysiac frenzy, we all of a sudden find ourselves on the other side of the Moebius band, so to speak. *Don Giovanni* adds supreme enjoyment to the list: 'Ah! To my list - / tomorrow morning / you will have to add / a round dozen!' he exclaims to Leporello, his servant in charge of the catalogue, by no means insignificant a fact. This reference to the "list" that determines his innermost passion makes don Giovanni's subjective position dependent on his servant.

The general conclusion to be drawn from it is clear enough: since "Woman doesn't exist", don Giovanni is condemned to an unending metonymic movement. His potency is nothing but a form of appearance of its very opposite, of a fundamental impotence designated by Lacan as the "impossibility of the sexual relation

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ship". This impossibility takes effect the moment sexuality is caught in the cobweb of language. Sexuality clearly is possible for animals led by their unerring sense of smell, whereas we all know what cruel tricks smell plays on don Giovanni: when, in the first act, he smells the odor di femina and sets out to seduce the veiled unknown, he soon learns that the mysterious belle is donna Elvira, _ his wife, whom he wanted to avoid at any price! - This answer," however, still leaves open the question of the concrete historical conditions of the appearance of a figure like don Giovanni.

A propos of Antigone, Lacan wrote that it presents a paradoxical case of a refusal of Humanism before its very advent. Isn't it somehow the same with Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, an opera which articulates a refusal of the bourgeois ideology of the love couple prior to its hegemony in the course of the nineteenth-century? (Even within the oeuvre of Mozart himself, the glorification of the harmonious couple in the *Magic Flute* follows its refusal in *Don Giovanni*!) An implicit quasi-Marxist answer was provided by Joseph Losey's film-version of the opera: don Giovanni's escape into debauchery expresses the hopeless social perspective of the feudal ruling class in decline... Although don Giovanni undoubtedly does belong to the ruling class, it nonetheless seems that such a quick "sociologization" fails to take into account the concrete historical mediation that conditioned its emergence. Let us indicate its contours by means of a comparison between don Giovanni and Casanova who is don Giovanni's exact opposite: a merry swindler and impostor, an epicure who irradiates simple pleasure, leaving behind no bitter taste of revenge, and whose libertinage presents no serious threat to the environs. He is a kind of correlate to the eighteenth-century free-thinkers from the bourgeois salon: full of irony and wit, calling into question every established view. Yet his trespassing of what is socially acceptable never assumes the shape of a firm position which would pose a serious threat to the existing order. His libertinage lacks the fanatic-methodical note. His spirit is that of permissiveness, not of purges. It is "freedom for all," not yet "no freedom for the enemies of freedom". Casanova remains a parasite feeding on the decaying body of his enemy and as such deeply attached to it. No wonder he condemned the "horrors" of the French revolution, since it swept away the only universe in which he could prosper.

It was only don Giovanni who brought libertinage to the point of its own "self-negation" and transformed resistance to Duty into the Duty to resist. His conquests are not a matter of enjoying simple

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life-pleasures, but *stricto sensu* a matter of a compulsive Duty. To use Kantian terms: they are strictly "non-pathological". He is driven by an inner compulsion which is "beyond the pleasureprinciple". In short, if Casanova was a correlate to the prerevolutionary free-thinking salon, (Mozart's) don Giovanni is a correlate to Jacobinism, a kind of "Jacobin of the libidinal economy" the paradox of a puritan debauchee. The Jacobins cut off the heads of citizens who yielded to decadent pleasures and never fully assumed the ideal of Citizen; don Giovanni contemptuously rejected women who never lived up to Woman. This homology is, however, mediated by an impossibility: don Giovanni's "Jacobinism of the libidinal economy" can never meet the "real," political Jacobinism. Because of his social position (a member of the ruling class in decay), don Giovanni carried out Jacobinism in the only field open to him, that of sexuality.¹⁴ Which is why his ultimate fate was the same as that of the Jacobins: He was an annoying "excess," a "vanishing mediator," shoved away as soon as the ideological hegemony of the bourgeois intimate love couple was established.

Endnotes

1. From this perspective, even the theory that epitomizes the horror and the imbecility of Stalinist "dialectical materialism," namely the infamous "theory of reflection," could be given a new twist insofar as one interprets it on the level of "squared reflection". An ideological edifice of course by definition fails to "reflect correctly" the social reality in which it is embedded; yet this very "surplus" of distortion is in itself socially determined, so that *an ideology "reflects" its social context through the very mode its "reflection" is distorted.*

2. In passing, the same is true of the various popular Heideggerian "histories of Being" where the history of the West is reduced to a succession of episodes as ways of disclosure of Being (the Greek epoch, Cartesian subjectivity, post-Hegelian "will to power," etc.): what is lost here is how each epochal experience of the truth of Being is a failure, a defeat of thought's endeavour to capture the Thing. Heidegger himself, at least in his great moments, never fell into this: so, for example, the emphasis of his interpretation of Schelling's *Treatise on Human Freedom* is that Schelling had a presentiment of a certain kernel which remained unthought in all previous metaphysical tradition, yet about which he simul-

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taneously blinded himself when he formulated it in the categories of Aristotelian metaphysics (Hoelderlin put this kernel into words more appropriately in his poems).

3. So it is actually much less "racist" than the kind of "understanding the Other in its diversity" by which we preserve a safe distance from the Other and erase everything from our experience of the Other that could "disturb" our subjective position by a direct, rude resentment of the Other. Some years ago an English anthropologist granted this when he wrote, after studying a Nigerian tribe for some years, that he had never seen a more corrupt tribe, that they instinctively and systematically tried to exploit and deceive him, etc.

4. Cf. Theodor W Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, New York: Herder and Herder 1972.

5. Cf. Gillian Rose, *Hegel contra Sociology*, London: The Athlone Press 1981, p. 48 et al.

6. On a different conceptual level, it is the same with what Lacan designates as the "subject of the signifier" (as opposed to the "subject of the signified"). Every signifier by definition misrepresents the subject, distorts it; yet the subject does not possess any ontological consistency outside this series of signifying (mis)representations. Its entire "identity" consists in its *lack of identity*, in the distance that separates it from the identity that could have been conferred upon it by an "adequate" signifying representation. In short, the "subject of the signifier" is ultimately nothing but the name for a certain limit constituted retroactively by the very failure of representation.

7. Cf. Michel Silvestre, *Demain la psychanalyse*, Paris: Navarin Editeur 1987, p. 93. There is, however, one precise point on which we disagree with Silvestre. For Silvestre "guilt feelings" are deceitful insofar as they serve to elude the real guilt of parricide. It seems to us that in a Lacanian perspective, even this radical guilt is already a deceptive stratagem by means of which the subject eludes the traumatic fact that the big Other is from the very beginning "dead" that is, inconsistent, impotent impostor. We didn't kill Him. He is always-already dead and the idea that we are

responsible for His death enables us to sustain the illusion that once upon a time, previous to our Crime, He was alive and well (in the form of the primal Father-Enjoyment, for example).

8. G. W E Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1977, p. 10.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

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10. This illusion enables us to avoid a lethal look into the Other's eyes: when we confront the Other eye to eye, we meet death.

11. As to the arguments for translating "lalangue" with "llanguage," cf. Russell Grigg's translation of Jacques Lacan, "Geneva lecture on the symptom," *Analysis I*, Melbourne 1989.

12. Let us recall how Marx produced the same formula a propos of capital: the limit of capital is capital itself, i.e. the capitalist mode of production.

13. PD. Dognin, *Les "sentiers escarpés" de Karl Marx I*, Paris: CERF 1977.

14. The relationship is the same here as that between French politics and German philosophy in the epoch of the French revolution: the great German idealists thought out the philosophical foundations of the French revolution, not in spite of German political backwardness, but precisely *because* the political blockage left open only the path of theory.

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