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The Abyss of Freedom/Ages of the World
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SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK/F. W. J. VON SCHELLING

THE ABYSS OF FREEDOM/ AGES OF THE WORLD

An essay by Slavoj Žižek
with the text of
Schelling's *Die Weltalter* (second draft, 1813)
in English translation by Judith Norman

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THE ABYSS OF FREEDOM

Slavoj Žižek

I

Perhaps the best-known single line from film noir is the final remark of the doomed hero in Edgar G. Ulmer's *Detour*: "Fate or some mysterious force can put the finger on you or me for no good reason at all." This parlance provides a concise expression of the central enigma Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling (1775–1854) struggled to resolve throughout his long philosophical career – the enigma of freedom, of the sudden suspension of the "principle of sufficient reason," discernible from God's radically contingent act of creation up to the "irrational" insistence of a stubborn child on a seemingly trifling point, on which, however, he is ready to stake everything. Schelling's solution involves an unheard-of reversal of the very terms of this enigma: what if the thing to be explained is not freedom but the emergence of the chains of reason, of the causal network – or, to quote Schelling himself: "The whole world is thoroughly caught in reason, but the question is: how did it get caught in the network of reason in the first place?"¹

Nowhere is the endeavor to comprehend this enigma more strenuous than in the three drafts of *Die Weltalter* ("Ages of the World") from 1811 to 1815. For many years, the third draft, from 1815, was the only one known to exist; it was published in volume 8 of Schelling's *Works* edited by his son, Karl, immediately after the philosopher's death.² The two previous drafts were discovered at the end of World War II in the debris of the Munich University library, destroyed by the Allied bombings; they were published in 1946.³ The three drafts remain fragments: all of them contain only book 1 of the planned trilogy of "Past," "Present," and "Future." They are interrupted at the crucial point of giving an account of the differentiation between Past and Present, of the emergence of the Word from the self-enclosed rotary motion of

unknown domain whose contours became discernible only in the aftermath of German Idealism. This breakthrough is most tangible in the second draft, and for this reason it was chosen for translation in the present volume. The work bears witness to such an effort of thought that it is almost painful to read.

A SYSTEM OF FREEDOM

The philosophical system Schelling was working on from about 1807, after abandoning his earlier project of the so-called philosophy of identity, provides an exemplary case of the *noncontemporaneity of a thought to its time*, that is, of the paradoxical temporality in which staying behind coincides with being ahead. In its time, the predominant perception of this system was of a hopelessly outdated regression to premodern theosophy. It is now clear that the entire post-Hegelian constellation – from Marxism to the existentialist notion of finitude and temporality as the ultimate horizon of being, from deconstructionist “decentering” of the self-presence of *logos* to New Age obscurantism – has its roots in Schelling’s late philosophy.

Schelling’s late philosophy should by no means be reduced to a mere “intermediate” phenomenon, announcing the contours of future thought in the inadequate language of the past. It rather functions as a kind of vanishing mediator, designating a unique constellation in which, for a brief moment after the disintegration of Absolute Idealism, something became visible that, once so-called post-Hegelian thought settled itself, and found shape in the guise of Schopenhauer, Marx, and Nietzsche, was again lost from sight. Schelling alone persisted in the “impossible” position of the post-Idealist crack that was quickly filled by the post-Hegelian “reversals” of Idealism. Schelling’s first name for this crack is the gap that forever separates Existence from its Ground, that is, the rational, articulated universe of the divine Word (*logos*) from that which in God himself is not God, from the contraction of the impenetrable Real that provides the support for the expansion of the divine Word.

Against all false appearances and even occasional misformulations, Schelling’s late philosophy is a philosophy of the

duality of “cosmic principles” (Light and Darkness, Masculine and Feminine, etc.). There is an eternal temptation to supplement the standard idealist edifice with such a duality of principles; insofar as Plato was the first idealist, no wonder that one of the obsessions of the New Age approach is to unearth – beneath Plato’s public teaching at our disposal in his written dialogues – his true, esoteric doctrine. This “secret teaching” offers an exemplary case of the *theoretical* obscene Other that accompanies, as a shadowy double, the One of pure theory. On a closer look, the positive *content* of this secret teaching reveals itself to be pop-wisdom commonplaces à la Joseph Campbell sold in thousands at airport bookstores, New Age platitudes about the duality of cosmic principles: the One, the positive principle of Light, must be accompanied by primordial Otherness, the mysterious dark principle of feminine matter . . . Therein resides the basic paradox: the secret we are supposed to discern through the arduous work of textual archaeology is none other than the most notorious New Age pop wisdom – a nice example of the Lacanian topology in which the innermost kernel coincides with the radical externality. Here is simply another chapter in the eternal fight waged by obscurantist Illumination against Enlightenment: insofar as Plato was the first great Enlightener, the obsession with Plato’s secret teaching bears witness to an effort to prove that Plato himself was an obscurantist preaching a special initiatic doctrine.⁴

In spite of its theosophical flavor, Schelling’s difference between Existence and its Ground radically undermines every dualism of cosmological “principles.” The central tenet of Schelling’s “Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom,” which immediately precedes *Weltalter* and announces its problematic,⁵ is that if one is to account for the possibility of Evil, one has to presuppose a split of the Absolute itself into God insofar as he fully exists and the obscure, impenetrable Ground of his Existence. With characteristic speculative audacity, Schelling locates the split that opens up the possibility of Evil in God himself. This distinction between God’s Existence and its

Absolute qua obscure longing (*Sehnsucht*) that strives for something outside itself without a clear notion of what it strives for, means that God is not fully "himself" – that there is something in God that isn't God. In "Philosophical Investigations," this relationship between the obscure Will of the Ground and the illuminated, effectively existing Will is not yet thought through, so that Schelling's position is here, strictly speaking, contradictory. That is to say, his answer to the question "What does the obscure Will aspire to?" is: it strives after illumination, it yearns for the Word to be pronounced. If, however, the obscure Will of the Ground itself aspires to *logos*, in what precise sense is it then *opposed* to it? *Weltalter* resolves this contradiction by qualifying the first Will as the divine *Selbstheit*, "being-itself," as the contractive force that actively opposes the Light of Reason and thereby serves as the necessary ground of the latter's expansion.

However, already in "Philosophical Investigations" Schelling's position is more subtle than may appear: this obscure-impenetrable side of God, the Ground of his Existence, is *not* to be conceived as a positive Base, the true foundation of Being, with Reason as its parasitic accident: the Ground is in itself ontologically hindered, hampered, its status is in a radical sense *preontological* – it only "is" *sous rature*, in the mode of its own withdrawal. The only true Substance is God in his actual Existence, and *Grund* is ultimately a name for God's self-deferral, for that elusive X which lacks any proper ontological consistency, yet on account of which God is never fully himself, cannot ever attain full self-identity. God needs this foreign body in his heart since without this minimum of contractive force, he wouldn't be "himself" – what, paradoxically, forever prevents God from attaining full self-identity is the very impenetrable kernel of his *Selbstheit*. This tension in the midst of the Absolute itself is, therefore, far more enigmatic than it may appear, since it is thoroughly incompatible with the oppositions that define the space of traditional ontology: the opposition between Ground and Existence does not overlap with the opposition between mere possibility and actuality (if this were the case, Ground couldn't corrode from

philosophy, that is, for the symmetrical polarity of two ontological principles (the Ground is "less" than Existence, it lacks full ontological consistency); it definitely doesn't imply that Ground is in any way the "true substance" or "foundation" of Reason. The enigma resides in the fact that Ground is ontologically nonaccomplished, "less" than Existence, but it is precisely as such that it corrodes from within the consistency of the ontological edifice of Existence. In other words, Schelling first opposes Existence (the fully actual God) and the mere Ground of Existence (the blind striving that lacks actuality) as the Perfect and the Imperfect, and then goes on to treat the two as complementary and to conceive true completeness as the unity of the two, as if the Perfect itself needs the Imperfect in order to assert itself. *This is why there is Evil in the world: on account of the perverse need of the Perfect for the Imperfect*, as if the intersection of the Perfect and the Imperfect is more perfect than the Perfect itself.

This paradoxical need of the Perfect for the Imperfect is another name for the Hegelian project of conceiving the Absolute "not only as Substance, but also as Subject." That is to say, what one should always bear in mind is that, in the opposition between (imperfect) Ground and (perfect) Existence, *Subject is on the side of Ground qua imperfect*: *subject* designates the "imperfection" of Substance, the inherent gap, self-deferral, distance-from-itself, which forever prevents Substance from fully realizing itself, from becoming "fully itself." The fact that there is something in God that is not God means that Substance implies Subject as its constitutive openness, gap. This also throws new light on the ontological status of sexual difference: Schelling explicitly sexualizes the relationship between Existence and its Ground, conceiving Ground as the impenetrable "feminine" foundation of the male Word. As such, Ground must remain in the background, silent: the moment Ground usurps the leading role, it changes from a beneficent protective power to a horrible fury bent on destroying every determinate Existence. It is easy to recognize here the standard patriarchal fear of the destructive force of fully asserted femininity. There is, however, another, perhaps unexpected conclusion to be drawn from this: this radical negativity

nel of subjectivity? Does this not mean that *subjectivity is, in its most basic dimension, in an unheard-of way, "feminine"*? Insofar as "subject" is the Ground that asserts itself "as such," in the very medium of Existence, against every determinate form of actual existence, subject is a potentiality, never fully actualized, and the feminine Ground asserted against the "masculine" existence-logos.

This basic insight of Schelling whereby, prior to its assertion as the medium of rational Word, the subject is the pure "night of the Self," the "infinite lack of being," the violent gesture of contraction that negates every being outside itself, also forms the core of Hegel's notion of madness: when Hegel determines madness as withdrawal from the actual world, the closing of the soul into itself, its "contraction," the cutting-off of its links with external reality, he all too quickly conceives this withdrawal as a "regression" to the level of the "animal soul" still embedded in its natural environs and determined by the rhythm of nature (night and day, etc.). Does this withdrawal, on the contrary, not designate the severing of the links with the *Umwelt*, the end of the subject's immersion in its immediate natural surroundings, and is it as such not the founding gesture of "humanization?" Was this withdrawal into self not accomplished by Descartes in his universal doubt and reduction to cogito, which, as Derrida pointed out in his "Cogito and the History of Madness,"⁶ also involves a passage through the moment of radical madness? Are we thus not back at the well-known passage from *Jenaer Realphilosophie*, where Hegel characterizes the experience of pure Self qua "abstract negativity," the "eclipse of (constituted) reality," the contraction into self of the subject, as the "night of the world":

The human being is this night, this empty nothing, that contains everything in its simplicity – an unending wealth of many representations, images, of which none happens to him – or which are not present. This night, the inner of nature, that exists here – pure self – in phantasmagorical presentations, is night all around it, in which here shoots a bloody head – there another white shape, suddenly here before it, and just so disap-

And the symbolic order, the universe of the Word, *logos*, can only emerge from the experience of this abyss. As Hegel puts it, this inwardness of the pure self "must enter also into existence, become an object, oppose itself to this innerness to be external; return to being. This is language as name-giving power. . . . Through the name the object as individual entity is born out of the I."⁸ What we must be careful not to miss here is how Hegel's break with the Enlightenment tradition can be discerned in the reversal of the very metaphor for the subject: the subject is no longer the Light of Reason opposed to the nontransparent, impenetrable Stuff (of Nature, Tradition . . .); his very kernel, the gesture that opens up the space for the Light of Logos, is absolute negativity qua "night of the world," the point of utter madness in which fantasmatic apparitions of "partial objects" wander around. Consequently, there is no subjectivity without this gesture of withdrawal, which is why Hegel is fully justified in inverting the standard question of how the fall-regression into madness is possible: the true question is rather how the subject is able to climb out of madness and to reach "normalcy." That is to say, the withdrawal into self, the cutting off of the links to the *Umwelt*, is followed by the construction of a symbolic universe that the subject projects onto reality as a kind of substitute-formation destined to recompense us for the loss of the immediate, presymbolic real. However, as Freud himself asserted apropos of Schreber, is not the manufacturing of a substitute-formation that recompenses the subject for the loss of reality the most succinct definition of paranoiac construction as an attempt to cure the subject of the disintegration of his universe? In short, the ontological necessity of "madness" resides in the fact that it is not possible to pass directly from the purely "animal soul" immersed in its natural life-world to "normal" subjectivity dwelling in its symbolic universe – the vanishing mediator between the two is the "mad" gesture of radical withdrawal from reality that opens up the space for its symbolic (re)constitution. It was already Hegel who emphasized the radical ambiguity of the statement "What I think, the product of my thought, is objectively true."

caught in his self-enclosed universe, unable to relate to reality, and the "highest truth," the truth of speculative idealism, the identity of thought and being. If, therefore, in this precise sense, as Lacan put it, normalcy itself is a mode, a subspecies of psychosis, that is, if the difference between "normalcy" and madness is inherent to madness, in what does then this difference between the "mad" (paranoiac) construction and the "normal" (social construction of) reality consist? Is "normalcy" ultimately not merely a more "mediated" form of madness? Or, as Schelling put it, is normal Reason not merely "regulated madness?"

Hegel's notion of the "night of the world" as the feminine kernel of subjectivity is thus profoundly "Schellingian" in that it subverts the simple opposition between the Light of Reason and the impenetrable darkness of matter. Its ultimate consequence is that the emergence of reality, of the universe as such, is grounded in a fundamental and irreducible inversion/perversion of the "proper" relationship between ontological forces – if their relationship were to be "set straight," reality as such would disintegrate. Schelling sticks to this fundamental insight of *Weltalter* up to his late philosophy of mythology and revelation: the universe as such (the actual world) is the result of an original inversion/perversion of divine "potencies": "reality" emerges when the harmonious balance between the three primordial divine potencies (A^1 , A^2 , A^3) is disturbed, that is, when the first potency (A^1), which should serve as the passive ground for the other, higher potencies, usurps the leading place and thus changes from a benevolent enabling force effective from the background, to an egoist contractive force destructive of every otherness. It is only through this perversion/inversion of potencies that the passage from mere potentiality to actuality can occur – the realm of harmony previous to the perversion of potencies is a realm of pure potentiality that lacks the firmness of actual being. Therein resides the great insight of German Idealism: the real, material world is not merely a (distorted) reflection of suprasensible Ideas in the mode of Plotinus's emanation but involves a violent reversal of the proper hierarchical relation between Ideas. Schelling's

reality: this Selfsameness is neither passive matter nor universal notional content, but the active force of absolute contraction to a point of self-relating that can only occur in the sphere of the Spirit – matter cannot absolutely contract itself into itself, since it has its center of gravity *outside* itself (as is proven by the phenomenon of gravity). In short, Schelling's crucial point is that the domain of Ideas becomes actual Spirit only through its "egotist" perversion/inversion, in the guise of the absolute contraction into a real Person. One must be careful not to miss the point here: it is not only that what we experience as "material reality" is the perversion/inversion of the true ideal order; reality emerges insofar as the true ideal order gets inverted in itself, runs amok – in Schelling's terms, *the inertia of external material reality is a proof of the divine madness, of the fact that God himself was "out of his mind."* (What Schelling is not ready to accept is the logical consequence of his reasoning: this perversion is unsurpassable, the Spirit in its actuality is irreducibly "out of joint," the stain of perversion is the unavoidable price for the Spirit's actualization – the notion of a Reconciliation that would "sublate" the contractive force of egotism in the ethereal medium of Spirit is purely fantasmatic, even when it puts on the technological dress of Virtual Reality and presents itself as the dream of cutting links with our material body and wandering freely in cyberspace.)

This perversion of the "proper" hierarchical relationship between potencies is the key feature of the German Idealist notion of a philosophical "system." Insofar as this perversion is a free act, the most elementary manifestation of freedom, one can see where the standard reproach (a topos from Kierkegaard to Heidegger), according to which the weak point of Schelling's essay on freedom is that it tries to think together what is incompatible (i.e., freedom and system), falls short. "System," in the precise sense of German Idealism, is a totality that is all-encompassing since it includes/contains its own inversion: in a "system," the relationship between A and B, the "higher" and the "lower" principle, is only fully actualized when, within the domain of B, their proper relationship is inverted, that is, A itself is subordinated to B. We

stance, but also as Subject," as Hegel put it: the principle of subjectivity means that what is originally a subordinate moment of the Absolute can posit itself as its own Center and subordinate to itself its own substantial presuppositions. Or, to put it in more popular terms, the gesture of the subject par excellence is that of wilfully putting at stake the entire substantial content for a capricious meaningless detail: "I want *this*, even if the whole world goes down." Therein resides what Hegel calls the "infinite right of subjectivity": the subject's freedom has to actualize itself *against* Substance, and it can do so only by way of elevating a contingent, meaningless particular moment that the subject posits as its embodiment, over the entire substantial content.

This inclusion of the inversion of the "proper" relationship is not only the key feature of Schelling's notion of freedom (as the freedom for good *and* evil, i.e., the freedom to invert the proper relationship), but also Fichte's and Hegel's, and even Kant's. Is not the aim of Fichte's "doctrine of science" to explain how the subject at the transcendental level, the pure I, which "posits" the entire objective content, experiences itself as passively determined by the universe of objectivity, how the proper relationship between Subject and Object is inverted? Is not the whole point of Hegel's theory of "alienation" to explain how the product of social activity is reified into an autonomous substantial content that subordinates to itself its own generative force? And do we not encounter the same inversion in the fundamental Kantian deadlock that resides in the overlapping of the condition of impossibility (the inaccessibility of the noumenal realm to finite human conscience) with the condition of possibility (humanity can act morally, out of Duty, only insofar as the noumenal realm is inaccessible to human beings) – humanity's limitation to finitude, that is, the very condition that prevents it from ever being able to fulfil its ethical destination, is at the same time a positive condition of its ethical activity? *Subject, freedom, and system* are thus three names for the same gesture of inversion.

Jean-Pierre Dupuy⁹ developed a homologous notion of autonomous system by way of confronting Derridean deconstruction

index of the system's failure to achieve autonomy, that is, by the fact that the system contains (in both senses of the term: to encompass and to restrain) its "condition of impossibility," an element that inverts/subverts its fundamental constellation – it was already Hegel who conceived the Absolute as that which, in its relation to its Otherness, relates to itself . . . Dupuy conceives this inherent inversion as the elementary "logical matrix of deconstruction": in the dominant field I, 2 is subordinated to 1, whereas in the subordinated field II, 1 itself is subordinated to 2. In general, Rhetoric is subordinated to Thought (rhetoric should serve as a mere device to express our thought more clearly); however, within the rhetorical domain itself, Thought is subordinated to Rhetoric (rhetorical manipulations sooner or later "contaminate" thought itself and subordinate it to its goal of achieving a persuasive "rhetorical effect") . . . It is easy to discern the same matrix in Hegel's treatment of the touchy subject of the relationship between Religion and State: Religion (God), of course, stands over the State, but *within the domain of the State*, State should exert power over Religion; that is, Religion qua social institution should follow the State's regulations. The insight into the necessity of this inversion is what distinguishes Reason from Understanding: according to the stiff rules of Understanding, if State is subordinated to Religion, this means that theocracy is the only legitimate form of government. The clergy should act directly as politically sovereign; every subordination of Religion to nonreligious State regulations is a depraved compromise (the position of "religious fundamentalism"). Reason, however, tells us that Religion truly rules the world precisely by accepting its own subordinate role within the sphere that is subordinated to itself. A King can legitimately exert unlimited power over all terrestrial institutions, inclusive of the Church, only insofar as this power itself is legitimized as grounded in God. One is tempted to formulate this reversal, which, perhaps, is ideology at its purest, in the well-known Marxist terms of the difference between the dominant agency and the agency that determines "in the last instance": God determines everything "in the last instance," yet he

other example is the way Gypsies function in the social perception of Balkan Slavic nations as a carnivalesque inversion of the “normal” patriarchal universe – the topsy-turvy world of disarranged social and sexual hierarchies (men with breasts, women with moustaches, etc.). This inversion is, however, *internal* to the (patriarchal) Order; it serves as its support: it is only through the *supplement* of this inversion that the Order is accomplished, fully actualized, that it becomes *autonomous*. We are dealing here with a mutual enveloping best illustrated by Escher’s two hands drawing each other: “Sacred” is the all-encompassing sea from which the domain of the Profane has to separate itself, yet once we are within the Profane, the Sacred itself starts to function as a special domain *within* the Profane, enclosed by it, that is, as its “super-structure,” its inherent “excess.”¹⁰

DRIVES AND THEIR ROTARY MOTION

How, then, does Schelling succeed in accounting for this inherent inversion of the Absolute? Perhaps the most appropriate way is by focusing on the *problem of Beginning*, the crucial problem of German Idealism – suffice it to recall Hegel’s detailed elaboration of this problem and all its implications in his *Science of Logic*. Schelling’s fundamental thesis is that, to put it bluntly, *the true Beginning is not at the beginning*: there is something that precedes the Beginning itself – a rotary motion whose vicious cycle is broken, in a gesture analogous to the cutting of the Gordian knot, by the Beginning proper, that is, the primordial act of decision. The beginning of all beginnings is, of course, the “In the beginning was the Word” from the Gospel according to St. John: prior to it, there was nothing, that is, the void of divine eternity. According to Schelling, however, “eternity” is not a nondescript bulk – a lot of things take place in it. Prior to the Word there is the chaotic-psychotic universe of blind drives, of their rotary motion, of their undifferentiated pulsating, and the Beginning occurs when the Word is pronounced that “represses,” rejects into the eternal Past, this self-enclosed circuit of drives. In short, *at the Beginning proper stands a resolution, an act of decision that, by way of differen-*

passage from the “closed” rotary motion to the “open” progress, from drive to desire, or, in Lacanian terms, from the Real to the Symbolic. The beginning occurs when one “finds the word” that breaks the deadlock, the vicious cycle, of empty and confused ruminations.

In this precise sense, the problem of the Beginning is the problem of “phenomenalization”: how does it happen that God pronounces the Word and thereby discloses himself, appears to himself? We must be careful not to miss this crucial point: as with Hegel, the problem is not how to attain the noumenal In-itself beyond phenomena; the true problem is how and why at all does this In-itself split itself from itself, how does it acquire a distance toward itself and thus clear the space in which it can appear (to itself).

How, then, can this phenomenalization of God, this pronunciation of the Word in him that magically, in an unfathomable way, dispells the impenetrable darkness of drives, occur? *It can only occur on condition that the rotary motion of drives that precedes the Beginning is itself not the primordial, unsurpassable fact.* That is to say, the notion of the vortex of drives as the ultimate foundation, the “origin of all things,” renders inconceivable the fact of freedom: how can a Word emerge out of this vortex and dominate it, confer on it its shape, “discipline” it? Consequently, this ultimate Ground of reality, the primordial vortex of drives, this Wheel of Fate that sooner or later engulfs and destroys every determinate object, must be preceded by an unfathomable X that in a way yet to be explained “contracts” drives. Is, however, the primordial vortex of drives not the ultimate ground that nothing can precede? Schelling would entirely agree with that, adding only that the point in question is precisely the exact status of this “nothing”: prior to *Grund*, there can only be an abyss (*Ungrund*); that is, far from being a mere *nihil privativum*, this “nothing” that precedes Ground stands for the “absolute indifference” qua the abyss of pure Freedom that is not yet the predicate-property of some Subject but rather designates a pure impersonal Willing (*Wollen*) that wills nothing. At the outset of his “prehistory,” prior

of *Weltalter*), “contracts” Being, that is, a firm, impenetrable Ground. (Schelling, of course, plays upon the double meaning of the term *contraction*: to tighten-compress-condense *and* to catch, to be afflicted with, to go down with [an illness]; the primordial Freedom “contracts” Being as a painful burden that ties it down.) Prior to this primordial contraction, to this act of engendering-ejecting one’s Ground, God is, as Schelling puts it in an unsurpassed way in the second draft of *Weltalter*, a pure Nothingness that “rejoices in its nonbeing.”¹¹

God qua pure Freedom that hasn’t yet contracted being thus *stricto sensu* doesn’t exist. The spontaneous, self-generated “breach of symmetry” (we are tempted to say: the primordial “vacuum fluctuation,” which sets in motion the development of the Absolute) is the primordial contraction by means of which God acquires being. This contraction of/into being is necessarily followed by a counterstroke of expansion – why? Let us step back for a moment and reformulate the primordial contraction in terms of the passage from a self-contented Will that wants nothing to an actual Will that effectively wants something. The pure potentiality of the primordial Freedom, this blissful tranquility, this pure enjoyment, of an unassertive, neutral Will that wants *nothing* actualizes itself in the guise of a Will that *actively, effectively, wants this “nothing,”* that is, the annihilation of every positive, determinate content. By means of this purely formal conversion of potentiality into actuality, the blissful peace of primordial Freedom thus changes into pure contraction, into the vortex of “divine madness” that threatens to swallow everything, into the highest affirmation of God’s egotism, which tolerates nothing outside itself. In other words, the blissful peace of primordial Freedom and the all-destructive divine fury that sweeps away every determinate content are one and the same thing, only in a different modality: first in the mode of potentiality, then in the mode of actuality: “the same principle carries and holds us in its ineffectiveness that would consume and destroy us in its effectiveness.”¹² Upon experiencing itself as negative and destructive, the Will opposes itself to itself in the guise of its own inherent

through the bars of its self-imposed contraction is doomed, since the antagonism of the two Wills, the contractive one and the expansive one, is here *under the dominance, in the power, of contraction*. God, as it were, repeatedly dashes against his own wall: unable to stay within, he follows his urge to break out, yet the more he strives to escape, the more he is caught in his own trap. Perhaps the best metaphor for this rotary motion is a trapped animal who desperately strives to disengage itself from a snare: although every spring only tightens the snare, a blind compulsion leads the animal to make dash after dash, so that it is condemned to an endless repetition of the same gesture. What we have here is Schelling’s grandiose “Wagnerian” vision of God in the state of an endless “pleasure in pain,” agonizing and struggling with himself, affected by an unbearable anxiety, the vision of a “psychotic,” mad God who is absolutely alone, a One who is “all” since he tolerates nothing outside himself – a “wild madness, tearing itself apart.”¹³ This rotary motion is horrible because it is no longer impersonal: God already exists as One, as the Subject who suffers and endures the antagonism of drives. Schelling provides here a precise definition of anxiety: anxiety arises when a subject experiences simultaneously the impossibility of closing itself up, of withdrawing fully into itself, and the impossibility of opening itself up, of admitting an Otherness, so that it is caught in a vicious cycle of pulsation – every attempt at creation-expansion-externalization collapses back into itself. This God is not yet the Creator, since in creation the being (the contracted reality) of an Otherness is posited that possesses a minimal self-consistency and exists *outside* its Creator – this, however, is what God in the fury of his egotism is not prone to tolerate.

As Schelling emphasizes again and again, this all-destructive divine vortex remains even today the innermost base of all reality: “if we were able to penetrate the exterior of things, we would see that the true stuff of all life and existence is the horrible.”¹⁴ In this sense, all reality involves a fundamental antagonism and is therefore destined to fall prey to Divine fury, to disappear in the “orgasm of forces.”¹⁵ “Reality” is inherently fragile, the result of a

an analogy from cinema: if the projection of a film is to give rise to an "impression of reality" in the spectator, the reel has to run at the proper speed – if it runs too quickly, the movement on the screen gets blurred and we can no longer discern different objects; if it is too slow, we perceive individual pictures and the continuity that accounts for the impression we are watching "real life" gets lost.¹⁶ Therein resides Schelling's fundamental motif: what we experience as "reality" is constituted and maintains itself through a balance between the two antagonist forces, with the ever-present danger that one of the two sides will "crack," run out of control, and thus destroy the "impression of reality." Is not this speculation confirmed by the premise of contemporary cosmology according to which the "reality" of our universe hangs in the balance, that is, hinges on the fragile tension between expansion and gravitation? If the expansion were just a little bit stronger, the universe would "explode," dissipate, no firm, stable object would form; if, on the contrary, gravitation were a little bit stronger, it would long ago have "collapsed," fallen in . . .

What Schelling aims at with his notion of a fragile balance of antagonistic forces is perhaps best exemplified by an interesting experiment by Komar and Melamid, two Russian painters now living in the United States. Recently, they made two paintings, the "best" and the "worst," drawing on an opinion poll they conducted on a representative sample of the American population. The worst painting, of course, was an abstract composition of sharp-edged triangles and squares in bright red and yellow à la Kandinsky, while the best rendered an idyllic scene, all in blue and green, of a clearing, with George Washington taking a walk near the bank of a river running through it and a Bambi-like deer timidly observing him from the wood. The effect of this painting is repulsive and uncanny because it comes too close to the fantasy that underlies our everyday notion of beauty – the "literal," excessively faithful rendering of the fantasy makes it strange.¹⁷ The Schellingian point of this experiment in irony is that in order for us to experience something as part of "reality," it must involve the right mixture of the two extremes. Schelling is thus well aware

of our psychic life, even the highest social ideal has to be sustained secretly by the "lowest" motivations. Let us recall an unexpected example: Diana Fuss¹⁸ detected in Freud a tension between the two aspects of homosexual identification. On the one hand, there is homosexual identification in its horrifying aspect (pre-Oedipal oral-anal introjection, swallowing up the partner); on the other hand, there is latent homosexual identification as the cohesive force of society, opposed to the heterosexual link that introduces the element of disturbance, of the individual's gaining a distance, excluding him- or herself from the group of peers. Far from a contradiction, this ambiguity of the notion of homosexual identification is crucial: as in the case of the notion of the Uncanny, the paradox, the "speculative identity" of the opposites, resides in the fact that social cohesion can take place only insofar as it is supported by its radical opposite, the "pre-Oedipal" cannibalistic logic of introjection – the universe of the Catholic Church is guaranteed by the community of believers eating the flesh of Christ (the Eucharist). So the paradox is that the Oedipal couple, far from unambiguously supporting social cohesion, can also undermine it and must therefore be subordinated to the homosexual logic of the group identification of peers.

This logic of presymbolic antagonism, of the rotary motion of drives, is not to be confounded with the *Lebensphilosophie* problematic of the prelogical life substance of "irrational" drives: the status of rotary motion prior to the Beginning is thoroughly logical, since we are dealing with a *failed* logic, with an endlessly repeated effort to begin, that is, to posit the identity-and-difference between the (logical) Subject and Predicate. Prior to the Beginning, there is in a sense only the failed Beginning, failed attempts at the Beginning, that is, a sterile repetition caught in its vicious cycle, a faltering effort that repeatedly collapses back into itself, unable to "take off" properly. As was conclusively demonstrated by Hoglebe, the endless oscillation between contraction and expansion is propelled by the impossibility of formulating the "stable" relationship between S and P that forms the structure of a propositional judgment: the subject (also and above all in the

it passes over into the predicate and thereby loses the firm ground of its self-consistency.

Another confusion to be avoided here is with the common-sense notion (to which, from time to time, all great theoreticians of antagonism succumb, not only Schelling but also Freud in his *Civilization and Its Discontents*, for example) of Eros and Thanatos, or expansion and contraction as two opposed forces engaged in an unrelenting battle for domination. The codependence of the two antagonistic forces does not reside in the fact that one force needs the other as the only ground against which it can assert itself (no light without darkness, no love without hate . . .); much closer is Marx's crucial concept of a "tendency" that can lead to countereffects: the long-term "tendency" of the profit rate to fall, for example, can set in motion the "defense mechanisms" of Capital, which – in the short term, at least – raise the profit rate. As was demonstrated by Jacqueline Rose, Melanie Klein's depiction of the presymbolic antagonisms of psychic life involves a homologous mechanism: one and the same cause can bring about opposite effects; that is, it sets in motion a process whose outcome is radically undecidable: excessive aggressivity can be counteracted by a suppression of aggressivity, or it can trigger the upward spiral of more and more aggressivity. Homosexuality can arise out of the very anxieties generated by overly strong heterosexual fantasies; anxiety and guilt at times check libidinal development and at other times enhance it (since, as a reaction to anxiety and guilt, the subject is pushed toward the integrative work of restitution). One shouldn't miss the crucial point here: homosexuality does not emerge as the revolt of the suppressed "polymorphous perversity" against the heterosexual phallic economy but as a reaction to the very excessive strength of heterosexual fantasies. It was already Freud who, in *The Ego and the Id*, indicated this paradoxical logic when he emphasized that the "progress" of culture is founded upon a libidinal "regression" or regressive fixation. One cannot escape the paradox by recourse to the infamous distinction between the two "aspects" or "levels": the point is not that what, at the level of culture, stands for a form of

place only as a reaction to an excessively "regressive" libidinal fixation, the same as with a highly developed moral sensitivity, which can emerge only as a reaction to an excessive propensity to Evil. Or, to take a further example from Klein: the very precocious formation of an overdeveloped ego can start to function as an obstacle to its further development, and vice versa.¹⁹ Two characteristics of this paradoxical causality should be retained: a cause is inherently undecidable – it can enhance the feature it stands for or its opposite; and, above all, there is no "proper measure" in the relationship between a cause and its effect – the effect is always in excess of its cause, either in the guise of the upward spiral (aggressivity leads to more and more aggressivity) or in the guise of the counteraction (awareness of aggressivity brings forth a fear of "overreacting" that deprives the subject of the "normal" measure of aggressive self-assertion).

THE UGLY JOUISSANCE

This Schellingian problematic also enables us to approach in a new way the status of the "ugly." Contrary to the standard idealist argument that conceives ugliness as the defective mode of beauty, as its distortion, one should assert the *ontological primacy of ugliness*: it is beauty that is a kind of defense against the Ugly in its repulsive existence – or, rather, against existence *tout court*, since, as we shall see, what is ugly is ultimately the brutal fact of existence (of the real) as such.²⁰

The ugly object is an object that is in the wrong place, that "shouldn't be there." This does not mean that the ugly object is no longer ugly the moment we relocate it to its proper place; rather, an ugly object is "in itself" out of place, on account of the distorted balance between its "representation" (the symbolic features we perceive) and "existence" – being ugly, out of place, is the excess of existence over representation. Ugliness is thus a *topological* category; it designates an object that is in a way "larger than itself," whose existence is larger than its representation. The ontological presupposition of ugliness is therefore a gap between an object and the space it occupies, or – to make the same point in

case of beauty, we have in both cases a perfect isomorphism, while in the case of ugliness, the inside of an object somehow is (appears) larger than the outside of its surface representation (like the uncanny buildings in Kafka's novels that, once we enter them, appear much more voluminous than they seemed from the outside).

Another way to put it is to say that what makes an object "out of place" is that it is too close to me, like the statue of Liberty in Hitchcock's *Foreign Correspondent*: seen from extreme proximity, it loses its dignity and acquires disgusting, obscene features. In courtly love, the figure of *die Frau-Welt* obeys the same logic: she appears beautiful from the proper distance, but the moment the poet or the knight serving her approaches too close to her, she turns to him her other, reverse side, and what was previously the semblance of a fascinating beauty is suddenly revealed as putrefied flesh, crawling, snakes and worms, the disgusting substance of life, as in the films of David Lynch where an object turns disgusting when the camera gets too close to it.²¹ The gap that separates beauty from ugliness is thus the very gap that separates reality from the Real: the kernel of reality is horror, horror of the Real, and what constitutes reality is the minimum of idealization the subject needs in order to be able to sustain the Real. Another way to make the same point is to define ugliness as the excess of stuff that penetrates through the pores in the surface, from science fiction aliens whose liquid materiality overwhelms their surface (see the evil alien in *Terminator 2* or, of course, the alien from *Alien* itself), to the films of David Lynch where (exemplarily in *Dune*) the raw flesh beneath the surface threatens to emerge. In our standard phenomenological attitude toward the body of another person, we conceive the surface (of a face, for example) as directly expressing the "soul" – we suspend the knowledge of what actually exists beneath the skin surface (glands, flesh . . .). The shock of ugliness occurs when the surface is actually cut, opened up, so that the direct insight into the actual depth of the skinless flesh dispells the spiritual, immaterial pseudodepth.

this proportionality is perturbed by the excess of the interior stuff that threatens to overwhelm and engulf the subject. This opens up the space for the opposite excess, that of something that is not there and should be, like the missing nose that makes the "phantom of the opera" so ugly.²² Here, we have the case of a lack that also functions as an excess, the excess of a ghostly, spectral materiality in search of a "proper," "real" body. Ghosts and vampires are shadowy forms in desperate search for the life substance (blood) in us, actually existing humans. The excess of stuff is thus strictly correlative to the excess of spectral form: it was already Deleuze who pointed out how the "place without an object" is sustained by an "object lacking its proper place" – it is not possible for the two lacks to cancel each other. What we have here are the two aspects of the real: existence without properties and an object with properties without existence.²³ Suffice it to recall the well-known scene from Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* in which, in a high-class restaurant, the waiter recommends to his customers the best offers from the daily menu ("Today, our tournedo is really special!"), yet what the customers get on making their choice is a dazzling color photo of the meal on a stand above the plate, and on the plate itself, a loathsome excremental lump: this split between the image of the food and the real of its formless remainder exemplifies perfectly the two modes of ugliness, the ghostlike substanceless appearance ("representation without existence") and the raw stuff of the real ("existence without appearance").

One should not underestimate the weight of this gap that separates the "ugly" Real from the fully formed objects in "reality": Lacan's fundamental thesis is that a minimum of "idealization," of the interposition of fantasmatic frame by means of which the subject assumes a distance vis-à-vis the Real, is constitutive of our sense of reality – "reality" occurs insofar as it is not (it does not come) "too close." Today, one likes to evoke our loss of contact with the authentic reality of external (as well as our internal) nature – we are so accustomed to aseptic, pasteurized milk that milk direct from a cow is unpleasant. This "true milk" necessarily strikes us as too dense, disgusting, undrinkable . . .

precisely the gap between Existence (ethereal form) and its impenetrable Ground, on account of which, as Schelling puts it, the ultimate base of reality is the Horrible. Crucial for any materialist ontology is this gap between the bodily depth of the Real and the pseudodepth of Meaning produced by the Surface. It is also easy to see the connection with Freud, who defined reality as that which functions as an obstacle to desire: "ugliness" ultimately stands for existence itself, for the resistance of reality, which never simply lends itself effortlessly to our molding. Reality is ugly; it "shouldn't be there" and hinder our desire. However, the situation is here more complicated, since this obstacle to desire is at the same time the site of unbearable, filthy, excessive pleasure – of *jouissance*. What shouldn't be there is thus ultimately *jouissance* itself: the inert stuff is the materialization of *jouissance*. In short, the point not to be missed is that, in the opposition between desire and the hard reality (bringing pain, unpleasure, preventing us from achieving the balance of pleasure), *jouissance* is on the side of "hard reality." *Jouissance* as "real" is that which resists (symbolic integration); it is dense and impenetrable. In this precise sense, *jouissance* is "beyond the pleasure principle." *Jouissance* emerges when the very reality that is the source of unpleasure, of pain, is experienced as a source of traumatic-excessive pleasure. Or, to put it in yet another way: desire is in itself "pure," it endeavors to avoid any "pathological" fixation.²⁴ The "purity" of desire is guaranteed by its residing in the very gap between any positive object of desire and desire itself. The fundamental experience of desire is *ce n'est pas ça*, this is not that. In clear contrast to it, *jouissance* (or libido, or drive) is by definition "dirty" and/or ugly, it is always "too close": desire is absence, while libido-drive is presence.

All this is absolutely crucial for the functioning of ideology in the case of our "everyday" sexism or racism: their ultimate problem is precisely how to "contain" the threatening inside from "spilling out" and overwhelming us. Are women's periods not the exemplary case of such an ugly inside spilling out? Is the presence of African-Americans not felt as threatening precisely inso-

bulging out, mouth too-large, as if the outside surface is barely able to contain the inside threatening to break through. (In this sense, the racist fantasmatic duality of blacks and whites coincides with the duality of formless stuff and shadowy-spectral-impotent form without stuff.) Is the concern with how to dispose of shit (which, according to Lacan, is one of the crucial features differentiating human beings from animals) also not a case of how to get rid of the inside that emerges? The ultimate problem in intersubjectivity is precisely the extent to which we are ready to accept the other, our (sexual) partner, in the real of his or her existence – do we still love him when she or he defecates, makes unpleasant sounds? (See the incredible extent to which James Joyce was ready to accept his wife Nora in the "ugly" *jouissance* of her existence.) The problem, of course, is that, in a sense, life itself is "ugly": if we truly want to get rid of the ugliness, we are forced to adopt the attitude of a Cathar, for whom terrestrial life is a hell and the God who created this world is Satan himself, the Master of the World. So, in order to survive, we do need a minimum of the real – in a contained, gentrified condition.

The Lacanian proof of the Other's existence is the *jouissance* of the Other (in contrast to Christianity, for example, where this proof is Love). In order to render this notion palpable, suffice it to imagine an intersubjective encounter: when do I effectively encounter the Other "beyond the wall of language," in the real of his or her being? Not when I am able to describe her, not even when I learn her values, dreams, and so on, but only when I encounter the Other in her moment of *jouissance*: when I discern in her a tiny detail – a compulsive gesture, an excessive facial expression, a tic – that signals the intensity of the real of *jouissance*. This encounter of the real is always traumatic, there is something at least minimally obscene about it, I cannot simply integrate it into my universe, there is always a gap separating me from it. This, then, is what "intersubjectivity" is actually about, not the Habermasian "ideal speech situation" of a multitude of academics smoking pipes at a round table and arguing about some point by means of undistorted communication: without the element of the

choice theory." For that reason, one is even tempted to replace the term *multiculturalism* with *multiracism*: multiculturalism suspends the traumatic kernel of the Other, reducing it to an aseptic folklorist entity. What we are dealing with here is – in Lacanese – the distance between S and a, between the symbolic features and the unfathomable surplus, the "indivisible remainder" of the real; at a somewhat different level, Walter Benn Michaels made the same point in claiming that

the accounts of cultural identity that do any cultural work require a racial component. For insofar as our culture remains nothing more than what we do and believe, it is impotently descriptive. . . . It is only if we think that our culture is not whatever beliefs and practices we actually happen to have but is instead the beliefs and practices that should properly go with the sort of people we happen to be that the fact of something belonging to our culture can count as a reason for doing it. But to think this is to appeal to something that must be beyond culture and that cannot be derived from culture precisely because our sense of which culture is properly ours must be derived from it. This has been the function of race. . . . Our sense of culture is characteristically meant to displace race, but . . . culture has turned out to be a way of continuing rather than repudiating racial thought. It is only the appeal to race that makes culture an object of affect and that gives notions like losing our culture, preserving it, stealing someone else's culture, restoring people's culture to them, and so on, their pathos. . . . Race transforms people who learn to do what we do into the thieves of our culture and people who teach us to do what they do into the destroyers of our culture; it makes assimilation into a kind of betrayal and the refusal to assimilate into a form of heroism.²⁵

The historicist/culturalist account of ethnic identity, insofar as it functions as performatively binding for the group accounted for and not merely as a distanced ethnological description, thus has to involve "something more," some transcultural "kernel of the real." (The postmodern multiculturalist only displaces this

listening to some ritual of Native Americans, of African-Americans. What we are dealing with here is clearly the inverted form of racism.) Without this kernel, we remain caught in the vicious cycle of the symbolic performativity that, in an "idealistic" way, retroactively grounds itself. It is Lacan who – in a Hegelian way – enables us to resolve this deadlock: the kernel of the real is the retroactive product, the "fallout," of the very process of symbolization. The "Real" is the unfathomable remainder of the ethnic substance whose predicates are different cultural features that constitute our identity; in this precise sense, race relates to culture like real to symbolic. The "Real" is the unfathomable X at stake in our cultural struggles; it is that on account of which, when somebody learns too much of our culture, he or she "steals" it from us; it is that on account of which, when somebody shifts allegiance to another culture, he or she "betrays" us; and so on. Such experiences prove that there must be some X that is "expressed" in the cultural set of values, attitudes, rituals that materialize our way of life. What is stolen, betrayed . . . is always *objet petit a*, the little piece of the Real.²⁶

Jacques Rancière gave a poignant expression to the "bad surprise" that awaits today's postmodern ideologues of the "end of politics."²⁷ It is as if we are witnessing the ultimate confirmation of Freud's thesis, from *Civilization and Its Discontents*: after every assertion of Eros, Thanatos reasserts itself with a vengeance. At the very moment when, according to the official ideology, we are finally leaving behind the "immature" political passions (the regime of the "political": class struggle and other "outdated" divisive antagonisms) for the postideological pragmatic universe of rational administration and negotiated consensus, for the universe, free of utopian impulses, in which the dispassionate administration of social affairs goes hand in hand with aestheticized hedonism (the pluralism of "ways of life") – at this very moment, the foreclosed political is celebrating a triumphant comeback in its most archaic form of pure, undistilled racist hatred of the Other that renders the rational, tolerant attitude utterly impotent. In this precise sense, "postmodern" racism is the *symptom* of

eral "tolerance" condones the folklorist Other deprived of its substance (like the multitude of "ethnic cuisines" in a contemporary megalopolis); however, any "real" Other is instantly denounced for its "fundamentalism," since the kernel of Otherness resides in the regulation of its *jouissance*; that is, the "real Other" is by definition "patriarchal," "violent," never the Other of ethereal wisdom and charming customs. One is tempted to reactualize here the old Marcusean notion of "repressive tolerance," reconceiving it as the tolerance of the Other in its aseptic, benign form, which forecloses the dimension of the Real of the Other's *jouissance*.

Schelling's insistence on the gap that separates forever the Real of drives from its symbolization also allows for a new approach to the crucial question of the relationship between libidinal economy and symbolic sociopolitical attitudes. Within the "poststructuralist" scene, these two extremes are best exemplified by Jean-François Lyotard, for whom all political positions are "libidinally equal," and Deleuze and Guattari, who endeavor to ground the political difference between Left and Right in the difference between paranoid desire and schizophrenic desire. Fredric Jameson's solution "affirms the Utopian character of all collective experience (including that of fascism and the various racisms) but stresses the requirement of an existential choice of solidarity with a specific concrete group: on this nonformalist view, therefore, social solidarity must precede the ethicopolitical choice and cannot be deduced from it."²⁸ This position of Jameson's is much more delicate than it may appear: it excludes a whole series of standard positions/solutions, from the eternal leftist temptation to directly "ground" political attitudes in different libidinal economies (apart from Deleuze and Guattari, there is, of course, the standard Freudo-Marxist attempt to establish the correlation between capitalism and the so-called anal-compulsive libidinal economy)²⁹ to "formalist" attempts to derive a concrete political stance directly from some universal formal presuppositions. This sleight of hand, at work in all idealists from Plato to Habermas, renders invisible the "pathological" particularity of a fantasmatic

tude.³⁰ Jameson's position involves two seemingly opposite notions: on the one hand, the assertion of what he calls the "Utopian" aspect (or of what we call the fantasmatic kernel that structures enjoyment) in its *neutrality* (or, to use a more fashionable term, *undecidability*) – enjoyment is not in itself "good" or "bad," "progressive" or "reactionary," but a kind of neutral "stuff" appropriated by different sociopolitical attitudes; on the other hand, the assertion that every "universal" ethicopolitical stance is grounded in a particular "pathological" social identification. The merit of Jameson's solution is that it inverts the standard attitude: it is the pathological kernel of enjoyment that is "universal"; it is the "universal" sociopolitical attitude that is grounded in a particular choice.³¹

THE UNCONSCIOUS ACT

The blind rotary motion of God prior to the pronouncement of the Word is not yet temporal. It doesn't occur "in time," since time already presupposes that God has broken free from the closed psychotic cycle. The common expression "from the beginning of time" is to be taken literally: it is the Beginning, the primordial act of decision/resolution, that constitutes time – the "repression" of the rotary motion into the eternal Past establishes the minimal distance between Past and Present that allows for the linear succession of time. One encounters here the first of Schelling's many anti-Platonic "stings": eternity prior to the Word is the timeless rotary motion, the divine madness, that is *beneath* time, "less than time." However, in contrast to those who emphasize Schelling's affinity with Heidegger's assertion of temporality as the ultimate, unsurpassable horizon of Being, it should be said that nowhere is Schelling farther from Heidegger, from his analytics of finitude, than in his conception of the relationship between time and eternity. For Schelling, eternity is not a modality of time; it is rather time itself that is a specific mode (or rather modification) of eternity: Schelling's supreme effort is to "*deduce*" time itself from the *deadlock of eternity*. The Absolute "opens up time," it "represses" the rotary motion into the past, in order to get rid of the antago-

Heidegger – freedom is for Schelling the moment of “eternity in time,” the point of groundless decision by means of which a free creature (man) breaks up, suspends, the temporal chain of reasons and, as it were, directly connects with the *Ungrund* of the Absolute. This Schellingian notion of eternity and time, or, to put it in more contemporary terms, of synchrony and diachrony, is therefore to be opposed to the standard notion of time as the finite/distorted reflection of the eternal Order, as well as to the modern notion of eternity as a specific mode of temporality: *eternity itself begets time in order to resolve the deadlock it became entangled in*. For that reason, it is deeply misleading and inadequate to speak about eternity’s “fall into time”: the “beginning of time” is, on the contrary, a triumphant ascent, the act of decision/differentiation by means of which the Absolute resolves the agonizing rotary motion of drives and breaks out of its vicious circle into temporal succession.

Schelling’s achievement is here a theory of time unique in that it is not formal but qualitative: in contrast to the standard notion of time that conceives the three temporal dimensions as purely formal (the same content, as it were, travels from the past through the present to the future), Schelling provides a minimal qualitative determination of each dimension. The rotary motion of drives is *in itself past*: it was not once present and now past but is *past from the beginning of time*. The split is as such present; that is, the present stands for the moment of division, of the transformation of drive’s undifferentiated pulsation into symbolic difference, whereas the future designates the reconciliation to come. The target of Schelling’s critique is here not only the formalism of the standard notion of time, but also, perhaps even primarily, the unavowed prerogative of the present involved in it – for Schelling, this prerogative equals the primacy of mechanical necessity over freedom, of actuality over possibility.

Schelling’s “materialism” is therefore encapsulated in his persistent claim that one should presuppose an eternally past moment when God himself was at the mercy of the antagonism of matter, without any guarantee that A – the spiritual principle of

the antagonistic rotary motion of contracted matter – has to beget out of himself a Son, that is, the Word that will resolve the unbearable tension. The undifferentiated pulsation of drives is thus supplanted by the stable network of differences that sustains the self-identity of the differentiated entities: in its most elementary dimension, Word is the medium of differentiation. We encounter here what is perhaps the fundamental conceptual opposition of Schelling’s entire philosophical edifice: the opposition between the atemporal “closed” rotary motion of drives and the “open” linear progression of time. The act of “primordial repression” by means of which God ejects the rotary motion of drives into the eternal past and thereby “creates time,” that is, opens up the difference between past and present, is *his first deed as a free Subject*: in accomplishing it, he suspends the crippling alternative of the subjectless abyss of Freedom and the Subject who is unfree, caught in the vicious cycle of rotary motion.

This primordial act of “repression” that opens up the dimension of temporality is *itself “eternal,” atemporal*, in strict homology to the primordial act of decision by means of which a man chooses his eternal character. That is to say, apropos of Schelling’s claim that human consciousness arises from the primordial act that separates the present-actual consciousness from the spectral, shadowy realm of the unconscious, one has to ask a seemingly naive, but crucial question: what, precisely, is here unconscious? Schelling’s answer is unambiguous: “unconscious” is not primarily the rotary motion of drives ejected into the eternal past; “unconscious” is rather the very act of *Ent-Scheidung* by means of which drives were ejected into the past. Or, to put it in slightly different terms: what is truly unconscious in man is not the immediate opposite of consciousness, the obscure and confused “irrational” vortex of drives, but the very founding gesture of consciousness, the act of decision by means of which I “choose myself,” that is, combine this multitude of drives into the unity of my Self. The “Unconscious” is not the passive stuff of inert drives to be used by the creative “synthetic” activity of the conscious Ego; the “unconscious” in its most radical dimension is rather *the*

remain operative, must be "repressed," kept unconscious, out of the light of the day. To quote from the admirable last pages of the second draft of *Weltalter*:

That primordial deed which makes a man genuinely himself precedes all individual actions; but immediately after it is put into exuberant freedom, this deed sinks into the night of unconsciousness. This is not a deed that could happen once and then stop; it is a permanent deed, a never-ending deed, and consequently it can never again be brought before consciousness. For man to know of this deed, consciousness itself would have to return into nothing, into boundless freedom, and would cease to be consciousness. This deed occurs once and then immediately sinks back into the unfathomable depths; and nature acquires permanence precisely thereby. Likewise that will, posited once at the beginning and then led to the outside, must immediately sink into unconsciousness. Only in this way is a beginning possible, a beginning that does not stop being a beginning, a truly eternal beginning. For here as well, it is true that the beginning cannot know itself. That deed once done, it is done for all eternity. The decision that in some manner is truly to begin must not be brought back to consciousness; it must not be called back, because this would amount to being taken back. If, in making a decision, somebody retains the right to reexamine his choice, he will never make a beginning at all.³²

What we encounter here is, of course, the logic of the vanishing mediator, of the founding gesture of differentiation that must sink into invisibility once the difference between the "irrational" vortex of drives and the universe of *logos* is in place. This passage from pure Freedom to a free Subject relies on the opposition between being and becoming, between the principle of identity and the principle of (sufficient) reason-ground. Freedom involves the principle of identity; it designates the abyss of an act of decision that breaks up the causal chain, since it is grounded only in itself (when I accomplish a truly free act, I do it for no determinate reason, solely "because I wanted to do it"). Ground designates the existing reality as the network of causes and effects where "noth-

time: when things are conceived in the mode of identity, they appear *sub specie aeternitatis*, in their absolute contemporaneity, that is, the way they are according to their eternal essence. When they are conceived in the mode of ground, they appear in their temporal becoming, that is, as passing moments of the complex causal network where the past "grounds" the present. In this precise sense, freedom is atemporal: a flash of eternity in time. However, the problem Schelling is struggling with is that Necessity and Freedom are also opposed as atemporal logic and temporal narrative: "Identity" also stands for the Eleatic universe of atemporal logical necessity in which there is no free development, in which everything coexists in absolute contemporaneity, whereas actual freedom is possible only in time, as a contingent-free decision of an actual Entity in its becoming. Schelling's effort is here to think freedom as the atemporal abyss of identity (the miracle of an act that is "its own beginning," grounded only in itself) and as the predicate of a free Subject who decides in time. In short, he endeavors to accomplish the passage from Freedom to a free Subject, from the impersonal *Es* of "there is Freedom" to "him," a God who is free. This passage of Freedom from Subject to Predicate involves a reversal that is strictly homologous to the paradigmatic Hegelian reversal of subject and predicate (from "determining reflection" to "reflective determination," etc.): from Freedom's self-limitation/contraction we pass to a self-limited/contracted (i.e., actually existing) Entity that is *free*. Therein resides the ultimate mystery of Schelling's *Weltalter*, as well as of the Hegelian dialectical reversal: freedom is "in itself" a movement of boundless expansion that cannot be constrained to any limited entity – so how can it become the predicate of precisely such a limited entity? Schelling's answer is that Freedom can become the predicate of a Subject only insofar as this Subject accomplishes the act of self-differentiation by means of which it posits itself as grounded in and simultaneously different from its contracted Substance: a free Subject has to have a Ground that is not itself; it has first to contract this Ground and then to assume a free distance toward it via the act of primordial decision that opens up time.

integrity of Schelling's thought and the feature on account of which the *Weltalter* fragments are the founding text of dialectical materialism – resides in the repeated failure of Schelling's desperate endeavor to avoid the terrifying intermediate stage between the pure, blissful indifference of the primordial Freedom and God as a free Creator.³³ What comes between the primordial Freedom and God *qua* free Subject is a stage in which God is already a Subject (he becomes a Subject when, by means of contraction, he acquires reality), but not yet a *free* one. In this stage, after contracting being, God is submitted to the blind necessity of a constricted rotary motion, like an animal caught in the trap of its own making and destined to repeat endlessly the same meaningless motions. The problem is that God's Reason, his awareness of what goes on, in a sense comes too late, is one step behind this blind process, so that later, when he pronounces the Word and thereby attains actual freedom, he can in a sense only acknowledge, accept, what he "contracted" not even unwillingly but in the course of a blindly spontaneous process in which his free Will simply played no part.³⁴ In other words, the problem is that "one has to admit a moment of blindness, even of 'madness,' in the divine life," on account of which creation appears as "a process in which God was engaged at His own risk, if one may put it this way."³⁵ In the three consecutive drafts of *Weltalter*, Schelling proposes three different versions of this traumatic moment of "short circuit" between freedom and existence, that is, of the primordial contraction that disturbs the beatitude and peace of pure Freedom, or, in the terms of quantum physics, that breaks the original symmetry:

In the first draft, the primordial Freedom *qua* Will that wants nothing "contracts" being – that is, condenses itself into a contracted point of material density – of necessity, not through an act of free decision: the primordial contraction cannot not happen, since it derives from primordial Freedom in an absolutely immediate, "blind," nonreflected, unaccountable way. The first inner tension of the Absolute is here the tension between expansive freedom and the blind necessity of contraction.

free act: as soon as the primordial Freedom actualizes itself, as soon as it turns into an actual Will, it splits into two opposed Wills, so that the tension is here strictly internal to freedom; it appears as the tension between the will-to-contraction and the will-to-expansion.

The third draft already delineates the solution adopted by Schelling's late "positive philosophy." In it, Schelling avoids the problem of the passage of freedom to existence by conceiving the starting point of the entire process, the primordial Freedom, as a "synthetic principle," as the simultaneity of freedom and necessary existence. God is an Entity that exists necessarily; his existence is guaranteed in advance, and *for that very reason* the creation of the universe outside God is a contingent, truly free act, that is, an act that also could not have happened – God is not engaged in it, it is not his own being that is at stake in it. The shift, the displacement, with regard to the first two drafts is here enormous: from a God who is *implicated* in the process of creation, to whom this process is his own Way of the Cross, we pass to a God who creates the universe from a safe distance of "metalanguage."

In a somewhat risky interpretive gesture, one is tempted to assert that the three consecutive drafts of *Weltalter* provide a condensed mirror-reflection of the three main stages of Schelling's entire philosophical development:

Schelling₁ (his "philosophy of identity") is in the power (exponent) of Being; that is, in it, necessity encompasses freedom, and freedom can only reside in the "comprehended necessity," in our awareness of the eternal order of rational Necessity in which we participate. In short, Schelling is here a Spinozist for whom the notion of the Absolute involves the absolute contemporaneity, copresence, of its entire content; consequently, the Absolute can only be conceived in the mode of logical deduction that renders its eternal inner articulation – temporal succession is merely an illusion of our finite point of view.

In contrast to it, Schelling₂ (of "Philosophical Investigations" and *Weltalter*) is in the power (exponent) of Freedom, which is

with regard to the mode of the presentation of the Absolute, logical deduction has to give way to mythical *narrative*.³⁶

Finally, the notion of God in Schelling₃ unites freedom and necessary existence, but the price for it is the split of philosophy into "positive" and "negative": negative philosophy provides the a priori deduction of the notional necessity of *what* God and the universe are; however, this *What-ness* (*Was-Sein*) can not ever account for the fact *that* there are God and the universe. It is the task of positive philosophy to function as a kind of "transcendental empiricism" and to "test" the truth of rational constructions in actual life.

One is tempted to draw a comparison between, on the one hand, the passage from *Weltalter* to Schelling's late philosophy of mythology, with its dichotomy of positive and negative philosophy, and, on the other hand, within the Frankfurt school, the passage from Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectics of Enlightenment* to Habermas: in both cases, we have first a condensed great breakthrough that, however, ends in failure and is then followed by a kind of compromise formation, an immense system elaborated in great detail, yet somewhat flat, with the impetus of the earlier work lost. The late Schelling resolves the impasse of *Weltalter* by taking refuge in the "division of labor" between negative and positive philosophy (negative philosophy deduces the scheme of "potencies" of the Absolute in a purely rational way, whereas its positive counterpart merely "verifies" the truth of this a priori construction on the empirical historical content), the same as with Habermas, who resolves the impasse of *Dialectics of Enlightenment* by taking refuge in the "division of labor" between "interaction" and "work," symbolic communication and productive activity. In short, while *Weltalter* endeavors to narrate directly the history of the Absolute, with no guarantee of its final outcome in an a priori rational scheme, the historical narrative of the late philosophy of mythology merely exemplifies – provides with flesh and blood, as it were – the skeleton of the a priori scheme of divine potencies, as in a kind of unintended imitation of the worst kind of Hegelian rational deduction of empirical content.

that he is all too "rationalist." The ultimate irony of this homology between Schelling and Habermas, of course, is that Habermas, who (in his excellent article on Schelling in *Theorie und Praxis*) was the first to formulate clearly the "regressive" character of Schelling's late philosophy with regard to *Weltalter*, plays the same "regressive" role in the history of the Frankfurt school.

THE FORCED CHOICE OF SYMBOLIZATION

To recapitulate: the crux, the turning point, in the history of the Absolute is the unconscious act of *Ent-Scheidung*, the resolution that, by way of rejecting the vortex of drives, their "mad dance," into the darkness of the "eternal Past," establishes the universe of temporal "progression" dominated by *logos*-light-desire.³⁷ Contrary to the commonplace according to which Schelling outlined the consequences of the thorough historicization of the Absolute, Schelling's greatest achievement was to *confine* the domain of history, to trace a line of separation between history (the domain of the Word, *logos*) and the nonhistorical (the rotary motion of drives). Therein resides Schelling's relevance for today's debate on historicism: his notion of the primordial act of decision/differentiation (*Ent-Scheidung*) aims at the gesture that opens up the gap between the inertia of the prehistoric Real and the domain of historicity, of multiple and shifting narrativizations; this act is thus a quasi-transcendental unhistorical condition of possibility and, simultaneously, a condition of the impossibility of historicization. Every "historicization," every symbolization, has to "reenact" this gap, this passage from the Real to history. Apropos of Oedipus, for example, it is easy to play the game of historicization and to demonstrate how the Oedipal constellation is embedded in a specific patriarchal context, and so forth; it requires a far greater effort of thought to discern, in the very historical contingency of Oedipus, one of the reenactments of the gap that opens up the horizon of historicity.

What exactly, then, is the relationship between historicization and the Real as its inherent limit? Freud's distinction between "normal" repression (*Verdrängung*) and the primordial repression

sufficient for it to be pushed away from the domain of Consciousness/Preconscious – it must also be exposed to some attraction from the Unconscious, from the side of the already repressed. One should translate this opposition into topological terms: every part of the repressed content is “historicizable”; that is, it should not be stigmatized into the untouchable taboo, since it can be retranslated back into the system Cs/Pcs – everything *except the very form of the Unconscious*, except the empty *place itself* that collects the repressed content. This empty place is created by the primordial repression that relates to “normal” repression as a kind of transcendental, a priori frame to its empirical, a posteriori content. This gesture of “primordial repression,” of evacuating the place of the Thing, whose psychoanalytic name is *death drive*, cannot be historicized, since it is the nonhistorical condition of historicity itself. For that reason, *death drive* does not designate the positive content one should directly refer to in order to explain some event (“people kill each other in wars because of the death drive”), but the empty frame within which the game of historicization is taking place: it maintains open the minimal gap, the delay, between an event and the modes of its historicization, of its symbolic inscription; *death drive* stands for the fact that the passage from an event to its historicization is radically contingent, never grounded in the Real itself. (In a similar vein, Derrida speaks of the nondeconstructible conditions of deconstruction.)³⁸

How is the emergence of Word connected with the pulsating “rotation” in God, that is, with the interchange of expansion and contraction, of externalization and internalization? How, precisely, does the Word discharge the tension of the rotary motion, how does it mediate the antagonism between the contractive and the expansive force? The Word is a *contraction in the guise of its very opposite, of an expansion*; that is, in pronouncing a word, the subject contracts his being *outside* himself, he “coagulates” the core of his being in an external sign. In the (verbal) sign I *find myself outside myself*, as it were; I posit my unity outside myself, in a signifier that represents me: “It seems universal that every

elevated miracle of the formation of the word in the mouth belongs, which is a true creation of the full inside when it can no longer remain in itself.”³⁹ This notion of symbolization (of the pronunciation of Word) as the contraction of the subject outside itself, that is, in the form of its very opposite (of expansion), announces the structural/differential notion of the signifier as an element whose identity stands for its very opposite (for pure difference): we enter the symbolic order the moment a feature functions as the index of its opposite (the moment the political Leader’s hatred – of the “enemies” – is perceived by his subjects as the very form of appearance of his unlimited love for the People; the moment the apathetic indifference of a femme fatale is perceived by her male admirers as the token of her intense passion; etc.). For the very same reason, phallus is for Lacan the “pure” signifier: it stands for its own opposite. That is, it functions as the signifier of *castration*. The transition from the Real to the Symbolic, from the realm of presymbolic antagonism (of contraction and expansion) to the symbolic order in which the network of signifiers is correlated to the field of meaning, can take place only by means of a paradoxical “pure” signifier, a signifier without signified: in order for the field of meaning to emerge, that is, in order for the series of signifiers to signify *something* (to have a determinate meaning), *there must be a signifier (a “something”) that stands for “nothing,”* a signifying element whose very presence stands for the absence of meaning (or, rather, for absence *tout court*). This “nothing,” of course, is *the subject itself*, the subject qua \$ (the Lacanian matheme, designating the subject with all content removed), the empty set, the void that emerges as the result of the contraction in the form of expansion: when I contract myself outside myself, I deprive myself of my substantial content. The formation of the Word is thus the exact opposite of the primordial contraction/abjection by means of which, according to Schelling’s *Stuttgart Seminars* from the same time,⁴⁰ God expels – discharges, casts out, rejects out of himself – his real side, the vortex of drives, and thus constitutes himself in his Ideality, as a free subject: the primordial rejection is an act of supreme egoism, since in it, God as it were “gets rid of the shit in himself” in

of his being, whereas in the formation of the Word, he articulates outside himself, that is, he discloses, (sur)renders, this very ideal-spiritual essence of his being: In this precise sense, the formation of the Word is the supreme act and the paradigmatic case of *creation*: "creation" means that I reveal, hand over to the Other, the innermost essence of my being.

The problem, of course, is that this second contraction, this original act of creation, this "drawing together outside itself," is ultimately always unfitting, contingent – it "betrays" the subject, it represents him inadequately. Here, Schelling already announces the Lacanian problematic of a *vel*, of a forced choice that is constitutive of the emergence of the subject: the subject either persists in himself, in his purity, and thereby loses himself in empty expansion, or he gets out of himself, externalizes himself, by way of "contracting" or "putting on" a signifying feature, and thereby alienates himself, that is, is no longer what he is, the void of pure \$:

... the subject can never grasp itself as what it is, for precisely in attracting itself [*sich-Anziehen*] it *becomes* an other; this is the basic contradiction, we can say the misfortune in all being – for either it *leaves* itself, then it is as nothing, or it attracts-contracts itself, then it is an other and not identical with itself. No longer uninhibited by being as before, but that which has inhibited itself with being, it itself feels this being as alien [*zugezogenes*] and thus contingent.⁴¹

Therein resides Schelling's reformulation of the classical question "why is there something and not nothing": in the primordial *vel*, the subject has to decide between "nothing" (the unground/abyss of freedom that lacks all objective being, pure \$) and "something," but always irreducibly in the sense of "something extra, something additional, something foreign / put on, in a certain respect something contingent."⁴² The dilemma is therefore the following: "either it remains still (remains as it is, thus pure subject), then there is no life and it is itself as nothing, or it *wants* itself, then it becomes an other, something not the same as itself, *sui dissimile*. It admittedly wants itself as such, but precisely this

turns around the primordial act by means of which "nothing" becomes "something," and Schelling's entire philosophical revolution is contained in the assertion that this act that precedes and grounds every necessity is in itself *radically contingent* – for that very reason, it cannot be deduced, inferred, but only retroactively presupposed. This act involves a primordial, radical, and irreducible *alienation*, a distortion of the original balance, a constitutive "out-of-jointedness": "This whole construction therefore begins with the emergence of the first contingency – which is not identical with itself – it begins with a *dissonance*, and *must* begin this way."⁴⁴ In order to emphasize the nonspontaneous, "artificial," "corrupted" character of this act, Schelling plays on the multiple meanings of the German verb *Anziehen*: being attracted, drawn to something; contracting a disease; putting on some clothing; acting in a false, pretentious way. Apropos of this last feature, Schelling directly evokes what was later (by Jon Elster)⁴⁵ conceptualized as "states which are essentially by-products":

There are certain moral and other qualities that one only has precisely to the extent that one does not have them, as the German language splendidly expresses it to the extent to which one does not put on [*sich anzieht*] those qualities. E.g., true charm is only possible precisely if it does not know about itself, whereas a person who knows of his charm, who puts it on, immediately stops being charming, and if he conducts himself as being charming will instead become the opposite.⁴⁶

The implications of this are very radical and far-reaching: every positive feature, every "something" that we are, is ultimately "put on" – in short, *fake is original*. At this point, one is used to opposing Schelling to Hegel, that is, to the Hegelian logical necessity of the immanent self-deployment of the absolute Idea. Before yielding to this commonplace, however, it would be worth pausing to consider the fact that Hegel develops a homologous *vel* in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, apropos of the Beautiful Soul and the act. The choice that confronts the subject here is between inactivity and an act that is by definition contingent, branded with a merely

the reaction of the Substance thereby set in motion inexorably leads to the failure of the subject's enterprise. The true critical "materialist" supplement to Schelling is to be sought elsewhere: in Marx, who, in his dialectics of the commodity form, also starts from the need of the abstract universal Value to embody itself in a contingent use-value, to "put on" a use-value dress, to appear in the form of a use-value; however, as he is quick to add, *at least two* use-values (commodities) are needed if a Value is to express itself, so that the use-value of the first commodity gives body to the Value of the second commodity. And Lacan's definition of the signifier as that which "represents the subject for another signifier" ultimately amounts to the same assertion of an irreducible duality: if a subject is to be represented by a signifier, there must be a minimal chain of two signifiers, one of which represents the subject for the other.

The crucial point not to be missed here is that, insofar as we are dealing with *Subject*, the "contraction" in question is no longer the primordial contraction by means of which the original Freedom catches being and thereby gets caught in the rotary motion of contraction and expansion, but the contraction of the subject outside himself, in an external sign, which resolves the tension, the "inner dispute," of contraction and expansion. The paradox of the Word is therefore that its emergence resolves the tension of the presymbolic antagonism, but at a price: the Word, the contraction of the Self outside the Self, involves an irretrievable externalization-alienation. With the emergence of the Word, we pass from *antagonism* to the Hegelian *contradiction* between S and S_1 , between the subject and its inadequate symbolic representation. This "contingency" of the contraction in the Word points toward what, in the good old structuralist terms, is called "the arbitrariness of the signifier": Schelling asserts the irreducible gap between the subject and a signifier the subject has to "contract" if the subject is to acquire (symbolic) existence: the subject qua S is never adequately represented in a signifier. This "contradiction" between the subject and a (necessarily, constitutively inadequate) symbolic representation provides the context for

himself, that is, *pronounces a Word*. Prior to his or her symbolic externalization, the subject cannot be said to be "inexpressible" since the medium of expression itself is not yet given, or, to invoke Lacan's precise formulation, desire is *nonarticulable* precisely as always-already *articulated* in a signifying chain. In this precise sense, "subject is not substance": it has no substantial positive being "in itself"; that is, it is caught between "not yet" and "no longer." In other words, the subject never "is," it "will have been" – either the subject is *not yet* here, we still have a presubjective bliss, or it is *no longer* here, since there is only a trace of its absence . . .

In short, by means of the Word, the subject finally *finds* itself, comes to itself: it is no longer a mere obscure longing for itself, since, in the Word, the subject directly attains itself, posits itself as such. The price for it, however, is the irretrievable *loss* of the subject's self-identity: the verbal sign that stands for the subject, that is, in which the subject posits itself as self-identical, bears the mark of an irreducible dissonance; it never "fits" the subject. This paradoxical necessity on account of which the act of returning to oneself, of finding oneself, immediately, in its very actualization, assumes the form of its opposite, of the radical loss of one's self-identity, displays the structure of what Lacan calls "symbolic castration." This castration involved in the passage to the Word can also be formulated as the redoubling, the splitting, of an element into itself and its place in the structure. Apropos of the Word, Schelling refers to the Medieval logic in which *reduplicatio* designated the operation by means of which a term is no longer conceived *simpliciter* but is posited *as such*: *reduplicatio* points towards the minimal, constitutive gap that forever separates an element from its re-marking in the symbolic network. Hogrebe invokes here the difference between an element and its place (*Platz*) in an anonymous structure.⁴⁷ Because of this structure of castration, Spirit is supernatural or extranatural, although it grew out of nature: Nature has an ineradicable tendency to "speak itself out," it is caught in the search for a Speaker (*die Suche nach dem Sprecher*) whose Word would posit it as such; this Speaker, however, can only be an entity that is itself not natural, not part of nature, but Nature's Other. Or, to put it in a slightly different way

“find itself,” attain itself, *outside itself*, in a medium that is itself not natural. The moment Nature becomes *ein Aussprechliches* (something that can be spoken of in meaningful propositions), it ceases to be the *Aussprechendes* (that which is speaking):⁴⁸ the speaking agency is the Spirit qua \$, the substanceless void of non-Nature, the distance of Nature toward itself. In short, the fundamental paradox of symbolization – the paradox the term *symbolic castration* aims at recapturing – is that Nature can attain itself, its self-identity, only at the price of radical decentrement: it can only find itself in a medium outside itself. A father becomes father “as such,” the bearer of symbolic authority, only insofar as he assumes his “castration,” the difference between himself in the immediate reality of his being and the place in the symbolic structure that guarantees his authority: the father’s authority is radically “decentred” with regard to father qua flesh-and-blood person; that is, it is the anonymous structure of the symbolic Law that speaks through him.

Incidentally, the first philosopher to focus on the uncanny contingency in the very heart of subjectivity was none other than Schelling’s predecessor and (later) opponent, Fichte: the Fichtean subject is not the overblown Ego = Ego as the absolute Origin of all reality, but a finite subject thrown, caught, in a contingent social situation that forever eludes its mastery. Crucial here is the notion of *Anstoss*, of the primordial impulse that sets in motion the gradual self-limitation and self-determination of the initially void subject.⁴⁹ Furthermore, *Anstoss* is not merely a mechanical external impulse: it also points toward another subject who, in the abyss of its freedom, functions as the challenge (*Aufforderung*) compelling me to limit/specify my freedom, that is, to accomplish the passage from the abstract egotist freedom to concrete freedom within the rational ethical universe. Perhaps this intersubjective *Aufforderung* is not merely the secondary specification of the *Anstoss*, but its exemplary original case. It is important to bear in mind the two main meanings of *Anstoss* in German: check, obstacle, hindrance, something that *resists* the boundless expansion of our striving, *and* an impetus, stimulus,

activity, so that, by way of overcoming the self-positing obstacle, it asserts its creative power, like the games the proverbial perverted ascetic saint plays with himself by way of inventing ever new temptations and then, in successfully resisting them, confirming his strength. If the Kantian *Ding an sich* corresponds to the Freudian-Lacanian Thing, *Anstoss* is closer to *objet petit a*, to the primordial foreign body that “sticks in the throat” of the subject, to the object – cause of desire that *splits it up*: Fichte himself defines *Anstoss* as the nonassimilable foreign body that causes the subject’s division into the empty absolute subject and the finite determinate subject, limited by the non-I. *Anstoss* thus designates the moment of the “run-in,” the hazardous knock, the *encounter* of the Real in the midst of the ideality of the absolute I: there is no subject without *Anstoss*, without the collision with an element of irreducible facticity and contingency – “the I is supposed to encounter *within itself* something foreign.” The point is thus to acknowledge “the presence, within the I itself, of a realm of irreducible otherness, of absolute contingency and incomprehensibility. . . . Ultimately, not just Angelus Silesius’ rose, but every *Anstoss* whatsoever *ist ohne Warum*.”⁵⁰ In clear contrast to the Kantian noumenal *Ding* that affects our senses, *Anstoss* does not come from outside, it is *stricto sensu ex-timate*: a nonassimilable foreign body in the very kernel of the subject. As Fichte himself emphasizes, the paradox of *Anstoss* resides in the fact that it is simultaneously “purely subjective” *and* not produced by the activity of the I. If *Anstoss* were not “purely subjective,” if it were already the non-I, part of objectivity, we would fall back into “dogmatism,” that is, *Anstoss* would effectively amount to no more than a shadowy remainder of the Kantian *Ding an sich* and would thus bear witness to Fichte’s inconsequentiality (the commonplace reproach to Fichte); if *Anstoss* were simply subjective, it would present a case of the hollow playing of the subject with itself, and we would never reach the level of objective reality; that is, Fichte would be effectively a solipsist (another commonplace reproach to his philosophy). The crucial point is that *Anstoss* sets in motion the constitution of “reality”: at the beginning is the pure I with the nonassimilable foreign body in its heart, and the

the Real of the formless *Anstoss* and conferring on it the structure of objectivity.⁵¹

“THERE IS NO SPIRIT WITHOUT SPIRITS”

However, Schelling is far from simply providing a new version of the “sublation” of bodily reality in the spiritual medium of the Word; Schelling gives to this “sublation” an uncanny *materialist* twist. The point of his critique of pure spiritual idealism, of its lifeless “negative” nihilism, is that *there is no spirit without spirits-ghosts*, no “pure” spirituality without the obscene specter of “spiritualized matter.” In the dialogue *Clara*, from 1810, Schelling drove a wedge into the simple complementary mirror-relationship of Inside and Outside, between Spirit and Body, between the ideal and the real element that together form the living totality of the Organism, by way of calling attention to the double surplus that “sticks out.” On the one hand, there is the *spiritual element of corporeality*: the presence, in the matter itself, of a nonmaterial but physical element, of a subtle corpse, relatively independent of time and space, that provides the material base of our free will (animal magnetism, etc.); on the other hand, there is the *corporeal element of spirituality*: the materializations of the spirit in a kind of pseudostuff, in substanceless apparitions (ghosts, living dead). Schelling thus asserts the impossibility of a pure dual relationship between Spirit and body: if Spirit is to acquire its autonomy with regard to body, it has to rely on *another* body, the “undead” body made of ethereal stuff, which lacks proper substantial density and, when we approach it too closely and attempt to seize it directly, disintegrates like the body of a vampire when properly pierced by a wooden stake. There is no Spirit without “undead” spirits-ghosts: the “undead” spectral body always serves as the “material basis” for the immortality of the soul.⁵² Modern art provides perhaps the most pertinent case of this spectral materiality. When exemplary modernist artists speak about the Spiritual in painting (Kandinsky) or in music (Schoenberg), the “spiritual” dimension they evoke points toward the “spiritualization” (or, rather, “spectralization”) of Matter (color and shape, sound) as such, outside its reference to Meaning. Suffice it to recall the “mas-

van Gogh, or the water or grass in Munch: this uncanny “mas-siveness” pertains neither to the direct materiality of the color stains nor to the materiality of the depicted objects – it dwells in a kind of intermediate spectral domain of what Schelling called *geistige Koerperlichkeit*. From the Lacanian perspective, it is easy to identify this “spiritual corporeality” as materialized *jouissance*, “*jouissance* that turned into flesh.”⁵³ In music, we encounter the same “spiritual corporeality” in the Vienna school, in what Webern referred to as *Strukturklang*, the sound of the structure itself, in its opposition to mere *Klangstruktur*, the structure of the sound. The shift from *Klangstruktur* to *Strukturklang* is the shift from the sound that follows the (imposed) tonal structure to an unheard-of sound that is directly the “sound of the structure itself” in its spectral materiality, beyond the sound as the bearer of meaning. This is what “modern music” is really about: the suspension of tonality renders palpable the presence of sounds in the real of their spectral materiality.

There is yet another way to connect Schelling with the modernist break in art. Where does musical modernism proper begin? Perhaps the most reliable way to draw the line of separation is to stick to the surface: at a concert of classical music, the end of a movement is as a rule followed by a sudden outburst of coughing and clearing of throats. There is nothing “natural” in these sounds, they are not a giving way to a long-withheld expression of a bodily need (since, while the music goes on, one must remain silent): they rather bear witness to a kind of metaphysical *horror vacui*, to a compulsion to fill the unbearable silence that confronts the public the moment music is over. In short, these raw chaotic sounds of the public are a strange “prolongation of the music by other means.” And, at the most elementary level, one can say that, after a movement of a modernist work, there is no coughing and clearing of one’s throat – why? The premodernist piece ends up in a triumphant dissolution of the dissonant tension (exemplarily in the great Wagnerian finales – of *Tristan*, of *Parsifal*); what is properly unbearable and has to be filled by coughing is the silence that follows this “orgasm of forces,” as

ject alive is annihilated. Since, however, a modernist piece does not dissolve the dissonant tension, the silence that confronts us at its end is of an entirely different nature: it is no longer the "postcoital" silence that follows the quenched desire, but rather the silence that marks the very absence, or failure, of the proper dissolution.⁵⁴

How does this Schellingian subversion of idealism, his emphasis on the unsurpassable real ground of the universal ideal notion, affect the status of the Universal? It enables him to anticipate the Marxist critique of ideology. That is to say, Schelling was the first to articulate the notion of a "false universal," of a universal beneath which one should discern the umbilical chord that links it to a particular content. It is in this "unmasking" of the false universality (say, in discerning, beneath the universal "rights of Man," the rights of white males) that resides the elementary procedure of the critique of ideology. Schelling's notion of the State as the imposed, "mechanical," unity of society that simultaneously *dissimulates* and *supplements* for the loss of the "organic" social unity clearly announces the Marxist critique of the State as the "alienated" form of social unity. However, the conclusion to be drawn from this is not that every Universal is simply false, subordinated to a Particular: everything in a universal notion is derived from a particular content – *everything except the very empty screen, frame, blank of universality that as it were waits to be filled out with particular content*. In other words, what a critique of ideology has to perform is not a simple reduction of the Universal to a contingent particular content beneath it, but to render visible the gap that forever separates the Universal qua empty frame from the particular content that fills it out, that is, to assert the Universal as the "empty signifier," the battleground for the hegemonic struggle to occupy its void.⁵⁵ There is no \$, subject, without the empty signifier: there is a subject-effect the moment the individual is caught in the split between the empty Universal (S_1) and the series of positive features (S_2), that is, in the hegemonic fight for the content of the empty Master Signifier (*nation, black dignity, democracy, ecology* . . .). And one of the most elementary defini-

disavowal of its empty character. We are in ideology the moment we "naturalize" the link between Master Signifier and a set of positive features that define it as the result of a struggle. In this precise sense, the subject is a nonideological concept; that is, subject and subjectivization are to be opposed: we "subjectivize" ourselves when we recognize ourselves in a determinate content of the Master Signifier, in the latter's fullness, whereas the subject is the void correlative to the empty signifier.

The conclusion to be drawn from Schelling's subversion of idealism is thus a paradoxical reassertion of universality: we have access to the Universal, the dimension of the Universal emerges, *because* of our irreducible embeddedness in the context of our particular life-world. That is to say, one might think that, since we are caught in our particular culture and thus cannot ever grasp other cultures in their specific Otherness, every universal notion at our disposal is colored by the implicit assumptions of our predominant horizon of preunderstanding ("human rights" are the rights of a white middle-class male, etc.). What is wrong with this notion is the underlying, apparently self-evident assumption that, in order to communicate with another culture, we have to share some common ideas ("cultural universals") beyond that which divides us. The moment we concede this, we "regress" from the properly Hegelian notion of the dialectical antagonism itself as the aspect that keeps together a totality (the "totalizing" moment of a class society, for example, is not some set of commonly shared features that individuals possess beyond class divisions, but the class struggle itself) to the Habermasian notion of pragmatic-transcendental universals; that is, we lose the properly dialectical paradox according to which "contradiction" ("struggle") unifies, whereas shared "neutral" universals involve only indifferent coexistence. Or, to put it in another way, what makes "communication" between different cultures possible is the fact that the limit that prevents our full access to the Other is *ontological*, not merely epistemological. The epistemological status of this limit leads to a simple historicist relativism: on account of my biased horizon of understanding, the full context of the Other

limit as ontological, this means that the Other (say, another culture I am trying to understand) is already "in itself" not fully determined by its context but "open," "floating." To make this point somewhat clearer, let us imagine the elementary example of trying to understand a word or a phrase of some foreign language: we really understand it only when we perceive how our effort to determine exhaustively its meaning fails not because of the lack of our understanding but because the meaning of this word is incomplete already "in itself" (in the Other language). Every language, by definition, contains an aspect of openness to enigma, to what eludes its grasp, to the dimension in which "words fail." This minimal openness of the meaning of its words and propositions is what makes a language "alive." We effectively "understand" a foreign culture when we are able to identify with its point of failure: when we are able to discern not its hidden positive meaning, but rather its blind spot, the deadlock the proliferation of meaning endeavors to cover up. In other words, when we endeavor to understand the Other (another culture), we should not focus on its specificity (on the peculiarity of "their customs," etc.); we should rather endeavor to encircle that which eludes their grasp, the point at which the Other is in itself dislocated, not bound by its "specific context." The lesson of the well-known (though discredited) story about the origins of the term *kangaroo* still holds: the white explorers pointed at a kangaroo and asked the natives "What is this?" When the natives answered "kangaroo," the explorers thought this was their name for the animal; later, when they learned the native language, it became clear that the word *kangaroo* means simply "What do you want?"

The properly Hegelian paradox thus resides in the fact that, far from preventing "communication" between cultures, this *redoubling* of the limit effectively renders it possible. "The enigmas of the ancient Egyptians were also enigmas for the Egyptians themselves," as Hegel put it: I understand the Other when I become aware of how the very problem that was bothering me (the nature of the Other's secret) is already bothering the Other itself. The dimension of the Universal thus emerges when the two lacks –

tion of possibility: the dimension of the Universal emerges precisely and only insofar as the Other is not accessible to us in its specificity; or, to put it in Lacanian terms: there is no universality without an *empty signifier*. What we and the inaccessible Other share is the empty signifier that stands for that X which eludes both positions. Apropos of "human rights," for example, it is easy to play the game of historicist reductionism and to prove how the universality of "human rights" is never neutral, since its specific content is always overdetermined by a particular historical constellation. The problem, however, is that "human rights" always function also as an "empty signifier": one can never fully enumerate them; that is, it is part of the very notion of human rights that they are never "complete," that there are always new (positive) rights to be added to the list – and the awareness of this "openness" is what enables us and individuals belonging to another culture to engage in communication and, perhaps, arrive at a common point by acknowledging the limitation of one's own position. In Kierkegaardian terms, one has to distinguish the already established Universal from the "Universal-in-becoming": the Universal in its established "being" is mute universality, the positive features a multitude of particular situations or objects have in common, whereas the Universal-in-becoming is the breach, the "opening," which prevents me from fully identifying with my own particular situation, that is, which compels me to take into account the way I am always "out of joint," displaced with regard to the particular context of my life-world.⁵⁶

Another aspect of this same paradox concerns the notion of identification.⁵⁷ When a (collective or individual) subject "identifies" with an object in the strict Freudian sense of the term, this in no way involves a pacifying "reconciliation" with the object, a passive "accommodation" of the subject to the object with which it identifies; "identification" is, on the contrary, a violent act that splits the object from within, disturbing its balance, wresting it from its context and privileging the aspect of the object that starts to function, via the act of identification, as the placeholder of the Lack/subject (in order to designate this aspect, Lacan uses the

partial feature, thereby reducing the person of the hero to a kind of appendix to this feature (Lacan evokes ironically the small moustache as Hitler's *trait unaire*). At the level of political order, this brings us to the crucial distinction between order and its "ordering" (elaborated by Laclau). Suffice it to recall the recent confused situation in post-Communist Russia, where the main "spontaneous" social demand is a demand for law and order: the winner will be the political party perceived as being able, *irrespective of its concrete political program*, to establish law and order; those opposing *this* party with its concrete program will be perceived as opposing the reestablishment of law and order *as such*. Or, to take another example from the West, the African-American "Million Men March" in Washington on October 16, 1995, organized by Louis Farrakhan's antifeminist and fundamentalist Nation of Islam: Farrakhan succeeded in cornering the more liberal-minded African-Americans. They had to participate since, in that concrete situation, any opposition to Farrakhan was equivalent to the opposition to African-American dignity and self-respect *as such*; the desperate attempts to justify one's participation by emphasizing the distinction between the appalling "messenger" (Farrakhan) and the acceptable "message" was a mere fig leaf concealing the liberals' defeat. Therein, in this inevitable, although always temporary and contingent, short circuit between the (universal) ordering function – in this case, the motif of African-American dignity and self-respect – and the (particular) order – Nation of Islam's fundamentalism – resides the "violence" of identification. What is at stake in the struggle for identification between different positions (liberal, fundamentalist, socialist) is which of these positions will succeed in exerting ideological hegemony, in functioning as the stand-in for (placeholder of) the universal dimension, so that identification with this particular position will "automatically" signify identification with the universality. The multitude of positions (liberal, fundamentalist, socialist) never meets in a neutral space; that is, one can never simply say that African-American liberals, religious fundamentalists, socialists, and so on, each render their own version of (or con-

position to the African-American cause. In this precise sense, political identification always involves the act of violent splitting, of disturbing the balance by way of privileging one particular position as the immediate stand-in for the universal dimension.

As Ernesto Laclau would have put it, the Universal is simultaneously *necessary* (unavoidable) and *impossible*; necessary, since (as we know at least from Hegel) the symbolic medium as such is universal, and impossible, since the positive content of the Universal is never purely neutral but is always (mis)appropriated, elevated, from some particular content that "hegemonizes" the Universal. Ecology, for example, is never simply a neutral genus of its species – "deep," conservative, feminist, socialist, statist . . . ecology – since, in every concrete situation, ecology "as such" *means* (is contaminated by) some particular content. And it is already here, at this general level, that we encounter the subject: the subject is that X which accomplishes the act of "suture," of connecting the Universal to a particular content, which violently "destabilizes," "throws out of balance," the "objective" order of things. The Lacanian name for such an entity that is simultaneously necessary *and* impossible is, of course, the Real; this same paradox of the Real is at work also in "free associations" within the psychoanalytic cure (we never really have them, one never can fully suspend the pressure of inhibitions and "let oneself go"; at the same time, *whatever one says* on the analytic couch is a free association, even if it was carefully planned in advance or is a long line of strict logical reasoning) and in *jouissance*: *jouissance* eludes us, it is beyond our reach, its full confrontation is lethal; at the same time, however, one can never get rid of it, its remainder sticks to whatever we do. Along the same lines, the Kantian ethical injunction also has the status of a Real: it is impossible fully to realize one's ethical duty, yet it is also impossible to avoid the pressure of the call of duty.⁵⁸

This same gap between the ordering principle and the series of features that define a concrete-positive order – in Lacanian terms, between S_1 (the Master Signifier) and S_2 (the chain of knowledge) – enables us to clarify the way the phallic signifier

and the person embodying it, functioning as its stand-in. Hamlet is unable to act (to kill Claudius) as long as he identifies Claudius directly with the Name of the Father, the phallic signifier, the agency of symbolic authority; it is only after he distinguishes between the two and becomes aware that Claudius is a mere replaceable stand-in, a substitute, for the Phallus that he is able to finish Claudius off without involving the collapse of his entire universe. Or, again, in Laclau's terms of the difference between ordering and order: as long as the ordering principle, the possibility of order, is stuck with the given positive order, the subject's capacity to act is hindered, since any act is suicidal; that is, it entails the collapse of order as such; the subject can act the moment he is able to resist the existing positive order *on behalf of the Order as such*, with the purpose of establishing a "better," "true" order. Or, at the level of the Oedipal complex: the subject overcomes the adolescent crisis when he resists his father in the name of the (paternal) Law itself. The space for the act is thus opened up by the gap between ordering and order.

In order to illustrate what this inversion of the standard Idealist notion of the Universal effectively amounts to, a (perhaps unexpected) reference to two recent films would be of some help. Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* and David Cronenberg's *M. Butterfly* tell the story of a man passionately in love with a woman who turns out to be another man dressed up as a woman. The moment of shock that, of course, occurs when the man finally discovers his beloved's true sexual identity can be read in two different ways. According to the first reading, *The Crying Game* and *M. Butterfly* offer a tragicomic confused bundle of male fantasies about women, not a true relationship to a woman: these two films simultaneously mask and point toward the fact that what we are dealing with is a case of homosexual love for the transvestite – they are simply dishonest and refuse to acknowledge this obvious fact. Along these lines, one could propose a reading of *The Crying Game* according to which the key to the film is the hero's (Fergus's) intense, but repressed homosexual attraction to Jody, the black English soldier imprisoned by the IRA; the "implausible" resolution of this tension (Fergus doesn't kill Jody, he dies by way of accidentally colliding with an oncom-

ing English military vehicle) has a dreamlike quality of a compromise-formation whereby the subject's wish (to get rid of the traumatic object of desire) is realized through an accident, that is, without the subject's being responsible for it.⁶⁰ After getting rid of the true, but unacceptable, object of his desire, Fergus follows the classic neurotic scenario and transfers his affection to an (apparently) acceptable person close to this object (wife, sister, or, in this case, girlfriend, the beautiful black Dil). So, when Fergus discovers that Dil is actually a man, he as it were gets from the other the truth of his (homosexual) desire: the substitute object reveals itself too close to the true object.⁶¹ There is, however, another, far more disturbing reading: what if this displacement from the true (homosexual) object to an idealized Lady is not merely a case of false heterosexual love that disguises a true homosexual attachment, but the truth, the underlying libidinal economy, of a "straight" heterosexual attachment? From this perspective, the true enigma of *The Crying Game* is: how can a hopeless love between the hero and his partner, a man dressed up as a woman, realize the notion of heterosexual love far more "authentically" than a "normal" relationship to a woman? In this way, the ending of *The Crying Game* could be read as adding an unexpected turn of the screw to the famous punchline that ends *Some Like It Hot*, the love-sick millionaire answering the last, desperate argument of Daphne (Jack Lemmon) against their marriage ("But I'm a man, not a woman!") with the stoic and forgiving "Well, nobody's perfect!"⁶² In *The Crying Game*, the fact that the partner is a man effectively doesn't disturb the relationship. That is to say, the first reading remains within the abstract opposition of the heterosexual norm and homosexuality qua its "transgressive" inversion, whereas the second reading reveals the secret of the norm itself: it renders visible the uncanny fact that, in the male fantasy that supports the "normal" heterosexual relationship, man's partner, the Woman about whom he is dreaming, is another man dressed up as a woman, and what – unconsciously, at least – turns him on is the very awareness of this fact. In other words, in the "heterosexual" male fantasmatic space, there are only male subjects: sexual difference amounts to a mere masquerade. It is only here that we accomplish the "inversion of inversion": when

we acknowledge the “perverted” fantasmatic support of the (heterosexual) norm itself.

This paradoxical fantasmatic status of “straight” sex is grounded in Lacan’s displacement of the standard classification of sexuality, of its division into “straight” heterosexuality and homosexuality that is then further subdivided into gay and lesbian sexuality. Lacan divides sexuality into the only true *heterosexuality*, that is, lesbian sex, the only one in which the otherness of our partner is maintained, in which we truly relate to the Other Sex, and homosexuality, which is then further subdivided into gay sexuality and “straight” heterosexuality. In both cases, the partner is reduced to the “same,” since, as we have just seen, the hidden fantasm that supports straight sex is that our feminine partner is a man dressed up as a woman. Or, to put it even more pointedly: the only “pure” sexual difference is the difference between (gay) homosexuality and (lesbian) heterosexuality, whereas “straight” heterosexuality, far from being the “norm,” functions as an uncanny surplus, as a disturbing stain, the outcome of the confusion of a faked otherness in which the same-sexed partner, a man, is masked as a woman. In short, it is “straight” sex that is the original “deviation.”

If, then, a woman is perceived by her partner in the “straight” sexual relation as a man masked as woman, does this not prove that the notion of femininity as masquerade is fundamentally a male fantasy according to which there is only one sex, male – if we scratch the surface of the mask, we discover a man beneath a woman, like the animal (cat, fox, bear) in cartoons or fairy tales who can take off its fur and disclose its human skin (see also the proverbial ideological statement that, beneath their yellow skin, all Vietnamese men are really Americans)? The answer is no: what the male fantasy of a woman as masked man conceals is not the true feminine substance but the fact that there is *nothing* beneath the (feminine) mask – the fantasy of a male subject beneath the feminine mask is a desperate endeavor to avoid the “nothingness” beneath the mask that “is” the subject.

“phenomenalization,” this crux of Schelling’s philosophical endeavor: not only the emergence of the Word, but also the emergence of the fantasmatic space of pure semblance that cannot be reduced to bodily reality. Let’s resort to another literary example. In J. G. Ballard’s short story “The Gioconda of the Twilight Noon,” the hero, recovering from an eye disease, spends his days in a deck chair close to the seashore, listening to the sounds of the gulls, immobilized due to the bandage covering his eyes. The sounds of the gulls repeatedly evoke in him a strange magic scene in the course of which he climbs the stairs of a mysterious sea-cave, at the top of which a half-veiled woman, the ultimate incestuous object of desire, is awaiting him (the last line of the story characterizes the hero as “an eager, unrepentant Oedipus”); however, he always awakens just before the woman’s identity is revealed. When, finally, the doctor proclaims him cured and takes off his bandage, the scene no longer appears to him; in despair, he makes a radical choice, steps outside at noon and looks straight at the sun until he goes blind, hoping that, in this way, he will be able to view the scene in its entirety. This story stages the choice between reality and the fantasmatic real accessible only to a blinded subject. The gap between the two is that of anamorphosis: from the standpoint of reality, the real is nothing but a formless stain, whereas the view of the fantasmatic real blurs the contours of “reality.”

The *dispositif* of Ballard’s story is none other than that of Plato’s myth of the cave from his *Republic* (which, incidentally, is also a cinematographic *dispositif avant la lettre*). How are we to modify this basic idealist *dispositif* in order to get a *materialist* *dispositif*? According to materialism, the status of true reality (of the sun outside the cave) beyond the bodily reality of the cave is that of an anamorphic fantasy, of something that can never be perceived directly, but only through its distorted reflection on the empty wall of the cave that serves as its “screen.” The true line of separation thus runs within the cave itself, between the material reality the cavemen see around themselves, and the elusive “anamorphic” appearance of the “suprasensible,” “incorporeal” event

ance. Or, to put it in yet another way: if the main problem of idealism is how we are to pass from the ever-changing “false” material phenomenal reality to the true reality of Ideas (from the cave in which we can perceive only shadows to the daylight in which we can catch a glimpse of sun), the problem of materialism from Lucretius through Schelling’s *Weltalter* and the Marxist notion of commodity fetishism to Deleuze’s “logic of sense” is the exact opposite, namely *the genesis of the semblance itself*: how does the reality of bodies generate out of itself the fantasmatic surface, the “incorporeal” sense event?

The minimal dispositif of the relationship between signifier, reality, and the fantasmatic Real is provided by Saki’s famous short story “Window”: a guest arrives at a country house and looks through the spacious French window at the field behind the house; the daughter of the family, alone at home and thus the only one to receive him, tells him that she now lives alone in the house – all other members of the family died recently in an accident. Soon afterward, when the guest looks through the window again, he sees the members of the family approaching slowly across the field, returning from the hunt; convinced that what he sees are ghosts of the deceased, he runs away in horror. (The daughter, of course, is a clever pathological liar; for her family, she quickly concocts another story to explain why the guest left the house in a panic.) So, a few words providing the proper symbolic context suffice to transform the window into a fantasy frame and to transubstantiate miraculously the muddy tenants into frightful apparitions. At a more elaborate level, one finds the same dispositif in one of the better recent science fiction films, Roland Emmerich’s *Stargate*, the story of a young scientist who solves the enigma of a gigantic ring made of unknown metal, discovered in Egypt in the 1920s: after one enters the appropriate seven symbols, the ring starts to function as a “stargate” – by stepping through the hole in its middle, one enters another, alternative universe, that is, a different time-space dimension. What makes the ring operative is the identification of the missing seventh symbol: we are thus dealing with symbolic efficiency, not

capacity of the fantasmatic frame, as in Saki’s “Window,” where the symbolic intervention transubstantiates the ordinary window frame into a screen of fantasmatic apparitions.⁶³ What is crucial here is the topological structure of this dispositif: not only the hole in reality that functions as the opening to the Other Scene of fantasy, but also a kind of topological twist, turning-into-itself, of reality, best exemplified by the theatrical stage: if we look at it from a spectator’s seat, we are engrossed in the fantasmatic space, whereas if we go backstage, we are immediately struck by the poverty of the mechanism responsible for the stage illusion – the fantasmatic space dissipates, “there is nothing to see” . . .

In science fiction literature and cinema, a mirror, a window or a door often serves as the passage into the other, fantasmatic dimension: one of the standard scenes in science fiction is that of a subject who opens up a door and, instead of the expected reality beyond its threshold, encounters something wholly unexpected (a ghastly real) – the secret is often “the secret beyond the door.” In another version of the same procedure, the subject looks into the mirror and sees in it “something else,” not the reflection of everyday reality this side of the mirror. (In one of the stories of the English omnibus *Dead of the Night* from 1945, the hero casts a glance into the mirror in his common modern bedroom – what he sees there is another dark, “Gothic” room with antiquated furniture and a burning fireplace.) In the history of cinema, perhaps the greatest master of this art of elevating an everyday door or window into the fantasmatic place of passage was Orson Welles; in his version of Kafka’s *The Trial*, for example, he systematically exploits the fantasmating potential of the simple act of opening a door: “Always they open onto bewilderingly different places. . . . The ‘next room’ in *The Trial* always suggests a repressed psychic horror.”⁶⁴ When the ordinary woman doing her laundry in a decayed room opens up the small doors at the bottom of the room and ushers K. through it, K. all of a sudden finds himself in a large room in which something like a political rally is going on, with hundreds of people packed in the rafters and the air thick with smoke. The adventure that befalls K. in his office building stands in a clear contrast to this sudden passage from a small private

ridor in the large and modern office building, K. opens the door to a tiny storage closet, where he finds a man in leather whipping two corrupt policemen against whom he earlier laid a complaint: "The huge corporate workroom has given way to a claustrophobic torture chamber, an ugly little space lit with a naked bulb and filled with cringing figures."⁶⁵ This scene renders perfectly the twisted logic of the superego: it culpabilizes K. by merely realizing, in an excessively literal way, his own complaint against the policemen – in the guise of the obscene, sadomasochistic sexualized torture, K. receives the truth of his own demand to the Other of the Law.

And is not this *dispositif* – the frame through which one can glimpse the Other Scene – the elementary *dispositif* of fantasmatic space from prehistoric Lascaux paintings to computer-generated Virtual Reality? Is not the *interface* of a computer the last materialization of this frame? What defines the properly "human dimension" is the presence of a screen, a frame, through which we communicate with the "suprasensible" virtual universe to be found nowhere in reality: it was already Lacan who pointed out that the proper place of Plato's Ideas is the surface of pure appearance. This hole derails the balance of our embeddedness in the natural environs and throws us into the state of being "out of joint" described by Schelling: no longer "at home" in the material world, striving for the Other Scene that, however, remains forever "virtual," a promise of itself, a fleeting anamorphic glimmer accessible only to a side view. The point is not only that man is a *zoon techniko*, interposing artificial technological environs, his "second nature," between himself and his raw natural environs; it is rather that the status of this "second nature" is irreducibly virtual. To go back to the example of interface: "virtual" is the space we see on the screen of the interface, this universe of signs and splendid images through which we can freely surf, the universe projected onto the screen and creating on it a false impression of "depth." The moment we cross its threshold and take a look at what lies "effectively" behind the screen, we encounter nothing but senseless digital machinery. This fantasmatic scene and the symbolic order are strictly correlative: there is no symbolic order

pseudomaterial, "virtual," Other Scene where the fantasmatic apparitions can emerge, or, as Schelling put it, there is no Spirit without Spirits, no pure spiritual universe of Ideas without the obscene, ethereal, fantasmatic corporeality of "spirits" (undead, ghosts, vampires . . .). Therein, in this assertion of the unavoidable pseudomaterial fantasmatic support of Ideas, resides the crucial insight of true ("dialectical") materialism.

What is a fantasy screen, an "interface?" Sometimes we find it even in nature, as in the case of Cerknica Lake in Slovenia: this intermittent lake (during its seasonal eruption, water throws into the air fishes, etc.) was experienced as a kind of magic screen, a miracle of something emerging out of a void. As early as the seventeenth century, this phenomenon intrigued natural scientists. A Slovene author, Janez Valvasor, became a member of the English Royal Academy for providing an explanation of this mystery (an intricate network of underground channels with different pressures). Perhaps this is the most elementary definition of a *mechanism*: a machine that produces an *effect* in the precise sense of "magical" effect of sense, of an event that involves a gap between itself and the raw bodily materiality – mechanism is that which accounts for the emergence of an "illusion." The crucial point here is that the insight into the mechanism does *not* destroy the illusion, the "effect"; it even strengthens it insofar as it renders palpable the gap between the bodily causes and their surface effect (suffice it to recall the recent series of "The making of . . ." films that accompany the big-budget productions – *Terminator 2*, *Indiana Jones*, etc.). The same goes more and more for political-campaign ads and publicity in general: first the stress was on the product (or candidate) itself, then it moved to the effect-image, while now it is shifting more and more to the making of the image (the strategy of making an ad is itself advertized, etc.). The paradox is that – in a kind of reversal of the old cliché according to which Western ideology dissimulates the production process at the expense of the final product – the production process, far from being the secret locus of the prohibited, of what cannot be shown, of what is concealed by the fetish, serves as the fetish that fascinates with its presence.⁶⁶

before the fashion of Virtual Reality, elaborated the status of virtuality apropos of the mystery of *event*. From the prehistoric paintings on the walls of the Lascaux caves to virtual reality, we confront the same enigma: how is it possible for us to suspend reality and become engrossed in the virtual space of the fantasmatic screen? How can the “incorporeal” event emerge out of the mixture of bodies, of bodily causes?⁶⁷ We seem to know everything about the social and artistic background of film noir: the traumatic impact of World War II on the established gender roles, the influence of German expressionism, etc., etc. – but all this is clearly not sufficient to account for the emergence of the noir universe with its unique flavor of all-permeating corruption embodied in the figure of the femme fatale. It is the same with courtly love: one can play indefinitely the historicist game of sources and influences: the hidden reference to Arab esoteric traditions; the incestuous triangle of the knight, his Lady, and the paternal figure of her husband; the difficult situation of the dispossessed knight in disintegrating feudalism; etc., etc. There is, however, an insurmountable gap, a “nothing,” that separates forever this mixture of material causes from the event of the miraculous emergence of the Lady. This Deleuzian claim that the sense event cannot be reduced to the mixture of bodily causes also allows us to locate properly the Foucauldian project of “archaeology”: what Foucault aims at is not the reduction of an event to the network of its causes (no matter how heterogeneous and contingent they are), but the rules of the emergence and disappearance of events, rules whose status is totally different from the laws that regulate the mixture of bodily causes and effects.

The key for the status of Virtual Reality is provided by the difference between imitation and simulation:⁶⁸ Virtual Reality doesn't *imitate* reality, it *simulates* it by way of generating its semblance. In other words, imitation imitates a preexisting real-life model, whereas simulation generates the semblance of a nonexisting reality – it simulates something that doesn't exist. Let us take the most elementary case of virtuality in a computer, so-called virtual memory: a computer can simulate far greater mem-

larger than it is. And does the same not hold for every symbolic arrangement, up to the financial system that simulates a far larger extent of coverage than it is effectively able to provide? The entire system of deposits and the like works on the presupposition that anyone can, at any moment, withdraw his or her money from the bank – a presupposition that, although it can never be realized, nonetheless renders possible the very “real,” “material” functioning of the financial system.

The consequences of this difference between imitation and simulation are more radical than may appear. In contrast to imitation, which sustains belief in preexisting “organic” reality, simulation retroactively “denaturalizes” reality itself by way of disclosing the mechanism responsible for its generation.⁶⁹ In other words, the “ontological wager” of simulation is that there is no ultimate difference between nature and its artificial reproduction. There is a more elementary level of the Real with reference to which both simulated screen-reality and “real” reality are generated effects, the Real of pure computation: behind the event viewed through interface (the simulated effect of reality) there is pure subjectless (“acephalous”) computation, a series of 1 and 0, of + and –. In *Seminar II*,⁷⁰ where Lacan develops for the first time this notion of the series of + and –, he reduces it precipitously to the order of the signifier; for that reason, one should reread these passages from the perspective of the opposition between signifier and letter (or writing) established in *Seminar XX*:⁷¹ subjectless digital computation is neither the differential symbolic order (the symbolic realm of meaning is part of the pseudoreality manipulated on the screen) nor reality outside the screen of the interface (in bodily reality behind the screen, there are only chips, electric current, etc.). The wager of Virtual Reality is that the universe of meaning, of narrativization, is not the ultimate reference, the unsurpassable horizon, since it relies on pure computation. Therein resides the gap that separates forever Lacan from postmodernist deconstructionism: the latter conceives science as one of the possible local narrativizations, whereas for Lacan, contemporary science enables us to gain access to the Real of pure computation that underlies the play of multiple narrativizations. This is the

subjectless computation that nonetheless regulates every “reality,” material and/or imaginary. One can see, now, in what precise sense the status of Virtuality is ambiguous: this term refers simultaneously and in an irreducible way to the virtual status of the fantasmatic “reality” we perceive on the screen of the interface *and* to the pure computation that cannot be reduced to its materialization in the electric current running through computer chips.

Prior to Schelling, the philosopher who provided the best conceptual apparatus to account for Virtual Reality was Malebranche, with his “occasionalism.” Malebranche, a disciple of Descartes, drops Descartes’s ridiculous reference to the pineal gland in order to explain the coordination between the material and the spiritual substance, that is, body and soul; how, then, are we to explain their coordination, if there is no contact between the two, no point at which a soul can act causally on a body or vice versa? Since the two causal networks (that of ideas in my mind and that of bodily interconnections) are totally independent, the only solution is that a third, true Substance (God) continuously coordinates and mediates between the two, sustaining the semblance of continuity: when I think about raising my hand and my hand rises, my thought causes the raising of my hand not directly but only “occasionally” – upon noticing my thought directed at raising my hand, God sets in motion the other, material, causal chain that leads to my hand effectively being raised. If we replace “God” with the big Other, the symbolic order, we can see the closeness of occasionalism to Lacan’s position: as Lacan put it in his polemics against Aristotle in “Television,”⁷² the relationship between soul and body is never direct, since the big Other always interposes itself between the two. Occasionalism is thus essentially a name for the “arbitrariness of the signifier,” for the gap that separates the network of ideas from the network of bodily (real) causality, for the fact that it is the big Other that accounts for the coordination of the two networks, so that, when my body bites an apple, my soul experiences a pleasurable sensation. This same gap is targeted by the ancient Aztec priest who

dination between the two series, the bodily necessity and the concatenation of symbolic events. “Irrational” as the Aztec priest’s sacrificing may appear, its underlying premise is far more insightful than our commonplace intuition according to which the coordination between body and soul is direct, that is, it is “natural” for me to have a pleasurable sensation when I bite an apple since this sensation is caused directly by the apple. What gets lost is the intermediary role of the big Other in guaranteeing the coordination between reality and our mental experience of it. And is it not the same with our immersion into Virtual Reality? When I raise my hand in order to push an object in the virtual space, this object effectively moves – my illusion, of course, is that it was the movement of my hand that directly caused the dislocation of the object; that is, in my immersion, I overlook the intricate mechanism of computerized coordination, homologous to the role of God guaranteeing the coordination between the two series in occasionalism.⁷³

For that reason, it is crucial to maintain open the radical ambiguity of how cyberspace will affect our lives: this does not depend on technology as such but on the mode of its social inscription. Immersion into cyberspace can intensify our bodily experience (new sensuality, new body with more organs, new sexes . . .), but it also opens up the possibility for the one who manipulates the machinery that runs the cyberspace literally to *steal* our own (virtual) body, depriving us of the control over it, so that one no longer relates to one’s body as to “one’s own.” What one encounters here is the constitutive ambiguity of the notion of mediatization:⁷⁴ originally this notion designated the gesture by means of which a subject was stripped of its direct, immediate right to make decisions; the great master of political mediatization was Napoleon, who left to the conquered monarchs the appearance of power, while they were effectively no longer in a position to exercise it. At a more general level, one could say that such a “mediatization” of the monarch defines constitutional monarchy: in it, the monarch is reduced to the point of a purely formal symbolic gesture of “dotting the i’s,” of signing and thus conferring the performative force on the edicts whose content is determined by

also not hold for today's progressive computerization of our everyday lives, in the course of which the subject is also more and more "mediatized," imperceptibly stripped of power, under the false guise of its increase? When our body is mediatized (caught in the network of electronic media), it is simultaneously exposed to the threat of a radical "proletarianization": the subject is potentially reduced to the pure \$, since even my own personal experience can be stolen, manipulated, regulated by the machinelike Other. One can see, again, how the prospect of radical virtualization bestows on the computer the position that is strictly homologous to that of God in Malebrancheian occasionalism: since the computer coordinates the relationship between my mind and (what I experience as) the movement of my limbs (in virtual reality), one can easily imagine a computer that runs amok and starts to act like an Evil God, disturbing the coordination between my mind and my bodily self-experience – when the signal of my mind to raise my hand is suspended or even counteracted in (virtual) reality, the most fundamental experience of the body as "mine" is undermined. It thus seems that cyberspace effectively realizes the paranoid fantasy elaborated by Schreber, the German judge whose memoirs were analyzed by Freud:⁷⁵ the "wired universe" is psychotic insofar as it seems to materialize Schreber's hallucination of the divine rays through which God directly controls the human mind. In other words, does the externalization of the big Other in the computer not account for the inherent paranoid dimension of the wired universe? Or, to put it in a yet another way: the commonplace is that, in cyberspace, the ability to download consciousness into a computer finally frees people from their bodies – *but it also frees the machines from "their" people* . . .

With reference to the mirror relationship between the dispersed "me" and my mirror image, this means that, in the wired universe of Virtual Reality, my mirror image is externalized in the machine, in the guise of a stand-in that replaces me in cyberspace, so that the body that is "mine" in "real life" is more and more reduced to an excremental remainder. The crucial point is that to persist in the utter ambiguity, yes, there is an

body and float freely in the cyberspace; since, however, our bodily self-experience itself is always-already "virtual," symbolically mediated, this body to which we are forced to return is not the constituted body of the full self-experience, of "true reality," but the formless remainder, the horror of the Real.

WHAT IS A MASTER?

The conclusion to be drawn is that, notwithstanding all the talk about "the end of the Cartesian paradigm," we continue to dwell within these conceptual coordinates. According to Fredric Jameson,⁷⁶ one of the antinomies of postmodernity is the antinomy of constructionism and essentialism: on the one hand, the vertiginous progression of universal "virtualization," the notion, more and more impending, that everything is (socially, symbolically, technically . . .) "constructed," contingent, lacking any guarantee in a preexisting ground; on the other hand, the desperate search for a firm foundation whose foremost expressions are not different religious or ethnic "fundamentalisms" but rather the return to Nature in the contemporary ecological stance. Within the domain of the postmodern New Age anti-Cartesianism, this antinomy assumes the shape of the tension between so-called Deep Ecology and New Age technospiritualism: the first advocates a return to the spontaneous experience of nature by way of breaking with the attitude of technological domination, whereas the second sets its hopes on a spiritual reversal brought about by the very opposite, the complete technological reproduction of reality (the notion that, in some not too distant future, by way of their full immersion into Virtual Reality, human subjects will be able to weigh the anchor that attaches them to their bodies and to change into ghostlike entities floating freely from one virtual body to another).

It is thus easy to discern the crux of the attraction exerted by the ecological stance: it presents itself as the only credible answer to the *hubris* of the modern subject, to the permanent instability built into capitalist logic. That is to say, *the* problem of today's ethics is how to install a Limit in our universe of postmodern relativism in which no agency possesses the unconditional au-

emerges here as the only serious contender against postmodern relativism: it offers *nature itself*, the fragile balance of the Earth's ecosystem, as the point of reference providing the proper Measure, the unsurpassable Limit, for our acts – *this gesture of procuring an "objective" justification for the Limit is ideology at its purest*. Against the deep-ecological reassertion of the Limit, one should therefore vindicate Schelling's seemingly "pessimist," "reactionary," insight that the universe as such is "out of joint," that a radical dislocation is its positive ontological condition.⁷⁷ Or, with reference to the Schellingian antagonism of contraction and expansion: is Virtual Reality not the extreme form of *expansion*, of the loss of our anchorage in the contracted physical body? And is ecology not a no less extreme *contractive* reaction to this loss? We can return now to the opposition between Deep Ecology and New Age technospiritualism: the fantasy of the reestablished natural balance with humanity relegated to its subordinated part and the fantasy of the evaporation of bodily inertia in comprehensive virtualization are two opposed strategies to disavow the *splitting* between what we call "reality" and the void of the Real filled by a fantasmatic content, that is, the elusive, intangible gap that sustains "reality."

Insofar as the impact of Virtual Reality is rooted in the dynamics of capitalism, it is no wonder that Marx's analysis of capitalism, his emphasis on the necessary codependence between lack and excess, remains pertinent for our approach to Virtual Reality. As was pointed out already by Hegel in his theory of civil society, the paradox of modern poverty is that the lack of wealth does not depend on society's limited productive capacities, but is generated by the very excess of production, by "too much wealth" – surplus and lack are correlative. Lack (the poverty of the "rabble") is the very form of appearance of the excess of production. On that account, any attempt to "balance" the lack and the excess (and what is Fascism, in its economic policy, if not a desperate attempt to reintroduce a fundamental balance into the cycle of social [re]production) is doomed to fail: the very attempt to abolish lack (poverty) by producing more

the Stalinist version of "totalitarianism": how does the superego function in the Stalinist bureaucratic universe? The supreme examples of it, of course, are the Stalinist purges. The double bind that pertains to the very notion of superego is best embodied in the fate of Stalin's ministers of the interior – Yezhov, Yagoda, Abakoumov. There was a constant pressure on them to discover ever new anti-Socialist plots, they were always reproached for being too lenient, not vigilant enough; the only way for them to satisfy the demand of the Leader was thus to invent plots and to arrest innocent people. However, this way, they were laying the ground for their own violent demise, since their successor was already at work, collecting evidence of how they were actually counterrevolutionary agents of imperialism killing good dedicated bolsheviks . . . The victim's innocence is thus part of the game, it enables the self-reproducing cycle of revolutionary purges that "eat their own children." This impossibility of achieving the "proper measure" between lack and excess (of zeal in the fight against counterrevolution) is the clearest index of the superego functioning of the Stalinist bureaucracy: we are either too lenient (if we do not discover enough traitors, this proves our silent support for counterrevolution) or too vigilant (which, again, makes us guilty of condemning dedicated fighters for Socialism).⁷⁸ This codependence of lack and excess is, perhaps, the core of what we call "modernity."⁷⁹

Another case of the codependence between lack and excess is provided by the paradoxical role of the "narrow band" (the fact that, for structural reasons, the picture is always limited, reduced) in the process of symbolization: it is this lack, this *limitation* itself, that activates the *excessive* wealth of imagination (suffice it to recall the almost proverbial example of a child with simple wooden toys, whose imagination is far superior to the one playing with intricate electronic equipment). Therein resides the impasse of the complete immersion into Virtual Reality: it saturates the force of imagination, since everything is already rendered to our eyes. This also accounts for the structural impasse of so-called interactive storytelling in which, at every turn of the story, the reader is free to select his or her own version of the

rience shows that such a constellation gives rise to a double discontent in the reader: (1) there is "too much freedom," too much depends on me; instead of yielding to the pleasures of the narrative, I am bombarded with decisions to be made; (2) my naive faith in diegetic reality is disturbed, that is, to the horror of the official ideology of interactive storytelling, I read a story in order to learn what "really" happened to the hero (did he "really" win over the coveted lady, etc.), not in order to decide about the outcome.⁸⁰ What underlies this frustration is the demand for a *Master*: in a narrative, I *want* somebody to establish the rules and assume responsibility for the course of the events – excessive freedom is frustrating to the utmost. More than an answer to the threat of an actual ecological catastrophe, Deep Ecology is an attempt to counter this lack of an "objective," imposed set of rules that limits our freedom. What one should bear in mind here is the link between this limitation and our "sense of reality": in the interactive virtual universe, reality lacks its inherent limitation and is thus, as it were, deprived of its substance, changed into a kind of ethereal image of itself.

What implicit rule is then actually violated in an "interactive" narrative? When we watch a performance of *Othello*, we know well what lies ahead, yet we are nonetheless full of anxiety and again and again shocked at the tragic outcome, as if, at another level, we were not quite sure that the inevitable would happen again. Do we not encounter here a new variation on the motif of the prohibition of the impossible and/or of the injunction to do what is already in itself necessary? Of the gap that separates the two deaths, symbolic and real? The gap exemplified by the ancient Aztec priest who organizes human sacrifices to ensure the rising of the sun, who is alarmed by the seemingly "irrational" prospect that the most obvious thing will not happen? And is not the same gesture of freely asserting the inevitable constitutive of the position of a Master? By means of his "Yes!" a Master merely "dots the i's," attests the unavoidable – he acts as if he has a choice where effectively there is none. (For that reason, there is unavoidably something inherently *asinine* involved in the position of a Master. Master's position is to state the obvious.) Suffice it

and Russia: in accordance with the silent pact regulating this relationship, Western states treat Russia as a great power on condition that Russia doesn't (effectively) act as one. One can see how the logic of the offer made to be rejected (Russia is offered the chance to act as a great power, on condition that it politely rejects this offer) is connected with a possibility that has to remain a mere possibility: in principle, it is possible for Russia to act effectively as a great power, but if Russia is to maintain the symbolic status of a great power, this possibility must not be taken advantage of. . . . Is, therefore, Russia's position not the position of Master as such? Another aspect of this same paradoxical position of Master concerns the enigma of passing exams and the announcement of their results: there has to be a minimal gap, delay, between the actual examination, the direct measurement of our capacities, and the moment of public proclamation of the result – an in between time when, although the die is already cast and we know it, there is nonetheless an "irrational" uncertainty as to "what will the Master (proclaiming the results) say," as if it is only via its public proclamation that the result becomes actual, "for itself."⁸¹

The tautological emptiness of a Master's Wisdom is exemplified in the inherent stupidity of proverbs. Let us engage in a mental experiment by way of trying to construct proverbial wisdom out of the relationship between terrestrial life, its pleasures, and its Beyond. If one says "Forget about the afterlife, about the Elsewhere, seize the day, enjoy life fully here and now, it's the only life you've got!" it sounds deep. If one says exactly the opposite ("Do not get trapped in the illusory and vain pleasures of earthly life; money, power, and passions are all destined to vanish into thin air – think about eternity!"), it also sounds deep. If one combines the two sides ("Bring Eternity into your everyday life, live your life on this earth as if it is already permeated by Eternity!"), we get another profound thought. Needless to add, the same goes for its inversion: "Do not try in vain to bring together Eternity and your terrestrial life, accept humbly that you are forever split between Heaven and Earth!" If, finally, one simply gets perplexed by all these reversals and claims: "Life is an enigma, do not try to

tery!" the result is, again, no less profound than its reversal: "Do not allow yourself to be distracted by false mysteries that just dissimulate the fact that, ultimately, life is very simple – it is what it is, it is simply here without reason and rhyme!" Needless to add that, by uniting mystery and simplicity, one again obtains a wisdom: "The ultimate, unfathomable mystery of life resides in its very simplicity, in the simple fact that there is life."

This tautological imbecility points toward the fact that a Master is excluded from the economy of symbolic exchange – not wholly excluded, since he occupies a special, exceptional place in it. For the Master, there is no "tit for tat," since, for him, tit is in a way *already its own tat*. In other words, when we give something to the Master, we do not expect anything in return, since this gift to the Master functions as its own reward – we are honored when the Master accepts our gift. Is it not often the case, with the persons toward whom we entertain a relationship of transference, that they do us a favor by merely accepting our gift?⁸² This refusal to be caught in the circle of exchange is what ultimately defines the attitude of a Master: the decline of the figure of Master in modern capitalist societies follows inherently from the definition of modern society as the society of *exchange*. Even when Masters seem to participate in an act of exchange, they are actually consummating the paradoxical *exchange of gifts* that doesn't yet function as the proper act of exchange: in the ritual of *potlatch*, for example, when I endeavor to organize an even more sumptuous feast for my guest than he did previously for me, the point is not to "reimburse the debt" but to repeat and outdo the excess of the gift.

So what is a Master? The conductor of an orchestra, for example: what he does is in a sense superfluous, that is, a perfectly rehearsed orchestra would have no need for the conductor. Precisely as such – as superfluous – the conductor adds the crucial *je ne sais quoi*, the unfathomable tact and accent. *The Master thus gives body to the irreducible excess of contingency over Necessity* – when the playing of the orchestra follows with full necessity, the master-conductor is no longer needed. The gesture constitutive of the Master is best exemplified by a tense political situation in

proper position in its extreme purity or to formulate a position broadly enough in order to present it as a wide "umbrella" able to embrace all currents of the leader's party. The outcome is utterly "undecidable": adopting the unreconcilable "extreme" stance can isolate the leader, it can make him or her appear unacceptable, yet it can also be perceived as the resolute measure that clearly designates the desired Goal and thus attracts broad masses (see General de Gaulle's resolute "No!" to collaboration with Germans in 1940 that made him into a leader); adopting the ill-defined "umbrella" stance can lay ground for a broad coalition, yet it can also be perceived as the disappointing sign of irresolution. Sometimes it is better to limit oneself pragmatically to "realistic," attainable goals; at other times, it is far more effective to say, "No, this is not enough, the true utopia is that, in the present state of our society, we can achieve even these modest goals – if we want truly to attain even these goals, we must aim much higher, we must change the general condition!" This, perhaps, is the feature that distinguishes a "true leader": the ability to risk the step into the extreme that, far from ostracizing the leader, *finds universal appeal and grounds the widest possible coalition*. Such a gesture, of course, is extremely risky insofar as it is not decideable in advance: it *can* succeed, yet it *can* also turn the leader into a figure of ridicule, a lone extremist nut. This is the risk a "true leader" has to assume: one of the lessons of history is that, in the political struggle between the moderate pragmatic and the extremist, it was the extremist who (later, after taking over) was able effectively to realize the necessary pragmatic measures.

There is a logical game that can further clarify the paradox of the Master:⁸³ two persons, A and B; both bear on their head a cardinal number visible only to the other person; one number is always a successor or a forerunner to the other number, so that, if one person bears a number 5, the other's number is necessarily either 4 or 6; 0 is forbidden. How, then, can the two persons arrive at knowledge of their respective number? Let us reproduce three basic situations:

A has 1, B has 2, that is, A sees on B 2, B sees on A 1. This combination, of course, renders possible the immediate insight of B: A

or 3, whereas B, who sees 1 on A, knows immediately that he bears 2. B is thus able to arrive at the answer directly: his knowledge is not mediated by the nonknowledge of A.

A has 2, B has 3. Here, it is again B who first arrives at the answer, but *his knowledge is mediated by A's ignorance*. That is to say, the reasoning proceeds in two steps: (1) A sees 3 and doesn't know her number (2 or 4), so she says, "I don't know"; (2) B sees 2 and says to himself, "I have either 1 or 3; if I were to have 1, A would know she has 2; since, however, A doesn't know her number, it follows that I have 3."

A has 3, B has 4. It is again B who first arrives at the answer; however, the reasoning now has to go through three steps:

- (1) B sees 3 and doesn't know his number (2 or 4), so he states his ignorance;
- (2) A sees 4 and doesn't know her number (3 or 5); B's ignorance is of no help to her here – since A sees 4, she knows that B sees on her either 3 or 5, and thus knows in advance that B's first answer will be "I don't know" (i.e., if B sees either 3 or 5, in both cases he cannot directly guess his number);
- (3) on the basis of this *double* profession of ignorance, however, B is able, in the third step, to arrive at knowledge. His reasoning is: "I see 3 on A, so I have either 2 or 4 – I do not know my number, and A is aware of my ignorance. However, if I were to have 2, A should be able to arrive at her number on the basis of my ignorance. That is to say, if I were to have 2, A's reasoning would be: 'I see 2 on B; this means that I have either 1 or 3. If I were to have 1, B would know that he has 2. Since, however, B doesn't know his number, I have 3.' Since, however, A doesn't know her number, my number must be 4." In other words, the ignorance of B (the fact that B who sees 3 on A doesn't know if his number is 2 or 4) assumes a different meaning/value for A with regard to what she sees on B: if A sees on B 2, B's ignorance tells her that she has 3; if A sees on B 4, B's ignorance tells her that she has either 3 or 5, that is, it tells her nothing she doesn't know already prior to B's profes-

A, so I have 2 or 4 – I do not know what I have. However, if I were to have 2, my ignorance would tell A that she has 3; since A doesn't know that she has 3, my number must be 4." B takes into account the effect of his (profession of) ignorance on A: if B's profession of ignorance produces knowledge in A, he has 2, if not, he has 4.

It is easy to discern in these three figurations the triad of the social link of the Master, the University, and Analysis: in the link of the Master, the Servant directly recognizes who is "numero uno" and thus assumes a subservient role; in the link of the University, the knowledge of the person of the university is mediated by the ignorance of the Other; in the link of Analysis, the analysand arrives at the knowledge (about the truth of the analysand's desire) through an initial profession of ignorance and the following profession of ignorance of the analyst – the analyst must not directly act as the one who knows, but rather as the one who stands for the lack in the Other, for the big Other's ignorance. In this precise sense, the analyst has to be able to count to 4, as Lacan put it. However, even more interesting than this is an enigmatic feature of the third figuration: the first step in the process of reasoning is B's proclamation of his ignorance; the enigma of this step is that it is necessary, that is, unavoidable, but, at the same time, *totally superfluous* – B states something that A already knows; that is, since A sees 4 on B, she knows in advance that the first gesture of B can only be his profession of ignorance. However, if B doesn't begin by stating the obvious, if the game begins directly with A's stating "I don't know," B cannot arrive at his knowledge. Here one encounters the symbolic order at its purest: the purely superfluous gesture of stating the obvious. This necessity to begin by stating the obvious is a kind of ontological proof of the big Other; that is to say, if each of the two persons participating knows it, who has to be informed about it? The big Other, of course . . .

This initial gesture that, precisely insofar as it is superfluous and "stupid," grounds the ensuing Order, is the gesture of the Master at its purest: the "Master" is the subject who makes this kind of "obvious" statement. In other words, the ultimate support

Enlightenment motto Knowledge is Power, *savoir est pouvoir*, one should assert that, in a social link, the position of the Master always relies on a minimum of ignorance, of *je n'en veux rien savoir*. From the proverbial Potemkin's villages to the model socialist villages hastily constructed along the main rail line in China to conceal the failure of the Great Leap Forward in 1959 from Mao Tse-tung's gaze, what we encounter again and again is the urge to conceal from the Master's gaze the grayness of everyday life. And the crucial point is that this ignorance is constitutive: the Master's decision is never fully "grounded in reasons"; there is always a minimum of arbitrariness and sheer idiocy in it. Therein resides the tragedy of Enlightened leftists who are unable to take into account this constitutive role of idiotic symbolic rituals (from Reagan to Tudjman in Croatia) and indulge in mocking them.

RECONCILIATION

The gap between the Real of the act and its symbolic assumption by means of which the act only becomes "itself" – in Hegelian terms, the gap between the "In-itself" and the "For-itself," the delay of the symbolic gesture of "freely choosing" with regard to the deed, on account of which the choice is ultimately always a forced one, an act of assuming what is already imposed on us – has profound consequences for Schelling's notion of divine freedom: as was pointed out by Marquet, the fact that God pronounces the Word and thus establishes himself as a free subject after being caught in the vortex of the rotary motion of blind drives means that God himself is not exempted from the predicament of the forced choice – he also is forced to assume freely what has already occurred by blind necessity. Paraphrasing Marx's famous beginning of the *Eighteenth brumaire*, one is tempted to say that, in his free act of Creation, "God makes his own history; but he does not make it just as he pleases; he does not make it under circumstances chosen by himself, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past" – from the eternal Past of the rotary motion of divine prehistory. Insofar as this predicament is the necessary outcome of the ontological edifice of *Weltalter*, one can claim that the ultimate reason for the failure

of the *Weltalter* project, for Schelling's retreat into the safe waters of the Aristotelian ontological frame, resides in his unreadiness to accept the fact that God's freedom is also the freedom of a forced choice, the gesture of freely assuming an imposed necessity.

In what, then, would Schelling's third "divine age," the final reconciliation between Past and Present in the reign of Love, consist? The already-mentioned "posthumanist" utopia of a new "bionic angel," of a wired subject who, by means of "downloading" consciousness into the machine, cuts the links that attach the subject to the material body and turns into a spirit freely floating in the ethereal materiality of cyberspace,⁸⁴ seems to fit perfectly the Schellingian Idealist fantasy of the third "divine age" as the redemption from the Fall, as the step from the Fall into Bliss: the fantasy of the humanity that overcomes the egotism of the contraction-into-self and thus gets rid of the material inertia, changing the bodily reality into a transparent medium of spiritual communion.

It is easy to assert here that, at some point, the subject is compelled to leave the staged illusion of cyberspace and return back to the "true reality" – say, what if the machine, the hardware support of the cyberspace, simply breaks down and throws us back to the misery of our bodily existence? However, what is this "true reality" of our bodily existence? Is not the fundamental lesson of Lacan that this "true reality" itself is supported by the virtual order of the big Other? In short, there is something wrong with the reasoning that tells us that we always remain attached to our body in material reality: we have to approach the problem from the opposite direction. The point to be made is not that it is not possible to cut the umbilical cord that links us to bodily reality and to float freely in virtual space, but its exact opposite: how is it that we are never fully immersed in this bodily reality, how is it that *there is no "reality" without the empty screen onto which we project fantasies*? "Reality" itself, to which we are compelled to return after every virtual escapade, needs the fantasmatic frame as the ultimate support of its consistency. The two propositions are thus to be thought together: there is no "hard reality" to which one can simply return, but there is nonetheless some "real" that prevents us from freely floating from one to another virtual body

in the fantasy space. There is no reality without the blank, the screen onto which we project fantasies, since – if reality is to emerge – something must be excluded from it: the blank screen is the index of that exclusion (“primordial repression”). *The fascinating presence of a fantasy formation does not dissimulate reality: it dissimulates the void of that which had to be foreclosed if reality was to emerge.*

Is, however, this reading of the Schellingian Third Age – the Future, the return to the Divine Bliss – as simply another version of the fantasmatic dissimulation of the real, the only one possible? Schelling is well aware that, if reality is to emerge, something (the horror of the primordial vortex of drives) has to be “repressed” into the Past. The crucial point is that Schelling here parts from the mainstream of German Idealism, inclusive of his own early philosophy of identity, which conceives Law (the objective rationality of the social order experienced by the isolated egotist individual as an alien force encroaching upon his or her freedom) as the inherent condition of Love (of authentic interpersonal relations): the pressure of Law compels us to renounce narcissistic self-will and thus to discover the true love of others. Far from functioning as an impediment to authentic interpersonal relations, Law creates the conditions for their realization. From *Weltalter* onward, however, Schelling no longer accepts this notion of a possible reconciliation of Law and love: his notion of reconciliation now involves the act of passing beyond the domain of Law; as such, it seems close to the notion of “love beyond law” mentioned by Lacan in the very last page of *Seminar XI*.⁸⁵ It is indeed tempting to approach Schelling’s reconciliation beyond Law from the perspective of Lacan’s notion of the “feminine” sublimation of drives into love: for the late Lacan, love is no longer merely a narcissistic (mis)recognition to be opposed to desire as the subject’s “truth,” but a unique case of direct asexual sublimation (integration into the order of the signifier) of drives, of their *jouissance*, in the guise of the asexual Thing (music, religion . . .) experienced in ecstatic surrender.⁸⁶ What one should bear in mind apropos of this love beyond Law, this direct asexual

Law – the moment we trespass the domain of Law, meaning changes into enjoy-meant (*jouis-sense*).⁸⁷

Insofar as, according to Lacan, at the conclusion of the psychoanalytic cure, the subject assumes drive beyond fantasy and beyond (the Law of) desire, this Schellingian problematic of reconciliation also compels us to confront the question of the conclusion of the cure in all its urgency. If we discard the discredited standard formulas (“reintegration into the sociosymbolic space,” etc.), only two options remain open: *desire* or *drive*. That is to say, either we conceive the conclusion of the cure as the assertion of the subject’s radical openness to the enigma of the Other’s desire no longer veiled by fantasmatic formations, or we risk the step beyond desire itself and adopt the position of the saint who is no longer bothered by the Other’s desire as its decentered cause. In the case of the saint, the subject, in an unheard-of way, “causes itself,” becomes its own cause: its cause is no longer decentered; that is, the enigma of the Other’s desire no longer has any hold over it. How are we to understand this strange reversal? In principle, things are clear enough: by way of positing itself as its own cause, the subject fully assumes the fact that the object-cause of its desire is not a cause that precedes its effects but is retroactively posited by the network of its effects: an event is never simply in itself traumatic, it only becomes a trauma retroactively, by being “secreted” from the subject’s symbolic space as its inassimilable point of reference. In this precise sense, the subject “causes itself” by way of retroactively positing that X which acts as the object-cause of its desire. This loop is constitutive of the subject; that is, an entity that does not “cause itself” is precisely not a subject but an object.⁸⁸ However, one should avoid conceiving this assumption as a kind of symbolic integration of the decentered Real, whereby the subject “symbolizes,” assumes as an act of its free choice, the imposed trauma of the contingent encounter of the Real. One should always bear in mind that the status of the subject as such is hysterical: the subject “is” only through its confrontation with the enigma of *Che vuoi?* (“What do you want?”) insofar as the Other’s desire remains impenetrable, insofar as the subject does not know what his intention is, and

equivalent to what Lacan called "subjective destitution," to the dehystricization by means of which the subject loses its status of subject.

The most elementary matrix of fantasy, of its temporal loop, is that of the "impossible" gaze by means of which the subject is present at the act of his/her own conception. What is at stake in it is the enigma of the Other's desire: by means of the fantasy formation, the subject provides an answer to "What am I for my parents, for their desire?" and thus endeavors to arrive at the "deeper meaning" of his or her existence, to discern the Fate involved in it – the reassuring lesson of fantasy is that "I was brought about with a special purpose."⁸⁹ Consequently, when at the end of the psychoanalytic cure I "traverse my fundamental fantasy," the point of it is not that, instead of being bothered by the enigma of the Other's desire, of what I am for others, I "subjectivize" my fate in the sense of its symbolization, of recognizing myself in a symbolic network or narrative for which I am fully responsible, but rather that I *fully assume the uttermost contingency of my being*. The subject becomes "cause of myself" in the sense of no longer looking for a guarantee of his or her existence in another's desire. One cannot overestimate the radical character of this move of Lacan: Lacan abandons here what is usually considered the very core of his teaching, the notion of the irreducibly "decentered" subject, the subject whose very emergence is grounded in the relationship to a constitutive alterity.

Another way to put it is to say that "subjective destitution" changes the register from desire to drive. Desire is historical and subjectivized, always and by definition unsatisfied, metonymical, shifting from one object to another since I do not actually desire what I want. What I actually desire is to sustain desire itself, to postpone the dreaded moment of its satisfaction. Drive, on the other hand, involves a kind of inert satisfaction that always finds its way; drive is nonsubjectivized ("acephalous"). Perhaps its paradigmatic expressions are the repulsive private rituals (sniffing at one's own sweat, sticking one's finger into one's nose . . .) that bring us intense satisfaction without us being aware of it, or, insofar as we are aware of it, without us being able to do anything about it, to prevent it. In Andersen's fairy tale "The Red Shoes," an

impoverished young woman puts on a pair of magical shoes and almost dies when her feet won't stop dancing; she is saved only when an executioner cuts off her feet with his ax. Her still-shod feet dance on, whereas she is given wooden feet and finds peace in religion . . . These shoes stand for drive at its purest: an "undead" partial object that functions as a kind of impersonal willing – "it wants," it persists in its repetitive movement (of dancing), it follows its path and exacts its satisfaction at any price, irrespective of the subject's well-being.⁹⁰ This drive is that which is "in the subject more than herself": although the subject cannot ever "subjectivize" it, assume it as "her own" by way of saying "It is *me* who wants to do this!" it nonetheless operates in her very kernel.⁹¹ Lacan's wager is that it is possible to *sublimate* this dull satisfaction – this is what, ultimately, art and religion are about.

Although there is no intersubjectivity proper in drive, drive nonetheless involves its own mode of relating to otherness: desire addresses itself to the symbolic big Other, it seeks active recognition from it, while drive addresses itself to the *silence* in the Other. The Other is here reduced to a silent witness, to a mute presence that endorses the subject's *jouissance* by way of emitting a silent sign of acknowledgment, a "Yes!" to drive. In order to exemplify this status of the Other in drive, let's not be afraid to reach for the lowest of the low – *Lassie Comes Home*. At the very end of the film, the wounded and tired dog proceeds along the streets of the small town toward the school in order to be there when classes end for her master, the young boy; on her way, she passes the workshop of the local blacksmith; when the blacksmith, an old bearded man, catches sight of the blood-stained animal approaching the school exactly on time, he silently nods in agreement. This silent nod is a Yes! to the Real of the drive, to the dog's uncompromising drive "always to return to her place" (see Lacan's definition of the Real as "that which always returns to its place"). And, perhaps, therein resides also the last gesture of the psychoanalyst announcing the conclusion of the cure: in such a silent Yes! – in a pure gesture of acknowledging that the analysand has traversed her/his fantasy, that she/he has reached beyond the enigma of *Che vuoi?* and turned into a being of drive.

Or, to put it in yet another way: desire as the desire of the Other remains within the domain of transference and the (big) Other; the ultimate experience is here that of anxiety, that is, the experience of the opaque trauma of the Other's desire, of what does the Other want from me (*Che vuoi?*). Drive, on the contrary, is outside transference and the reference to the Other (for that reason, the dissolution of transference equals the passage from desire to drive: there is no desire without transference). At the level of desire, the encounter with the Real occurs as the encounter of the Other's desire; at the level of drive, the Real is directly drive itself. Or, to put it in yet another way: desire is the desire of the Other, while drive is never the drive of the Other. With respect to literary references, this move "beyond desire" (to drive) is also a move *beyond Kafka*: the work of Kafka probably gives body to the experience of *Che vuoi?* – of the enigma of the impenetrable desire of the Other – at its most extreme, while drive involves the suspension of the dimension of the Other's desire. The Other who says "Yes!" to drive is not the Other of *Che vuoi?*⁹²

Another way to formulate the opposition between desire and drive is to say that desire stands to interpretation as drive to sublimation: the fact that sublimation is as a rule mentioned apropos of drive, not of desire (Freud himself never speaks of the "sublimation of desire"), while, on the other hand, one also never speaks of the "interpretation of drive" but always links interpretation to desire, bears witness to a profound theoretical necessity. The title of Lacan's seminar from 1958–59, "Desire and Its Interpretation," is to be taken as a direct assertion of their ultimate identity: desire *coincides* with its own interpretation. That is, when the subject endeavors to interpret (its or, originally, the Other's) desire and never finds the ultimate point of reference, when it forever slides from one to another reading, this very desperate attempt to arrive at "what one really wants" is desire itself. (Or, to put it in a more elaborate way: insofar as the coordinates of desire are provided by the "fundamental fantasy," and insofar as this fantasy emerges as an attempt to provide an answer to the enigma of *Che vuoi?*, of the Other's desire – in short: as the interpretation of this desire, of what the Other "effectively wants

strictly homologous way, drive is its sublimation: there is no "direct" drive that is afterward sublimated, since the "nonsublimated drive" is simply the biological instinct: *drive* designates the moment when an instinct is "sublimated" – cut off from its natural point of satisfaction and attached to an object that acts as the stand-in for the impossible Thing – and, as such, condemned to the repetitive movement of encircling, never directly "swallowing," its object.⁹³

A key moment in the recent e-mail discussion between Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau about the relationship between failure and repetition (or iterability, to use the Derridean term) directly concerns this problematic of drive. The stakes of this discussion were high, since they directly concerned the alternative "Lacan or Hegel." That is to say, Butler claims that "the failure of any subject formation is an effect of its iterability, its having been formed in time, again and again. One might say, via Althusser, that the ritual through which subjects are formed is always subject to a rerouting or a lapse by virtue of this necessity to repeat and reinstall itself." Her point is clearly anti-Lacanian: if we accept the primacy of failure over repetition – that is, if we claim that repetition itself is driven by the failure of the subject to achieve its full self-identity – then we elevate, in a kind of negative foundational gesture, the failure (or lack) itself into the ultimate ontological universal condition: lack itself becomes a kind of common a priori shared by all ontic entities on account of their very failure to achieve full identity. (It was, of course, already Derrida who, in his "Le facteur de la vérité," accused Lacan of ontologizing the lack.) However, Butler's background is here more Nietzschean: repetition stands for the assertive movement of "return of the same," for the *excess* of the will that is not grounded in any prior lack. When, in his final response, Laclau emphasizes the ambiguity of Butler's statement that failure is an effect of iterability, his critical point is that giving preference to iterability over failure can bring us to (mis)perceive the process of repetition as a kind of Hegelian movement of *Aufhebung* in which particular failures are progressively sublated by way of their iteration – if there is no original lack opening up the space of repetition, if there is no lack

nence of the totality of the process to itself. The only thing that can prevent this dialectical closure is thus the assertion of a constitutive failure, of an ultimate deadlock. It is easy to miss the finesse of Laclau's point here: he not only claims that we must assert the gap between the ontological level of lack, of the impossible universal, and the repetitive endeavors of particular contents to hegemonize the universal; he also adds that, *precisely because this lack is irreducible*, there is always some particular content that hegemonizes the universal; that is, the relationship between universal and particular is always "pathologically" twisted on account of a short circuit between the two. We never reach the balance of the dialectical totality in which the Universal coincides with the plurality of its particular content, with the movement of mediation from one to the other particular moment driven by the failure of each particular moment to embody directly the universal totality. Laclau's implicit corrective to Hegel is that not only does no particular moment directly encompass the universal, the movement of mediation from one to another particular moment driven by the failure of each of them also does not do the job. What one should do here – apart from pointing out that Laclau's notion of dialectical totality perhaps simplifies Hegel's position and misses the way impossibility is cosubstantial to the Hegelian totality – is to point out how a kind of iterability that *precedes* the logic of lack is also central to Lacan, to his notion of drive as opposed to desire. The ambiguity of the relationship between failure and iterability mentioned by Laclau involves the very line of separation between desire and drive: insofar as lack precedes repetition and serves as its mobile, we are within the space of *desire*, whereas *drive* designates a repetitive movement not driven by a constitutive lack.

We can see, now, how we are to interpret the opposition between desire and drive. Insofar as desire remains our horizon, our position ultimately amounts to a kind of Levinasian openness to the enigma of the Other, to the imponderable mystery of the Other's desire. In a clear contrast to this attitude of respect for the Other in its transcendence, drive introduces radical immanence:

way, desire and drive are to be contrasted as subject and object: there is a *subject of desire* and an *object of drive*. In desire, the subject longs for the (lost) object, whereas in drive, the subject makes herself an object (the scopic drive, for example, involves an attitude of *se faire voir*, of "making-oneself-seen," not simply of wanting to see). Perhaps this is how we are to read Schelling's notion of the highest freedom as the state in which activity and passivity, being active and being acted upon, harmoniously overlap: humanity reaches this acme when it turns its very subjectivity into the Predicate of an ever higher Power (in the mathematical sense of the term), that is, when it, as it were, yields to the Other, "depersonalizes" its most intense activity and performs it as if some other, higher Power is acting through human beings, using them as its medium – like the mystical experience of Love, or like artists who, in the highest frenzy of creativity, experiences themselves as mediums through which some more substantial, impersonal Power expresses itself. The crucial point is to distinguish this position from that of a pervert who also undergoes a kind of "subjective destitution" and posits himself as the object-cause of the Other's desire (see the case of the Stalinist Communist who conceives himself as the pure object-instrument of the realization of the Necessity of History): for the pervert, the big Other exists, while the subject at the end of the psychoanalytic process assumes the *nonexistence* of the big Other. In short, the Other for whom the subject "makes herself . . . (seen, heard, active)" has no independent existence and ultimately relies on the subject herself – in this precise sense, the subject who makes herself the Other's object-cause *becomes her own cause*. In order to render this position of pure drive beyond the search for (symbolic) recognition, one is tempted to refer to Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*, a novel that is usually decried as the exemplary case of protofascist capitalist individualism. There is nonetheless a trace of authenticity in Rand's description of the momentary impact the architect Howard Roark, the hero of the novel, makes on the members of the audience in the courtroom where he stands trial:

could drop the nameless resentment, the sense of insecurity which he aroused in most people. And so, for the first time, they could see him as he was: a man totally innocent of fear.

The fear of which they thought was not the normal kind, not a response to a tangible danger, but the chronic, unconfessed fear in which they all lived. They remembered the misery of the moments when, in loneliness, a man thinks of the bright words he could have said, but had not found, and hates those who robbed him of his courage. The misery of knowing how strong and able one is in one's own mind, the radiant picture never to be made real. Dreams? Self-delusion? Or a murdered reality, unborn, killed by that corroding emotion without name – fear – need – dependence – hatred?

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

It was only a moment; the moment of silence when Roark was about to speak.⁹⁴

Indeed, as Lacan put it: a true Master is the one who cannot ever be betrayed – the one who, even when actually betrayed, does not lose anything. One can somewhat clarify this paradox through reference to Kant. As we have already seen, Kant is well aware that the condition of impossibility of our ethical activity is at the same time its condition of possibility: humanity's limitation to finitude, that is, the very condition that prevents it from fulfilling its ethical destination, is, at the same time, a positive condition of its ethical activity. For that reason, Kant holds sainthood not only to be impossible, unattainable in our terrestrial existence, but, at a more profound level, *undesirable*: moral consciousness is horrified at its prospect, since this state would close the gap that keeps the space for ethical activity open. This closing of the gap, however, is precisely what takes place at the conclusion of the

"everything becomes clear," there is no longer any enigmatic X to sustain our desire – no wonder that the conclusion of the cure often involves the danger of a psychotic breakdown, or, at least, of severe depression . . . When Lacan conceives the conclusion of the cure as the moment when the subject, by way of its own destitution, changes into a "being of drive" and becomes its own cause, does this, then, not point towards the Schellingian Reconciliation?

A BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

The third draft of *Weltalter* was translated into English as *Schelling: The Ages of the World* (1813), translated by Frederick de Wolfe Bolman, Jr. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942; reprint New York: AMS Press, 1967). In the recent profusion of books on Schelling, let us limit ourselves to ten studies; first, three German readings that provided the basic coordinates for the subsequent interpretations.

1. Martin Heidegger, *Schelling's Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1985) (lectures presented in 1936). Heidegger's emphasis is on the inherent tension of Schelling's text between the German Idealist problematic of the System and Schelling's notion of freedom, which already points toward a post-idealist, even postmetaphysical, dimension of finitude and temporality.

2. Jürgen Habermas, "Dialektischer Idealismus im Übergang zum Materialismus – Geschichtsphilosophische Folgerungen aus Schellings Idee einer Contraction Gottes," in *Theorie und Praxis* (Berlin: Luchterhand, 1969), pp. 108–61 (left out of the English translation of *Theory and Practice*!). The first "progressive" appropriation of Schelling that interprets *Weltalter* as a break with the German Idealist logic of the Absolute, introducing the motif of radical historicity and contingency, and emphasizes the revolutionary political implications of this break.

3. Walter Schulz, *Die Vollendung des Deutschen Idealismus in der Spätphilosophie Schellings* (Pfullingen: Necke, 1977). A counterpoint

its conclusion the inherent logic of development of German Idealism.

TWO FRENCH STANDARD INTRODUCTIONS:

4. Xavier Tillet, *Schelling. Une philosophie en devenir* (Paris: Vrin, 1970). In the French tradition of the historical reconstructions of great philosophical systems à la Martial Gueroult, the standard reference work, full of erudition but with a shade of academic grayness.

5. Jean-Francois Marquet, *Liberté et existence. Etude sur la formation de la philosophie de Schelling* (Paris: Gallimard 1973). Probably the book on the development of Schelling's philosophy, with great attention to the fundamental deadlock Schelling again and again endeavored to resolve.

TWO RECENT ENGLISH INTRODUCTIONS:

6. Andrew Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1993). Arguably the best English-language introduction to Schelling, very good not only in providing a clear picture of the different stages of Schelling's philosophy, but also in displaying how Schelling announced a multitude of contemporary trends, from psychoanalysis to "deconstruction."

7. Edward Allen Beach, *The Potencies of God(s): Schelling's Philosophy of Mythology* (Albany; SUNY Press, 1994). A detailed examination of late Schelling's attempt to interpret the entire history of mythology as the imaginative expression of the elementary "potencies" (or powers) of the Absolute.

FINALLY, THREE "STRONG" INTERPRETATIONS:

8. Manfred Frank, *Der unendliche Mangel an Sein: Schellings Hegelkritik und die Anfänge der Marxschen Dialektik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1975). Frank is most deserving for the reactualization of Schelling in the last two decades; this book, his first on Schelling, demonstrates the roots of Marxism as well as Sartrean Existentialism in the late Schelling's turn against Hegel.

9. Wolfram Högerebe, *Prädikation und Genesis* (Frankfurt:

discursive rotary motion of drives to the articulated universe of the Word.

10. Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996). A Lacanian reading of "Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom" and *Weltalter*, listed here simply because it provides a more exhaustive development of the themes outlined in this introduction.