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(neuro)plasticity, epigenesis and the void

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POST-CONTINENTAL NATURALISM

What follows offers a close reading of Catherine Malabou's thinking of plasticity, neuroplasticity and epigenesis and attempts to discern the intimate relation of each of the instances to ontological groundlessness, that is to say, an experience of and exposure to what is here called, "the void." This reading of Malabou is part of a wider and ongoing project which examines the relation of science to philosophy in the work of four thinkers who might, broadly speaking, be characterized as "post-deconstructive": Malabou herself and also Jean-Luc Nancy, François Laruelle, and Bernard Stiegler.¹

This broader project arises more or less directly as a continuation of the arguments developed in *The New French Philosophy*.² In this work it was argued that a specific canon of French philosophers has emerged over the last three decades or so, rising to prominence from the 1980s and 1990s onwards. These philosophers explicitly distanced themselves from the linguistic paradigm that characterized the heyday of French structuralism in order to embrace innovative forms of realism and to align philosophy with, variously, a non-reductive naturalism, with the life-sciences, with mathematics and with a worldly materialist thinking. Now, as one reviewer of the book pointed out, this re-alignment is not entirely a decisive break, since a large amount of Deleuze and the late Foucault could arguably be characterized in these

terms.³ And, of course more generally, there are a number of specific trajectories in French thought that have been concerned with the sciences throughout the twentieth-century: from Gaston Bachelard, Georges Canguilhem and French historical epistemology in the mid-twentieth century through to the work of Michel Serres, Bruno Latour and many others in the last decades of the twentieth-century, including the work of French analytic philosophers. Nevertheless what is clear is that a number of the older philosophers that were engaged with in this book launched explicit polemics against the structuralist-linguistic paradigm as early as the 1970s, most notably Nancy, Laruelle and Alain Badiou, and that this shaped the development of their work into the 1980s and after. The decline of the related paradigm of writing or *écriture*, signalled explicitly in Laruelle's 1970s polemic which bears the title, *Le Déclin de l'écriture*, is a centrepiece of Malabou's later thinking of plasticity which will be of central concern here.

More generally, the relation of science to philosophy in Nancy, Laruelle, Malabou and Stiegler has arguably given rise to a mode of thinking that has emerged in the wake of this eclipse of the linguistic paradigm. This mode of thinking might potentially go by the name of "post-continental naturalism." This term is used, briefly and without any systematic development, in John Mullarkey's 2006 work *Post-Continental Philosophy: An Outline*.⁴ It may seem rather strange, if not entirely implausible, to give the name of naturalism to bodies of thought that have developed in the wake of Derridean deconstruction, for instance those of Nancy, Malabou and Stiegler. It is a little less surprising in relation to Laruelle's thought which has a close proximity to Deleuze, who, principally via his writing on Lucretius and Spinoza, has of course been associated with naturalism and who has, more broadly, been extensively aligned with scientific contexts. There is a strong tendency, with some notable exceptions, to characterize the general trajectory of phenomenological thought as distinctly anti-naturalist, and to associate this anti-naturalist tendency with the phenomenological legacy as it passed on into France from its German origins in post-Kantian transcendental philosophy and from the philosophies of Husserl and Heidegger in particular.

It may be worth pointing out that naturalism arguably has no very precise meaning within contemporary philosophy. In its broadest and most general form, of course, it can be characterised as thought which allies itself closely with science and holds that reality is exhausted by nature and specifically by nature as it can be known or investigated by the methods of the natural sciences. So, to be clear, naturalism therefore does not admit the existence of supernatural entities and, arguably, it is perhaps antithetical to the idea of a transcendental moment within thought, to a

priori structures of the mind which would be irreducible to the physical structure of the brain. Even at this most general level it is clear that naturalism implies a very specific relation between philosophy and science.

Perhaps one of most paradigmatic naturalist thinkers in this context would be Willard Van Orman Quine and it is worth reminding ourselves of the way in which the science-philosophy relation is configured in Quine's thought. In his short essay "Five Milestones of Empiricism" Quine argues that naturalism can be seen as the abandonment of the goal of a first philosophy, an abandonment which dictates that science alone is the primary mode of knowing and enquiring into reality.⁵ Science here would not be answerable to any non-scientific or supra-scientific tribunal or mode of justification. For Quine, therefore, philosophy is not prior to science and it cannot take priority over science, but is rather continuous with the scientific enterprise in general. Thus the authority of philosophy is constrained by, indeed subordinated to, scientific knowledge and cannot contradict or overturn that knowledge on purely philosophical grounds. So when in philosophy we pose, say, the ontological question of what can be said to exist or qualify for existence, Quine's naturalism would tell us that we need to refer, and to defer, to our current best scientific theories. This relation of philosophy to science is carried forward into, and is radicalised within, the contemporary context in the project of scientific metaphysics developed by figures such as James Ladyman, Don Ross and Harold Kincaid.

A guiding hypotheses here is that, if one can identify and sensibly come to talk about something like a post-continental naturalism, then such a naturalism will look very different from the image of philosophical naturalism sketched out above and will articulate a very different relation of philosophy to science.

The broader related contexts which are of interest in the bringing together of Nancy, Laruelle, Malabou and Stiegler under the rubric of post-continental naturalism are numerous and cannot be fully engaged with here. Names such as Bachelard, Canguilhem, Serres and Latour have already been mentioned. One might also mention the project of naturalizing phenomenology that has emerged in recent decades and specifically the neuro-phenomenology of figures such as Francesco Varela, or thinkers who have tried to combine phenomenological or ontological accounts of embodiment with cognitivist approaches, such as Antonio Damasio or Hubert Dreyfus. This context is of particular interest as a point of comparison and contrast to the naturalizing of post-phenomenological or post-deconstructive thought.

Perhaps the most important contemporary contexts or debates to which the emergence of a post-continental naturalism can be related are those concerning the post-Kantian turn within continental philosophy and the emergence of speculative realism as a distinct, albeit highly disputed, movement from 2007 onwards, and associated initially with the names of Quentin Meillassoux, Ray Brassier, Graham Harman and Iain Hamilton Grant. Quentin Meillassoux's, *After Finitude*, with its argument that philosophy should move beyond the Kantian and post-Kantian problematic of finitude, is of particular interest.⁶ As is Graham Harman's suggestion that speculative realism can be divided into two opposing groups: epistemist and anti-epistemist, the former group comprising Quentin Meillassoux and Ray Brassier and the latter comprising himself and Iain Hamilton Grant.⁷ What Harman's distinction rightly identifies is a difference of orientation with respect to mathematical and scientific forms of knowledge within speculative realism. On the one hand Meillassoux endorses a kind of mathematism when he claims in *After Finitude* that mathematics is able to describe those aspects of reality that are human-independent. On the other hand Brassier endorses a version of scientism, inspired by his interest in the thought of Wilfred Sellars, when, in *Nihil Unbound* and elsewhere, he privileges the scientific image of the world.⁸ In both cases mathematical or scientific thought are privileged insofar as they offer the possibility of moving beyond, or of stripping away, the finitude of human knowledge in order to approach and attain the reality of the world as it would be without humans. In Brassier's case his scientism leads him very much towards a form of naturalism that he has recently dubbed "critical naturalism" and which would allow philosophy, as the name suggests, to have a more critical relation to scientific knowledge. Harman and Grant conversely, in their "anti-epistemist" speculative-realist approach, hold that ultimate, human-independent reality is withdrawn absolutely from all thought, phenomenal appearance and therefore from scientific determination. So Harman, for instance, develops his distinctive object-oriented ontology using a mode of argumentation, by turns phenomenological and metaphysical, which is entirely divorced from scientific knowledge. What is important to note here is that speculative realism, in its attempt to move beyond the legacy of Kantian transcendental thought, has divided into wildly divergent positions which configure the relation of philosophy to science in more or less diametrically opposed terms, with the epistemist wing aligning the two closely and the anti-epistemist wing separating the two decisively.

Again a guiding hypothesis here is that the post-continental naturalism that is identifiable in the thought of Nancy, Laruelle, Malabou and Stiegler is decisively different from the orientations towards science one finds in the work of epistemist

speculative realists such as Meillassoux and Brassier. And, insofar as Nancy et. al. *do* engage with science at all, their thought also decisively differs from the anti-epistemist speculative realists Harman and Grant.

There are other thinkers who can be brought into dialogue with the specific engagements with science carried out within post-continental naturalism. So, for instance, Bruno Latour, Alfred North Whitehead and Isabelle Stengers are all of interest in this context. Gilles Deleuze would, most obviously and pre-eminently of course, figure in this regard. There is a large amount of thought and scholarship which interrogates the relation of Deleuzian thought to the sciences: most prominently perhaps Keith Ansell Pearson's works around the life sciences and technology, *Viroid Life* and *Germinal Life*, and Manuel DeLanda's ground-breaking *Intensive Science & Virtual Philosophy*.⁹

Nancy, Laruelle, Malabou and Stiegler all offer a different image of thought and philosophy from that given by Deleuze, despite certain proximities, particularly in the case of Laruelle. And with this different image of philosophy comes a different articulation of philosophy's relation to science.

PLASTICITY AND GROUNDLESSNESS

In the case of Catherine Malabou this difference can be seen in the very specific nature of her engagements with neuroscience, and more recently epigenetics, and in the way that she brings together insights drawn from empirical science with a philosophical elaboration of the concept of plasticity derived initially from Hegel. So, for instance, in works such as *What Should We Do With our Brain?* a dialectical but nonetheless post-deconstructive account of the formation, deformation, and reformation of material form, that is very much indebted to the post-Kantian transcendentalist tradition, is mapped onto the scientific phenomenon of neuroplasticity, that is to say, the formation and plastic development of the neural networks and interconnections of the brain throughout life.¹⁰ On this basis Malabou is able to rearticulate, in a highly original manner, a philosophical materialism which gives novel articulations of subjectivity, of freedom, and of the intersection between history and biology, consciousness and brain structure. Malabou's bringing together of post-phenomenological or post-deconstructive thought and contemporary neuroscientific knowledge is both original and powerful, but it is also deeply problematic. The obvious question arises as to whether philosophical plasticity as thought originally from a Derrida-inspired reading of Hegel is really compatible with the strictly empirical scientific concept of neuroplasticity. The

point is that neuroscience treats the brain as an object or thing, a thing whose activities can be objectively determined via magnetic resonance imaging and other technologies. In contrast, post-Kantian, phenomenological and post-phenomenological thought treats subjectivity, consciousness, and thought itself as no kind of thing, as that which, given its transcendental or quasi-transcendental conditions, cannot be objectified or reified and therefore cannot be treated in any way as simply another thing in the world of things. In *What Should We Do With our Brain?* and subsequent works, Malabou insisted that what is needed is a philosophical *interpretation* of neuroplasticity, but she did not really tackle or develop the problem of the relation of transcendental and empirical moments within plasticity head on, except at times to suggest some kind of dialectical or plastic relation between them. Her recent work on Kant and epigenesis in *Before Tomorrow* has however fully embraced this problem, placed it in the centre stage of her thinking, and related it explicitly to the wider stakes of contemporary philosophical debate that has been outlined here, particularly those of speculative realism and of Meillassoux's rejection of the post-Kantian transcendental.¹¹

And this is where my own questioning of plasticity, neuroplasticity and the void in Malabou's thinking begins. My argument is that what I am calling the "void," the experience of and exposure to ontological groundlessness, is what allows philosophical and scientific articulations of plasticity to be thought together. It is only with reference to an absence of ontological ground or foundation that something like thought—non-objectifiable, and never disclosable as a thing—can be brought and thought together with that thing or object that is the neurally networked brain.

As readers of Malabou's work will know very well, she aims to think plasticity in ontological terms as the mutability, transformability and exchangeability of being and of the material forms of existence. Plasticity, prior to any regime of meaningful or symbolic inscription, prior therefore to signification, *écriture*, or the Derridean trace, is fundamental, primordial or originary. Running slightly counter to Malabou's emphasis on plasticity's primordial status, it can be argued that there is, however, a yet more fundamental or primordial moment that must be admitted and articulated, that of the void or of ontological groundlessness. Malabou's plasticity is evidence of—it bears witness or testifies to—the void, the groundlessness, the abyss of being, and the void is always plasticity's most originary moment.

This may be surprising when taken in the context of Malabou's materialism, one which has consistently refused the notion of a gap or break between the regime of subjectivity, consciousness or thought on the one hand, and material, biological and embodied existence on the other. In her recent book on Kant, rationality and epigenesis, *Before Tomorrow*, Malabou asks: "why does philosophy continue to ignore recent neurobiological discoveries that suggest a profoundly transformed view of brain development and that now make it difficult, if not unacceptable, to maintain the existence of an impassable abyss between the logical and biological origin of thinking?"¹² This question reiterates Malabou's long-standing conviction that there is an ontological continuity between the neuro-biological or neuronal dimension of thought and the experience of thought itself as consciousness or as the lived subjectivity of mental life as such. She reiterates here the certainty that was so clearly articulated in *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, namely the "certainty that there exists a perfect continuity between the neuronal and the mental".¹³ Does this then mean that there is no place at all for any conception of the void in Malabou's materialism, since there is no ontological breach between mind and body, and the perennial mind-body problem of philosophy is no longer pertinent? The absence of "an impassable abyss" between the logical and biological origin of thinking might well lead one to question where, after all, there *can* be a space or place for any kind of abyssal opening or vertiginous absence of ground within being when there is nothing but a seamless continuity between thought and matter.

And yet, what has been clear throughout the development of Malabou's thinking is her insistence that the continuity of the neuronal and the mental, the biological and the logical, should not in any way involve the reduction of the latter to the former. Nor should it allow for any kind of materialist or neuro-cognitive eliminativism, of the kind, say, proposed by Paul and Patricia Churchland, which would consign thought and the qualia of subjective experience to the realm of the illusory or the epiphenomenal. Malabou's thinking, therefore, *despite* its insistence on the strict ontological continuity between the neurobiological activity of the brain and the mental life of subjective consciousness, maintains a questioning of, and a philosophical engagement with, the transcendental origin and status of thought. As was indicated earlier, this conjugation of the neurobiological and the transcendental has been Malabou's implicit concern at least since the polemic of *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* and is the central preoccupation of her engagement with Kantian rationality and the problem of epigenesis in her most recent work *Before Tomorrow*.

The philosophical problem here, however, as was indicated earlier, is the fact that, as Malabou herself puts it: “the neurobiological viewpoint simply erases the transcendental”.¹⁴ Reductivism or eliminativism is eminently easy from the neurobiological viewpoint since it seemingly has no need at all to pose the transcendental question of the formation of reason and rationality. Nor, seemingly, does it need to account for the phenomenological problem of the transcendence of intentional consciousness towards a meaningful world. Malabou’s arguments against reductivism need not be rehearsed here, nor does her persuasive demonstration in *Before Tomorrow* of the philosophical inadequacy of any attempt to dispense with the transcendental moment within thought, either from the neurobiological or from other contemporary theoretical perspectives. What is important to note is that the void in Malabou’s thinking, the ontological groundlessness that is plasticity’s most originary moment, has its place insofar as it makes possible the intrication of biological life and the transcendental—the thinking together of the neuronal and the mental without any recourse to a breach, separation or split between mind and body.

In fact, notions of vacuity, negation, and void have been at the centre of Malabou’s thinking of plasticity from her earliest work on Hegel. In *The Future of Hegel*, Hegel’s own use of the German term “*plastizität*” is mapped onto the dialectical operations of subjectivity and its temporal experience, and, Malabou shows, the moments of vacuity, dissolution and annihilation are of central and paramount importance for the plastic character of the dialectical process. This is brought out most evidently in her reading of Hegel’s interpretation of divine kenosis, that process described in Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians, as Christ’s emptying out or voiding of his divinity as he becomes incarnate in flesh. Malabou notes the way in which for Hegel kenosis is the movement by which God, on becoming incarnate, places himself outside of himself and alienates himself from himself, and thus accomplishes his divine essence in the contingent body of Christ. This movement exactly mirrors the dialectical structure of Hegelian subjectivity and its transcendental origin, or, as Malabou puts it: “there is an essential and indissoluble rapport between the kenosis of the divine and the emptiness of the transcendental. Working his way from one void to another, Hegel brings to light the kenotic essence of modern subjectivity.”¹⁵ So transcendental subjectivity, in its plasticity and dialectical becoming, is, at the very beginning of Malabou’s philosophical trajectory, characterized as vacuity, as void.

Given the Hegelian context none of this should be in any way surprising, but it is interesting and important to trace the way in which the central place given to the

void in Malabou's understanding of plasticity develops in subsequent philosophical contexts and engagements. So in *Le Change Heidegger*, or *The Heidegger Change* as it is appears in its English translation, plasticity is recast for the first time in terms of an originary ontological mutability and transformability. Malabou demonstrates the way in which Heidegger's thinking of ontological difference and his destruction or overcoming of metaphysics testifies to the convertibility of different regimes of being and to an understanding of being itself as a primordial economy of change, modification or exchangeability. What Heidegger's thinking shows us therefore is that "being is nothing ... but its mutability, and that ontology is therefore the name of an originary migratory and metamorphic tendency".¹⁶ Yet if being is nothing but its mutability, nothing but originary exchange, change and transformation, then it is, in an important sense, also and very simply nothing in and of itself. It cannot be named as substance and is necessarily without essence or ground. In the place of ground or substantial foundation there is only a void of groundlessness. It is this groundlessness that informs Malabou's thinking of the fantastic in philosophy that gives the subtitle to *The Heidegger Change*. For the originary ontological groundlessness or void makes it necessary that the site of being is not nameable as such by means of anything other than phantasmatic images, or as Malabou puts it: "The fantastic: the locus of originary (ex)change can only ever be invested with images. The concept falls forever short of it".¹⁷ So this fantastical character of ontology, the nameability of being only in the plastic and mutable phantasmatic image, means that originary being only shows itself in and as a series of masks, each succeeding the other, but nowhere in this succession does anything lie behind or beneath the mask itself. Originary exchangeability, change and transformation are *as such* only in and through this primordial absence or void of essence, substance or ground.

These considerations may seem to be rather abstract, and one might wonder whether being in Heidegger, like the Hegelian kenotic subjectivity, thought as an emptying out, or absence, of substance, can ever be understood as materiality, as the very real malleability and plasticity of material forms. Yet Malabou is at pains to point out that the exchangeability of being that she is trying to discern as the most originary economy of Heidegger's ontology always concerns the material real, our own material real and its capacity to change, to manifest itself differently in the destruction of old, and the emergence of new, material forms. Here the originary void, the transformability of phantasmatic images of being and the plasticity of material forms, beings and entities all need to be thought together.

And Malabou's conjugation of the biological phenomenon of neuroplasticity with the philosophical conceptions of plasticity and transformation drawn from Hegel and Heidegger achieves just such a thinking together. In *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* the dialectical, plastic subjectivity described by way of Hegel in the earlier work is recast as the plasticity of the neuronal self, the self that emerges, and that is articulated in and through, the formation of neural connections and networks within the brain. Here brain plasticity is that capacity of neural networks to receive and to give form, to be formed, deformed, and reformed throughout the life of the brain in its ongoing interactions with its surrounding environment and world. The neuronal self, Malabou argues, drawing on the work of neurobiological thinkers such as Antonio Damasio and Joseph LeDoux, is mapped only in the material structure of its neural connections and networks and, according to the properties of life-long neuro-plasticity, it is "structured by the dialectical play of the emergence and annihilation of form".¹⁸ Yet for all its biologically determined physicality the neuronal self here is no less ungrounded and exposed to a void of substance or being than is Hegel's kenotic subjectivity, or Heidegger's originary economy of ontological mutability and exchange.

And this is where things become particularly difficult and complicated in Malabou's thinking. For she needs to find some way of articulating the ontological continuity between what are, after all, two very different registers: that of biological and neurobiological physicality, on the one hand, and dialectical or phenomenological subjectivity on the other. Or, put another way, an ontological continuity needs to be articulated between one register which erases the transcendental and another which requires it. And it is here that Malabou nevertheless uses the language of *discontinuity*, of rupture, breach, and abyssal opening, and it is precisely *here* that the place of the void can be discerned once more. For if the neuronal and the mental, in their ontological continuity, nevertheless necessarily remain as two distinct registers, then the continuity at stake here is by no means a seamless continuum. Malabou writes: "Only an ontological explosion could permit the transition from one order to another, from one organisation to another".¹⁹ And, she continues: "This explosive and formative effect corresponds to the transformation of one motor regime into another, a transformation necessitating a rupture, the violence of a gap that interrupts all continuity,"²⁰ concluding finally: "one might suppose, at the very core of the undeniable complicity that ties the cerebral to the psychical and the mental, a series of leaps or gaps."²¹

This might sound rather like a straightforward reintroduction of the mind-body split, an acknowledgement that, whatever neuroscience might tell us about

the undeniable complicity of the cerebral and the psychical, there will always necessarily be a gaping chasm or opening between them. But this is not so. Rather than a breach between two distinct ontological realms, the substance of physical and biological form, on the one hand, and the ideality or transcendence of thought on the other, what is at play here is the groundlessness, abyssal opening, or ontological void that subtends both instances and which makes possible the play of transition or transformation from one to the other. The ontological groundlessness of both the neuronal and the mental indicates that neither are self-sufficient substances in themselves. Both are articulated only in their relationality and the relation of transition, transformation or exchange from one to the other is made possible by the material spacing, differentiation and singularization that ontological groundlessness makes possible in the first instance.

The role of ontological groundlessness in thinking the mutual intrication of the neuronal and the mental is made much more explicit in *Before Tomorrow*. Here epigenesis, as thought from the biological perspective, and the epigenesis of reason, as thought by Kant, are brought together in much the same way as biological neuroplasticity and Hegelian plasticity are brought together in *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* Here it is worth reminding ourselves that within biology neuroplasticity is a specific manifestation of epigenetic development. Epigenetics in general studies the way in which the information contained in the genome is translated into the form and behaviour of a biological organism specifically taking into account the role of environmental influences and biochemical mechanisms which affect morphological and behavioural development without changing the DNA sequence itself. So neuroplasticity must be understood as the development of neurons, synapses, and neural interconnectivity in general, under the influence of biochemical and environmental factors which supplement and interact with the expression of genes leaving the gene sequences themselves intact.

The most striking and original achievement of *Before Tomorrow* is to argue that the epigenetic paradigm needs to be considered as a new form of the transcendental. In a complex and wide-ranging reading of Kant's thinking about the epigenesis of reason in the first *Critique*, Malabou argues that the transcendental moment of thought should no longer be understood in terms of a strict *a priori* of logical invariance or predisposition towards logical or categorial structure. Rather, the *a priori* structure of thought must be understood as being folded into the temporal and material becoming of epigenetic development and specifically that of neuroplasticity. But what this means, of course, is that the logical and categorial structure of thought, as folded into epigenetic becoming, formation

and articulation, has no timeless, transcendent or fixed essence or ground. Once again thought is shown to unfold in and as an absence of ground, or as Malabou puts it: “There is an epigenesis of reason because the a priori has no meaning. Rationality engenders itself—invents its forms—out of this necessary lack.”²² The absence of a timeless or transcendent ground within thought is central to the thinking of the epigenetic transcendental in *Before Tomorrow* and is explicitly affirmed on a number of occasions. So epigenesis is, for instance, “the origin born of the lack of origin, the lack of meaning of the origin.”²³ Yet this is not to be understood in privative terms, since “the absence of a foundation is a resource and not a lack,” and indeed, “it is perhaps the resource of absence that defines the transcendental,”²⁴ leading finally to the conclusion that “the transcendental is not based on anything” (*le transcendental ne repose sur rien*).²⁵ Malabou’s singular achievement here is to argue that an absence of foundation or ground is by no means an absence of reason and that, on the basis of an ontologically groundless biological epigenetic process, reason can find its form.

Arguably, the conjugation of the neuronal and the mental which was first elaborated in *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* finds here its most philosophically developed and accomplished form. The bringing together of neuroplasticity and Hegelian subjectivity is superseded by the co-articulation of a biological and philosophical reinterpretation of epigenesis and of epigenetic temporal becoming. And once again the ontological void finds its place, here as the most originary condition or resource of epigenetic plasticity, allowing epigenesis to be reformulated as the transcendental moment within a strictly biological account of the origin of thought and reason.

SCIENCE AND THE VOID

At this point a decisive question might be posed. It is clear that the affirmation of ontological groundlessness is eminently possible in the context of certain philosophical interpretations of Hegel and Kant, and arguably expedient in any interpretation of Heidegger. But is it philosophically compatible with the epistemological and ontological commitments implicit in neurobiological or more generally scientific discourses? Is there really a place for the void in biology and within the broader scientific worldview?

The answer is a plausible “yes” and, in fact, even the most hard-nosed of contemporary scientific metaphysicians are able to acknowledge that science does not furnish us with an ontology which can be firmly grounded in notions

of substance, essence or any other foundational moment. I am thinking here, by way of example, of the Ontic Structural Realism defended by James Ladyman and Don Ross in their 2007 work *Every Thing Must Go* and in the wider contemporary project of scientific metaphysics in which they and their colleagues are engaged.²⁶ Following and radicalising the naturalist primacy accorded science I described earlier, Ladyman and Ross argue that metaphysics must be guided exclusively by what fundamental physics tells us is the case about the universe. Their overtly scientific position suggests that all metaphysical thinking that is not so guided and also constrained by fundamental physics should be abandoned. They refer specifically in their polemic to analytic metaphysics and do not even mention the continental tradition which, one would imagine, they would dismiss out of hand. Yet even from this position of extreme scientism Ladyman and Ross argue that all science can know of being is structure and relations, and that structure and relations are determined ultimately and solely as the information that they bear or articulate. Citing physicists such as Jeffrey Bub, Anton Zeilinger and John Archibald Wheeler, Ladyman and Ross argue that information, understood in the Shannon-Weaver sense of the term, is *the* fundamental category according to which physical reality can be known or determined and that information may ultimately come to be “regarded as primitive in physics” and “in some sense be all there is.”²⁷ As they also point out, information is an abstract mass noun; it does not designate substance or essence nor any substantial entity or thing. This has led Ladyman and Ross elsewhere in their collaborative writing explicitly to deny that there is any convincing basis at all for believing that a “ground of things” exists as such. Ontic structural realism, then, is very much a thinking of ontological groundlessness insofar as it thinks the being of the universe only in relational terms and as information.

One could cite scientist-philosophers such as Bernard d’Espagnat who have interpreted quantum theory in similar terms, but perhaps more pertinent, given Malabou’s engagement with neuroscience, would be to pose the same kind of question in relation to biology rather than physics. The biological thought of Georges Canguilhem is perhaps especially pertinent here. Intriguingly, Canguilhem is cited twice in *Before Tomorrow*: at the beginning, by way of an epigraph, and in a subsequent footnote.

The interest in reading Malabou alongside or through the thought of Canguilhem lies in the fact that he develops a purely relational theory and ontology of biological individuation. Plasticity in Malabou, understood as a fundamental order of transformation, mutability, and exchange, needs necessarily to be

understood in relational terms or again as a purely relational ontology—there is plastic transformation because one instance or form of material existence in some way relates to another in the very plastic process of transformation itself.

Canguilhem's understanding of biological individuation is developed in a diffuse way across a range of his writings, most notably perhaps in essays collected in the 1952 work *Knowledge of Life*.²⁸ His thinking here develops in the context of reflections upon the history of cell theory and upon the relation between organisms and their environment. It is succinctly expressed in the following quotation from the essay "The Living and its Milieu":

From the biological point of view, one must understand that the relationship between the organism and its environment is the same as that between the parts and the whole of an organism. The individuality of the living thing does not stop at its ectodermic borders any more than it begins at the cell. The biological relation between a being and its milieu is a functional relationship, and thereby a mobile one; its terms successively exchange roles. The cell is a milieu for intracellular elements; it itself lives in an interior milieu which is sometimes on the scale of the organ and sometimes of the organism; the organism itself lives in a milieu that, in a certain fashion, is to the organism what the organism is to its components.²⁹

Here we have a model of biological individuation in which there are nothing but relations within relations, within relations: for instance, diverse biochemical processes and their relations to molecular microstructures that in turn form intracellular structures, such structures then functioning in relation to the cell, those of the cell to the organ, of the organ to the organism, and of the organism to its environment. It is essential to note that for Canguilhem, the biological functional relations he describes should not be understood as relations between already existing entities but always as "relations to," that is, as a relation of one point in a structure to another point which, in relating, constitutes the entity as such in both its interiority and exteriority.

In this context it is equally essential to note that for Canguilhem, such a "relation to" is understood as a sense or meaning: the French term is "sens," and that "sens" in his thinking takes on a fundamental ontological status. He defines "sens" as follows: "From the biological and psychological point of view, sense is an appreciation of values in relation to a need. And for the one who experiences

and lives it, a need is an irreducible, and thereby absolute, system of reference.”³⁰ Biological functional relations here, understood as “relations to,” constitute biological entities or organisms as a “sens,” where “sens” must be understood axiologically as a system of reference experienced and lived in such a way as to centre the entity and individuate it as such, as a discrete and autonomous value. In this way the biological entity is both fully relational and fully individuated out of its relations, and at the same time its individuality nevertheless has a fundamental ontological status. This leads Canguilhem to argue that “the being of the organism is its sense.” To live, for Canguilhem, is to organise a milieu according to a centre of reference constituted out of “relations to,” but as a need or lived sense this centre of reference becomes absolute and irreducible or ontologically self-subsistent.

Canguilhem’s purely relational ontology of biological organisms, where being is only *as* the “relation-to” of sense, is no more amenable to the idea of ontological foundation or ground than is Ladyman and Ross’s Ontic Structural Realism. As has been suggested, Malabou’s neurobiological account of plasticity, articulated as it is within a necessarily relational ontology, is particularly susceptible to further development in relation to Canguilhem’s thought. As was suggested earlier, the possibility of transition and transformation of the neuronal to the mental in *What Should We Do With Our Brain?* turned on the ontological groundlessness of both instances. The ontological explosion between the neuronal and the mental, the series of leaps or gaps between them and across which they relate to each other are, remember, not a traditional mind-body gap but rather the void of being or substance to which both instances are exposed and which makes the relation and transition of one to the other possible. If, following Canguilhem, we understand the physical organisation of biological structure *and* the worldly or environmental directedness of the individual organism as both equally articulating ungrounded relations of *sense*, then the ontological continuity of both the neuronal and the mental is confirmed. What we call thought, consciousness, subjectivity, self-awareness, or the logical or categorial structures of reason are all of the order of sense understood as “relation-to,” and are therefore in an ontological continuum with the relations of sense that organise the biological genetic and epigenetic formation of organisms. And relationality here, as the material spacing, genesis and epigenesis of biological structure, and the meaningful directedness of an organism to its world, occurs always and only in and through the void, the absence of origin within being.

The epigenetic transcendental, Malabou writes, must be understood as “hermeneutic latitude, the power of *sense*, opened in the heart of the biological”.³¹

In so doing she has posed a major challenge to all neurobiological thought that is committed to reductivism and eliminativism and the rejection of the transcendental moment within thought itself. Her thinking also shows, it has been argued here, that the void necessarily has its place, both in the neurobiological and the philosophical perspective and in the possibility of bringing the two together. By this reading, the opening of a hermeneutic latitude or power of sense at the heart of the biological requires plasticity to be thought and elaborated within the context of a purely relational ontology which would be co-articulated with a primordial absence of ontological foundation or ground.

Malabou's next project is to develop further the thinking begun in *Before Tomorrow* through an interrogation of the symbolic dimension of biological life. The argument outlined here can be more thoroughly developed both in relation to Canguilhem's biological philosophy of sense and in relation to Jean-Luc Nancy's thinking of sense and world, as developed in texts such as *The Sense of the World*, and his philosophical elaboration of ontological groundlessness in Kantian critical philosophy developed in the 1988 work *The Experience of Freedom*.

By way of conclusion, it should be emphasised that what is at stake in this reading of Malabou, and the broader synthetic reading of Malabou, Nancy and Canguilhem in which it can be situated, is the possibility of placing the qualitative experience of thought and consciousness and the purely physical and bio-chemical processes of life and living organisms on the same ontological footing. To reiterate: the life of subjective consciousness, perception, thought and experience interrogated by transcendental philosophy, phenomenology, and post-phenomenological thinking is to be understood in the same terms as the material, objective, bio-chemical and physical structures known to science: namely as an order of ungrounded and relational sense. There is no ontological separation here between the material structure of life and the physical processes that govern it on the one hand, and the qualitative experience of the living organism's interaction with its material milieu on the other. Both are and are lived as relational sense.

This is important because there is a tendency of much scientific or scientific thinking to be reductionist or eliminative with regard to qualitative experience, subjective consciousness or mental states. So, for instance, in the case of the rather extreme scientism of Ladyman and Ross alluded to earlier, not only do they deny the objective existence of independent things or entities at the metaphysical level—hence the title of their work *Every Thing Must Go*—they also deny the existence of the qualia of first person perceptual experience. For Ladyman and

Ross, the notion of a quale of sense perception is an idle metaphysical category, referring to an illusory subjective epiphenomenon which must give way to a more scientific and objective measurement of what my physical brain is doing when it experiences the colour of the carpet and walls around us. Similarly, the eliminative materialism of the likes of Paul Churchland claims that a large number of the mental states that we believe we experience, states such as belief, desire, pain, and again qualitative perceptual experience, do not really exist as such and can only be judged or endowed with existence according their neural basis or how well they reduce to the level that can be known or observed by science.

Broadly speaking, for those of us working in the arts and humanities, and within large swathes of the social sciences, the reductivism that can be identified in mainstream naturalism, scientism, and areas such as eliminative materialism, or perhaps even cognitive science and evolutionary psychology, is difficult to accept or endow with any theoretical or philosophical credence. Indeed, for those disciplines which have qualitative, non-scientifically objectifiable experience as their principle subject of enquiry—aesthetic experience, symbolic experience, collective social and cultural experience, and so on—scientific reductivism or eliminativism may border on an absurdity.

The category of sense that has been introduced here by way of Malabou's recent work on epigenesis and in relation to Canguilhem's biological philosophy is in essence a purely speculative (and not at all a scientific) category. As indicated earlier, this idea will be developed much further elsewhere in relation to Jean-Luc Nancy's thought.³² In many ways it is, along with the idea of ontological groundlessness or void, a key hinge around which something like a post-continental naturalism can be seen to turn. Sense emerges in Nancy out of a purely philosophical trajectory of thought, through the contexts of Kantian and post-Kantian thought, phenomenology, existential ontology and deconstruction. In Malabou, as has been shown, it emerges in the conjuncture of post-deconstructive and biological accounts of plasticity and epigenesis. In Canguilhem it emerges in the context of lengthy speculative and philosophical reflections upon and interpretations of the history of cell theory and the relation between organisms and their environment. And here, by way of a final conclusion, something of the relation of philosophy to science in this context can be articulated. For if something like a philosophical naturalism can be identified in Nancy and Malabou, with a little help from Canguilhem, then it is not a naturalism according to which philosophy is exactly continuous with or subordinate to scientific knowledge or what our best theories dictate at any one time we can know of reality. Rather,

this post-continental naturalism would locate itself at a certain limit point of both philosophical and scientific thought, the speculative moment that arises and necessarily imposes itself when both philosophy *and* science come to the limit of what they can currently or constitutively determine of being. The experience of limits, of ungraspable finitude, indeterminacy, and of metaphysical exhaustion is central to the philosophical tradition of “French theory.” It could be questioned whether most scientists working at the cutting edge of quantum mechanics, cosmology, and the life sciences, for instance, would not readily admit the need for a speculative moment within their activity when they move beyond what is known to develop concepts which might advance their research. It is in the experience of, and encounter with, the limits of thought and knowledge that we perhaps come closest to the intuition or experience of ontological groundlessness. And it is here that speculation becomes necessary and that concepts such as sense that can bridge the gap between qualitative, subjective experience and quantifiable objective reality become useful. To this extent it may be that if something like a post-continental naturalism within contemporary French thought can be identified, it will necessarily also be a speculative naturalism.

NOTES

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7. Graham Harman, "The Current State of Speculative Realism," *Speculations: A Journal of Speculative Realism*, 4 (2013, 23).
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11. Catherine Malabou, *Avant Demain: Epigénèse et rationalité*. Paris: Presses Universitaire de France, 2015; *Before Tomorrow: Epigenesis and Rationality*. Trans. Carolyn Shread. Cambridge : Polity, 2016. References will be made to the original French edition followed by a reference to the English translation.
12. Malabou, *Avant demain*, 2; *Before Tomorrow*, 1.
13. Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, 55.
14. Malabou, *Avant demain*, 262; *Before Tomorrow*, 152.
15. Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*. London: Routledge, 2004, 111.
16. Catherine Malabou, *The Heidegger Change*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2012, 270.
17. Malabou, *The Heidegger Change*, 71.
18. Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, 72.
19. Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, 72.
20. Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, 73.
21. Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, 75.
22. Malabou, *Avant demain*, 169; *Before Tomorrow*, 98.
23. Malabou, *Avant demain*, 170; *Before Tomorrow*, 98.
24. Malabou, *Avant demain*, 180-81; *Before Tomorrow*, 105.
25. Malabou, *Avant demain*, 271; *Before Tomorrow*, 157.
26. James Ladyman and Don Ross, *Every Thing Must Go*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
27. Ladyman and Ross, *Every Thing*, 186.
28. Georges Canguilhem, *Knowledge of Life*. Trans. Stefanos Gerolanos and Daniela Ginsburg. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008.
29. Canguilhem, *Knowledge of Life*, 111.
30. Canguilhem, *Knowledge of Life*, 120.
31. Malabou, *Avant demain*, 153; *Before Tomorrow*, 89.
32. See note 1 above.

from "l'inexistence divine"

quentin meillassoux, translated by
nathan brown

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of Quentin's Meillassoux's slim treatise *Après la Finitude* in 2006, rumours have circulated concerning the relation of this book to a larger work in progress, titled *L'Inexistence Divine*, of which the arguments in *After Finitude* constitute a partial précis.¹ Yet we already have the complete text of Meillassoux's doctoral dissertation of the same title, filed at Université de Paris in 1997.² Indeed, a digital file of the dissertation is readily available online. Doubtless the arguments of the dissertation might be refined, expanded, consolidated—yet the text that we have, filed when Meillassoux was thirty years old, is a coherent and rigorously argued philosophical system, at ease with the entirety of the tradition in which it intervenes and immensely consequential for a contemporary understanding of philosophical rationalism, of the philosophy of time, of the relation between necessity and contingency, and of the theory of physical law.

What is striking about this document, for the reader of *After Finitude*, is the marked difference of its rhetorical strategies, its order of reasons, and its philosophical style from those of Meillassoux's first book. The dissertation has in common with *After Finitude* the clarity of argumentation and the conceptual radicality that made that book a signal intervention in contemporary philosophy. But here

we find little or no reference to some of the major watchwords that have guided the reception of *After Finitude*, for better or for worse. The term “correlationism” is nowhere to be found among the dissertation’s four hundred pages (though there is a twenty page section discussing the problem of “the correlation” in Heidegger’s oeuvre). Whereas *After Finitude* opens by challenging “correlationism” to account for “the arché fossil” or “the problem of ancestrality,” a brief subsection titled “Le problème du fossile” occupies just over two pages in the middle of Meillassoux’s dissertation. Perhaps even more notable is the rhetorical tenor of the argumentation, which largely forgoes the polemical style characterizing much of *After Finitude*. The version of “L’Inexistence Divine” that we have in the archives develops a more patient and constructive relation to the tradition it interrogates, featuring detailed and powerful commentaries on Hegel, Heidegger, Heraclitus and Anaximander, and on the problem of participation in Plato. Absent are the terminological fireworks of references to “hyper-chaos” or the “menacing power” and “omnipotence” of time; in their place we find a more sober reflection upon the immanence of time and becoming.

Indeed, what comes to the fore in this early work is the degree to which Meillassoux’s philosophy is centrally concerned with how to think the relation between immanence and becoming through a theory of time. Whereas “something akin to Time” is identified with “Chaos” in *After Finitude*, it becomes clear in “L’Inexistence Divine” that the philosophy of time is the major problematic within which Meillassoux situates his theory of absolute contingency. In my view, the dissertation might fruitfully be read as an effort to go beyond Heideggerian and Derridean responses to Hegel’s thinking of time—as an effort to carry out the properly ontological thinking of time promised by Heidegger as Division III of *Being and Time*, a philosophical project that Badiou’s renovation of ontology in *Being and Event* largely left aside. When Heidegger declares, in section 65 of *Being and Time*, that “Temporality is the primordial ‘outside of itself’ in and for itself,”³ he puts us on the path toward a difficult conjunction of exteriority, immanence, and temporality that Meillassoux pursues with striking originality, beyond the “correlational” structure of Heidegger’s thought.

Equally important is the very different articulation of the Principle of Factiality that we find in Meillassoux’s dissertation, and it is this section of the text that I have chosen to translate below. This principle—that only contingency cannot be thought as contingent, that only contingency is necessary, and thus absolute—is established in the central chapter of *After Finitude*. There, however, Meillassoux’s

argument takes the form of a dialogue between correlationist, subjective idealist, and speculative philosophers, circling around a discussion of claims about the afterlife and working through the exposure of impasses internal to the relation between correlationism and subjective idealism. In “L’Inexistence Divine,” on the other hand, we an argument for the principle of factuality articulated without any reference to the impasses of other positions, and thus stands more clearly on its own terms. Perhaps we might view Meillassoux’s development of his critique of correlationism as a response to objections, or possible objections, to this form of the argument. If so, it might help us to understand and situate some of the discursive or logical problems Meillassoux attempts to resolve in *After Finitude*. What is particularly notable about the dissertation’s initial articulation of the Principle of Factuality is the greater emphasis placed upon the “anhypothetical” form of the argument, the status of which is here granted a full subsection of the discussion and theorized more explicitly than in the version published later.

I would like to thank Quentin Meillassoux for his permission to translate and publish this excerpt from his doctoral work, with the proviso that this should be considered a provisional stage of his argumentation. Any errors or infelicities of the translation are solely my responsibility. My hope is that readers of French will turn to the original text of Meillassoux’s dissertation in order to consider the arguments of *After Finitude* in relation to his earlier, more expansive presentation. My sense is that, until we have access to his published revision and further development of this impressive philosophical beginning, knowledge of the dissertation would substantially refine discussions of his thought.

FROM "L'INEXISTENCE DIVINE," PART TWO. THE FACTIAL

We will see that the resolution of the problem of induction ultimately requires the demonstration of the impossibility of the Whole. But, more generally, we have noted that this demonstration requires a profound rethinking of the notion of contingency. Yet to rethink contingency is to rethink *as well* its immediate contrary, necessity. We will thus, in this second part, attempt a redefinition of this pair of opposites—a redefinition that will admittedly have consequences far greater than the resolution of the problem of induction. In effect, it is the notion of reason itself that will be modified. Since reason is defined as a discourse grounded upon necessary argumentation, as opposed to any other arbitrary discourse, to rethink necessity is thus to modify the very notion of rationality. The demonstration of the impossibility of the Whole will thus be a consequence of an immense modification of our usual concepts, as we will now endeavor to show in detail.

What we call the factial, or *factial ontology*, is the ground of our entire discourse: it rests upon an unprecedented redefinition of necessity, and by the same token of reason as necessary discursivity. This redefinition grounds our concept of un-subordinated contingency in its distinction from chance, since to transform the region of necessity amounts to modifying the frontiers of its other, which is contingency, or facticity, as such.⁴

1. THE PRINCIPLE OF FACTIALITY

Formulation

Reason, one says, is the field of necessary discursivity. But what is necessity? Nothing seems to be necessary, since beings, in their determinate and empirical existence, given in their radical contingency, make up our world in its entirety: I can not, it seems, give any ultimate reason for the existence not only of this or that thing (every reason requires another reason, all equally contingent, and so on to infinity), but even for the existence of the world in general (the world appears to me as a pure fact). The canonical paradox of rationality is thus given in this form: reason presents itself as *universal* discursivity, *necessary* and *true*, thus as the thought of that which is—but that which is is given as *particular* and *contingent*. If reason is not a chimera, then it must resolve this problem: how to disengage, amid the factual beings given in experience, that which, adequate to beings as such, is not itself contingent? What we call the factial, or principle of factiality, proposes

an unprecedented solution to this classical difficulty, which itself involves the whole status of the rational.

We must find that which, at the heart of the facticity of beings, is not itself factual. The factual solution is formulated thus: *what is, is factual, but that what is is factual, this can not be a fact. Only the facticity of what is can not be factual.* Yet again, put otherwise: *it can not be a fact that what is is a fact.* The rational, as necessitating logos (*logos nécessaire*), is then identified with a discourse bearing upon what all beings are (*ce qu'est tout étant*), *that is to say upon the necessity of contingency.* The contingency of beings, and this alone, is not a contingent property of beings.

The elucidation of this concept of necessity rests thus upon what we call the *principle of factuality*: *only the facticity of what is can not itself be a fact.* We thus distinguish the facticity, or the contingency, of what is from the *factuality which designates the impossibility of redoubling facticity, that is to say of attributing facticity to facticity itself.*

The principle of factuality will then have the burden of establishing a necessary discursivity, *non-contingent*—which we call “factual”—whose object is the non-factual (necessary) facticity of what is.

2. CLARIFICATION

a. Non-Redoubling

The specificity of the principle of factuality does not reside in stating the non-contingency of contingency, but in the affirmation that *only* contingency can not itself be a contingent property of what is.

The non-contingency of contingency could signify that contingency is deduced from a principle *exterior* to it and which will be, itself, a necessary being: such is Hegelian contingency, deduced as a necessary moment of the Whole, and which thus finds in the absolute its non-contingent reason.

The affirmation of the non-contingency of contingency could also signify that what exists is certainly contingent, but that this contingency is not total, absolute, i.e. that a necessary principle limits this contingency from its exterior, for example a law or a logical principle. One will say, from this perspective, that it is contingent that a being has such and such empirical determination, but that it is

not entirely contingent, because its contingency is proscribed by certain physical or logical principles.

The non-contingency of contingency expresses, in these two cases, the limitation of contingency by principles exterior to it and declares these necessary (we recognize here the thesis of subordinated contingency). But why these principles are necessary, from whence their necessity derives, how contingency may itself be limited by what it is not, precisely these questions are no longer posed since they seem, from the perspective of such a conception, insoluble or trite.

In relation to these theses, the novelty of the principle of factuality is thus as follows: we affirm that contingency *and it alone* is *absolute*, i.e. *insubordinate* to every principle exterior to it, and *we draw from this very absoluteness of contingency the necessary principles by which it is usually limited*. No doubt, it is in this proposition that the originality and “strangeness” fundamental to the factual method resides. If its meaning is not mastered, all our succeeding statements will seem absurd. Let us see what this assertion entails.

b. Figures

The contingency of what is must, according to us, be considered as absolute. This absolute signifies that *every determination of a being may not be*: one can not find any possibility of demonstrating that a being must be thus rather than otherwise, since every assertion of this order refers to another determinate condition, which itself has no reason for being thus rather than otherwise. No determination can therefore be called necessary, which notably means that no determinate physical law can be considered as necessary. It follows that necessity must be drawn from that which, in a being, is not one of its determinations. Such is the case, and the *unique* case, of the contingency of its determinations: since *the contingency of the being's determinations is not a contingent determination supplementary to this being*.

That a being must be this color, with this form, in this place, that it has this or that determination, this always appears to us as a fact. But that all these determinations are factual is not a *new* determination of the being which would be added to those preceding it. In that case, it would itself be a contingent determination. But it would then add to the contingency of this determination that contingency is itself a new contingent determination of the object, and so on indefinitely. That the object is a fact would thus itself appear as a fact that might not have been: as

if the object may not be contingent, just as it may not be red or sweet. One would then say: the object is in fact red, it is in fact a fact, as if this facticity of the empirical were itself an empirical fact *among others*.

On the contrary, it must be affirmed that *contingency can not be a contingent determination of beings, since it is the contingency of these determinations*. And *this is not a simple affirmation, but the unveiling of the source of every necessary statement as the impossibility of redoubling the factual—i.e. the impossibility of attributing facticity to facticity itself, of affirming the contingency of contingency*.

This impossibility thus allows us to see: the factual is what may be or not be; facticity can not then itself be a fact, “something” which may be or not be, since such an affirmation must *necessarily* pass through the affirmation of the facticity of facticity, i.e. through a conditioning of facticity *by itself*—that which, as we have established, can not condition facticity. We can justifiably say that the statement “X is red” is true on the condition that red indeed exists in X. But we cannot say “X is contingent” is true on the condition that contingency “exists” in X, since this conditioning itself appeals to the contingency of all determination. We thus see that *we can not speak of the contingency of a being in the same way we speak of a contingent being*.

The *intuitive* grasp of this *difference* (contingency is not given in experience as an empirical property) to which *responds* the unconditional rationale of contingency (it is impossible to say that contingency may not be *without* the presupposition that “contingency is contingent”)—this understanding is revealed as the comprehension of the veritable difference between contingency and necessity. Necessity is not a mysterious property of beings, *alongside* other properties that are, themselves, contingent. Necessity designates the very contingency of all determinations of beings, *contingency as such*. Or more precisely, necessity resides in the impossibility of speaking of the contingency of beings as if this contingency were itself a contingent being, i.e. a being at all, since all beings are contingent. *Necessity thus consists in the impossible auto-attribution of contingency, the impossibility of qualifying the contingency of contingency, the fact of the factual—what we have called the impossibility of redoubling the factual*.

This non-redoubling reveals the origin of *every* necessary statement: *a necessary statement has as its object not a being, but the contingency of beings*. This point is essential: it signifies that the principle of factuality reveals not a necessity among

others, but *the very essence* of necessity. This principle thus takes on the burden grounding—or of refuting—the necessity of statements concerning *that which is*—logical, mathematical, or philosophical. Again, it signifies that *only the necessity of contingency will adjudicate the necessity of these statements*. The principle of factuality thus “radiates,” according to a specific procedure, toward a multiplicity of propositions—those we call *Figures*—which draw their legitimacy from this center alone. These Figures, in multiplying the “forms” of necessity to which beings are submitted, progressively illustrates, following a “paradox” constitutive of the factual, *an auto-limitation of contingency*.

We will see that the principle of factuality grounds as well *the absolute* (the term will be justified) necessity of the principle of non-contradiction, of the impossibility of the Whole, or even the necessary existence of something in general. *Because contingency is necessary, everything does not prove possible (tout ne s'avère pas possible)*: the necessity of contingency *implies* the impossibility of contradiction or of the Whole. Put otherwise, it is because everything must be contingent that everything can not be possible.

This factual ground of the Figures relies upon the following step: it is a matter of giving a *reason* for the *identification* of the *unthinkability* of a statement with an ontological *impossibility*, and not a simple factual and subjective incapacity. *The factual has for its object the demonstration that unthinkable statements are also impossible*. In order to make this more clear, let us anticipate an example of a Figure, the Figure of non-contradiction. The necessity of this principle usually rests upon the *unthinkability* of contradiction: to think contradictorily is not to think—it is to produce a pure *flatus vocis*—because contradiction is unthinkable. If we would then speak of *something*, of beings in the widest sense—real or possible—we must respect non-contradiction. The necessity of the principle of non-contradiction rests here upon the unthinkability of contradiction. Yet such a principle can do nothing—and this is not its role—to give us a *reason* according to which nothing could—at the heart of being—be unthinkable. Such a principle can not, in sum, deliver us a *reason* why such unthinkability is not a simple *subjective incapacity* on our part to think contradiction. That a God *exists*, who transcends the limits of what is thinkable for us—reason, against this, usually cannot adduce any reason. In general, reason can not give a reason for identifying the unthinkable with the impossible: one can always retort that this unthinkability is a pure fact, due to the conformation of our mind, and this in a sense psychological or transcendental. Such is the canonical limit of rationality, which legitimates through weakness

faith in a beyond of the thinkable. This is why the principle of non-contradiction, the necessary principle *par excellence*, is itself submitted, from such a perspective, to the ultimate contingency of all rational statements: there is no reason why the unthinkable is effectively impossible.

The factual ground of the Figures consists in providing such a reason. This reason will always consist in holding that a Figure is impossible because if it could attain to being it would result in a being that would be necessary. Let us return, by way of illustration, to the example of non-contradiction. One usually affirms that the contingency of a being is *limited* by a logical principle exterior to it: a being, one says, may, in a contingent manner, be red or blue; it may, in a contingent manner, exist or not exist, but if it in fact exists, and if it is red, then it can not be red and not-red at the same time. From this point of view, the necessity of the principle of non-contradiction *limits* the contingency of the being. But, from such a perspective, the necessity of this principle remains *itself* a pure fact, since we can not give a reason according to which a being could not be contradictory. We can only maintain that contradiction is *for us* unthinkable. In sum, the facticity of the being is found to be limited by another fact—that of the unthinkability for us of contradiction. No absolute necessity, unconditioned by a fact, can be attained.

Faced with such a conception, the factual affirms, and claims to demonstrate, that *it is the very contingency of beings that, carried to an absolute, drives the necessity of the principle of non-contradiction.* And this for the *reason* that the necessity of the contingency of beings implies that they not be contradictory, since if a being were contradictory it would have in itself its proper negation *and could not be otherwise.* A contradictory being could not cease to be what it is, since it would also *be* what it is not: it would then *not* be contingent, but necessary, with God as its example, eternal and contradictory, or rather eternal *because* contradictory.⁵ *The principle of non-contradiction,* far from being opposed to what is contingent in beings, draws its whole necessity from the necessary contingency of being. And we see immediately that the preceding objection—claiming that the unthinkability of contradiction is itself a pure fact, thus reaching no ontological impossibility—no longer holds *since this unthinkability rests from now on upon the very necessity of facticity.* One cannot claim that the unthinkability of contradiction rests upon a fact of thought without presupposing that this facticity of thought one has argued is, itself, unsurpassable: but this again legitimates the ground of all necessity, which is the non-contingency of contingency alone. However radical the relativist he cannot, without refuting himself, contest the absoluteness of contingency he deploys

systematically to contest the absoluteness of the concepts of thought. It is by such a procedure that we demonstrate the unconditioned (i.e. absolute) necessity of the Figures and of one of their parts, the impossibility of the Whole.

What are the immediate consequences of this mode of thought? Hitherto transcendence, understood as that which exists beyond the thinkable, benefited from a properly rational legitimation. Because reason could only accept its proper limitation by certain first principles, whatever these were could only be *posited* in their ultimate contingency. Reason, in search of a necessary first principle, therefore itself called for its proper overcoming, and faith could legitimately posit itself as the accomplishment of the rational. One easily grasps that if the itinerary we have proposed succeeds, such an articulation of reason/faith will no longer have any place: it will no longer be possible to limit reason "by reason" due to the facticity of its principles, since these principles will from now on be grounded upon the very necessity of this facticity. And as it is no longer possible to condition this same facticity without appealing to itself ("facticity is a factual principle") reason would appear capable, on its own, of giving reasons for the final *truths* of the real world: the term truth, classically understood as correspondence between thinking and being, is found to be rigorously justified since we demonstrate that rational unthinkability effectively makes us accede to an ontological impossibility. One can no longer claim that thought only gives us access to certain structures that appear to us necessary, and that we cannot surpass this ultimate facticity, since rational necessity derives precisely from this absolute necessity of facticity.

We thus see where the specificity of the factual resides: necessary principles no longer derive from limiting contingency from the outside in the name of a necessity whose origin remains mysterious and, in the last instance, itself contingent; on the contrary, necessary principles are drawn from contingency itself, grasped in its radicality. The remarkable point is that contingency rules itself by these principles that it can not transgress precisely for the reason that they are absolute. The path opened by the factual is thus an unprecedented *semantics* of logic and mathematics, tasked with clarifying these discourses by grasping as their invisible object the necessary contingency of what is.

We will content ourselves in this work with treating the logical principle of non-contradiction, the principle of identity, of the indefinite, and of the infinite. Elsewhere, we will consider the consequences of the principle of factuality for the most classical problems of metaphysics (the problem, here inaugural, of induc-

tion; the problem of knowing why there is something rather than nothing; the problem of solipsism); we will be able to see that in the light of the factial these problems are no longer insoluble or insignificant.

c. The Principle of factiality as anhypothetical principle

The preceding considerations will not fail to seem strange. Understanding the source of this strangeness requires a return to the principle of factiality in order to grasp its exact status.

The “exotic” character of our analysis of the Figures stems from the *mode of reasoning* we have deployed. We *have* reasoned, since we have proposed arguments and arrived at conclusions; but we have done so in such a way that the rationality at work seems *foreign* to what we normally understand by the idea of reason.

This rationality intersects with neither of the *two* conceptions one may generally have of the rational: these two conceptions of the rational we name *metaphysical* and *hypothetical*.

We have tasked ourselves, in due time, with rigorously determining the nature of metaphysics. Let us say for now that metaphysics, according to us, is essentially characterized by the affirmation that *there are necessary beings*. The object of the mode of reason we call metaphysics is to respond to the question: “why is a being thus and not otherwise?” It thus states why it is necessary that a being is what it is—is thus, and not otherwise—by referring this being to the necessity of a reason, of a cause, a cause which is *another* being. Consequently, the purest model of metaphysics is, following Heidegger, *onto-theology*: which puts in play a reasoning that ascends toward a *first* being, a supreme Being which is absolutely necessary because it is *causa sui*, its own reason. For metaphysics to reach this height, a being must be what it is by reason of a first being which must itself be what it is by reason of itself.

It is not difficult to see how the factial is distinguished from this mode of thought: necessity is not the necessity of a being, since there is no necessary being, but of the contingency of beings—contingency which is not itself a being. Factial rationality thus does not give the reason for a singular determination of a being but gives the reason for the contingency of such a determination. *Gives a reason*, this no longer consists in responding to the question: why is it necessary that a being

has these determinations?” but to the question “Why is necessary that the determinations of a being are contingent?” We thus understand how the very notion of reason finds itself detached (*décalée*) from its relation to its metaphysical expression.

However, the contemporary abandonment of metaphysical rationality is such that it is doubtless not the rupture of the factial with the latter that produces this sense of unfamiliarity, *but rather the fact that the factial breaks equally with hypothetical rationality—i.e. with all forms of rationality that set out from a posited beginning.*

The principle of this second rupture is simple because radical: *factial rationality claims to demonstrate its beginning.* It is through this claim that the factial establishes its strangeness in relation to the contemporary epoch, and its appearance of absurdity. For what we call hypothetical reason designates the conception according to which the beginning of reason can only be *posited*—as an axiom, postulate, thesis, hypothesis, etc.—i.e. posited *no less than* the hypothetical-deductive reason deployed by logic and mathematics, or the inductive reason deployed by the experimental sciences. Now this idea of an indemonstrable beginning, posited—“hypothetically,” in the Platonic sense—by all rationality is made the object, in contemporary thought, of what we could call a *consensus*, to my knowledge unwavering. With regard to this consensus, the factial statement of a *demonstrated* first principle seems to rekindle the deepest illusion of philosophy since its Platonic inauguration: to have knowledge of an *anhypothetical* principle, a principle grounded by rational thought which would not itself be posited irrationally (in a contingent manner) but which would, on the contrary, itself be grounded in reason.

Such is, in truth, the case with the principle of factiality: *we affirm that the principle of factiality is the anhypothetical principle demanded since Plato as the first principle of philosophy.* And yet, we affirm *at the same time* that this first principle does *not* lead to a metaphysics, i.e. to a rational ground of the necessity of particular beings that rests upon a supremely necessary being. We must then show how we can hold onto these two ends our affirmation: *anhypothetical ground of the rational and rejection of metaphysics.*

We have said in what respect the principle of factiality breaks with metaphysics, and we have seen in what respect this principle breaks equally with hypothetical rationality. This rupture consists in the principle of factiality *not being posited* but

grounded in a *primary demonstration*. Primary demonstration means this: *argument stamped by necessity presupposing nothing*. In sum, we claim that the principle is demonstrated *but not deduced*: it is demonstrated without being deduced from *another* statement. In order to evaluate this assertion, we must return to the manner in which we uncovered the principle of factuality.

Recall that we set out from a *provisional* definition of contingency. What was the status of this “pre-given” contingency? *This provisional contingency was nothing other than ignorance*. In effect, we have begun by affirming that what is, including ourselves, is given to us without any reason for being, nor any reason for being as it is. The contingency offered to us *at this point* could thus be presented as a *subjective* ignorance of the reason for the being of beings (*d’être de l’étant*). We can not even say if such a reason exists or not, if the notion of reason itself has any meaning. The reason would thus only be given under the form of a subjective and problematic absence formulable as follows: “*I don’t know why things are, and are so; I don’t know if I can know; I don’t know if this question has any meaning.*” “Being contingent” thus signifies my ignorance of the reason for things, my ignorance even of the being or non-being of such a reason, and my ignorance of what such a question could mean. The missing “reason” thus has no positive sense: reason *as absent* refers solely to my *capacity to not understand* why a being would be thus. My *incomprehension* of beings, thus my *power of questioning*, has produced this provisional contingency under the form of a subjective ignorance referring to a reason without proper content, since it is absent, and identified with a problematic project: the demand for a *response* to the “why?”

The principle of factuality consisted in identifying my ignorance with a knowledge. Contingency, in effect, is transformed into a knowledge of the *effective* absence of reason for every being, including the being that I myself am. Let us pause upon this point: the “change of perspective” we call for consists in ceasing to make of contingency a sad subjective incapacity to understand what is, in order, on the contrary, to intuit the contingency *even of that*. One must get used to perceiving—but with a non-empirical perception, with a properly *intellectual* intuition—the real absence of reason for empirical beings, so as to make of facticity a positive access, *a priori* and unsurpassable, to being itself—so as to make thought a power of truth without limit.

The search for a possible reason for beings has thus touched upon the discovery of the very essence of the notion of reason, as reason for the general possibility

for a being, whatever is, to be or to not be. Reason thus no longer resides in the existence or inexistence of a being, but in that if it exists, a being must necessarily be able to not exist, and if it does not exist, must necessarily be able to exist. And for this, it turns out, *there is* a reason, indicated by the argument for the non-redoubling of contingency. Factial reason thus grounds knowledge upon the very essence of ignorance. Non-knowledge carried to its pinnacle becomes the base of knowledge by a “transmutation” of the concept of contingency—that concept which designates the very operation of ignorant questioning, becoming the principle of access to the thought of being itself. But this knowledge of non-knowledge is not Socratic knowledge: it is not the simple understanding of one’s ignorance (I know that I do not know), since knowledge of the necessary contingency of beings leads to certain non-arbitrary consequence for beings—i.e. to the multiple Figures that are so many conditions fulfilled by beings to satisfy of their facticity.

We have disengaged an initial index of the absence of presuppositions from the principle of factuality—producing knowledge from non-knowledge itself, and this through an argument (the non-redoubling). But this will doubtless not suffice, in the eyes of the reader, to ground the assertion of a primary demonstration. One is always entitled to suspect in the claim to ignorance from which we set out, or in the argument employed in response to it, a mass of naïvely unnoticed presuppositions. It is thus the very nature of the argument that must legitimate the primary character of the demonstration: one has to show that this argument can not be conditioned by *another* principle, implicitly admitted, and which in consequence would only be posited in a contingent manner.

To do so, let us reexamine in detail the argument for the non-redoubling of contingency. We have said that contingency can not itself be “relativized” without being immediately reestablished. If I affirm, against the principle of factuality, that contingency itself is contingent, I base this argument upon the idea of an irreducible contingency: in the occurrence of the contingency of contingency. But this contingency “squared” is no different than what I tried to refute: it is absolute, ultimate, irreducible. The contingency of contingency does not give way to any other contingency than factial contingency, i.e. to absolute contingency, *that contingency which, alone, is out of its own reach*. To contest the principle of factuality is thus to refute oneself, it is to claim that contingency is not absolute because it is absolute. The necessity of contingency is thus established by the unthinkability of its conditioning by any thing other than itself, which comes back once again to affirming its unconditionality.

But this unthinkability of the redoubling of contingency *thinks equally its passage to the outside of mere thinkability*—that is to say, its passage *toward being itself*. To affirm, against the principle of factuality, that the thought of contingency is simply a contingent thought—a category that only applies for us, but not in-itself—this can only be done on the condition of affirming the irreducible contingency of thought and, by the same token, of all that it thinks. The idea that what one thinks is only a “for us” that does not reach the in-itself always rests upon the postulate that thought can only attain those thoughts which have no meaning considered independently of the thought that thinks them. After all, one says, just as thought is contingent (man as an individual, and as a species, is mortal) everything that it thinks is as well.

This reasoning falters, however, upon *one* thought, which is precisely the thought of contingency. Because one must admit that, on this point, at least, thought attains a content *that is not relative to itself*—i.e. that is not relative to itself in as much as it is. I can very well tell myself that the world to which have I access only exists in these determinations for as long as I am (there is no time, no qualities, no space, etc., without subjective consciousness of time, of qualities, of space). But precisely this can not be said of the condition of having access to the very contingency of all things, *including and above all of myself as subjective thought of all things*. This relativist, or transcendental, reasoning no longer holds for contingency, *and for it alone*. In the thought of my contingency as a thinking being, I accede in thought to that which is not dependent upon my thought, to an in-itself, and not a for-us. If I think that I may not be, I must effectively admit that this content of thought that is my possible non-being does not depend upon the fact that I think it. Because, if my non-being depended upon the fact that I think it, it would only be possible on the condition that I exist, thus it would not be possible. Contingency, including my own as a thinking being, is thus the only object of thought that is given as necessarily independent of the thought that thinks it. *The contingency of the thought can not depend upon the thought of contingency*.

And thus, that the contingency of contingency is unthinkable *for us* requires that it be impossible *in itself*. *Here it proves unthinkable that the unthinkable is not impossible*. It is unthinkable that contingency be contingent, and it is unthinkable that this unthinkability is not also an impossibility in itself of being, independently of thought.⁶ Thought thus attains in contingency a content independent of its purview, a content radically *exterior* to it. The Figures, consequences of the contingency of beings, are thus so many characteristics of beings which one can no

longer treat as if they only apply for us: they are given, on the contrary, as the properties *in itself* of beings, independently of the existence of thought, since they follow from the contingency of all things, and notably of the thought that thinks them.

In this way, the factial thus returns us to the apparently hackneyed category of the adequation of thought with being. "In this way": this means that the factial secures in one and the same movement *both* the power of thought to think being as such *and* the radical difference between thought and being. Since the Parmenidian statement: "Being and thought are the same," the "crux" of all philosophy resides in that it seems impossible to bind thought to being, in the mode of *truth* (thought thinks that which is), without ending up with a simple *identity* of thought and being (that which is is thought). The principle of factuality *resolves* this aporia. If thought unites with the contingency of that which is, contingency does not unite with it: because the thought *is* a contingent being, whereas the contingency of beings is not itself a being. Thought thus thinks itself as contingent at the same time that it thinks the non-contingency of contingency: that is to say, thought thinks that it *may* disappear, *but that the contingency that it thinks will not disappear with it*. It is contingent that there exists a thought adequate to the necessity of contingency, but it is not contingent that this thought of contingency be necessary, as it is independent of thought: *that there is a donation of facticity is a fact, but that facticity is given as non-factual can not be a fact*. That the essence of beings be thinkable as contingency thus excludes that thought be the essence of beings: because if that which is must be thought as contingent, thought must be a contingent being *among others*.

Thought thus presents itself at one stroke, and for the same reason, as adequate to being and as different from being.

We can now return to the stakes of this discussion to understand the anhypothetical character, demonstrated and non-positated, of the principle of factuality. Our problem is to show that the very nature of the argument grounding the principle of factuality (the non-redoubling of contingency) prohibits us from considering the principle as based upon another principle, necessary to its demonstrative capacity and implicitly *admitted*. In that case, our primary demonstration would only be a consequence of a positated principle, and we would not escape hypothetical rationality. That it is not thus, that the demonstration of non-redoubling can not be said to rest upon anything other than itself, just this is what the following

statement allows us to see: *one cannot condition by a contingent statement a statement bearing upon the unconditionality of contingency.* The general idea is as follows: a “hypothetical” principle is stated as contingent, i.e. as simply posited, as without reason. But the principle of factuality pronounces *that which is of contingency:* its content, its aim, is the essence of contingency. And this essence is that it is impossible to relativize contingency without appealing to it. *Now, such would be precisely the operation which would consist in conditioning the principle of factuality by a posited principle:* one would condition by a statement *granted to be* contingent a statement bearing upon the non-contingency of contingency: one would thus condition anew contingency by itself, and one recognizes anew that it is impossible to condition contingency otherwise than by itself. This would be precisely the content of the factual statement that one would claim to condition.

One may understand more intuitively how the factual frees itself from the constraint of beginning hypothetically by posing the following question: when we claim that reason must set out from a posited principle, *is this assertion itself posited?* If we say yes, in that case the assertion is not necessary: it must then be admitted that another assertion is equally possible, namely: “reason begins with a principle that is not posited, but demonstrated.” If the assertion is posited, it can not then by itself constitute an objection to the factual.

If, on the contrary, one claims that the assertion is necessary, one must proceed to carry out the demonstration. But then this demonstration will itself have to rest upon a posited principle, in which case we are back where we started. This demonstration would therefore have to be primary. And in truth, such is precisely the path followed by the factual: *the theoretician of the factual says the same thing as the partisan of hypothetical reason, except that he demonstrates that which the latter says, and it is by this demonstration that he ceases to say the same thing.*

In order to clarify this last assertion, and to eliminate within it all appearance of paradox, let us tarry with it a little further. We will then have a clear idea of the factual overcoming of hypothetical reason, gathering together the preceding diverse arguments before advancing. In order to do so, it is useful to distinguish between two aspects, always linked, of hypothetical reason: that is, those we call its *empiricism* and its *logicism*. In effect, to affirm that reason must set out from a posited statement can entail: 1) that all thought of the real must set out from particular facts offered by immediate experience, or submitted to its protocols; but 2) the posited beginning designates as well the place of logical principle(s) bound

up with reason itself—among which, fundamentally, is the principle of non-contradiction—which can themselves only be accepted and not demonstrated.

Now, what is the position of the factual vis-à-vis these two aspects of hypothetical reason? Let us begin with empiricism. The empiricist affirms that, if we would establish any knowledge whatever of what there is, we must set out from facts—i.e. from particular facts given in experience. *But the principle of factuality says nothing else*, since it demonstrates that there are only contingent beings, thus particulars, necessarily impossible to know *a priori* in their particularity. One therefore understands what we meant to signify when we stated that the factual says “the same thing” as the partisan of the hypothetical beginning: by this we single out the empirical aspect of the hypothetical beginning, since the factual asserts, like the empiricist, that one can only speak about particular beings through reference to the indeducible givenness of a fact. But the difference between empiricism and the factual is that the factual demonstrates in a non-empirical manner the necessity of the empiricist proposition. Thought, according to us, does not set out from facts, but from the *necessity* of setting out from facts: and this necessity is no longer a fact, but the non-facticity of fact as such.

It is in this same way that we diverge from hypothetical reason in its second aspect, logicism. As we have said, if the necessity that there are only facts is avowed, then this necessity must be able to *ground*—and not only posit—a certain number of principles, those we have previously called Figures, *such as the principle of non-contradiction*. We have already evoked the way in which the factual claims to account for the ontological necessity of this principle, usually confined to the formal consistency of discourse—we will not return to this at the moment. It suffices for now to emphasize that the factual diverges from hypothetical rationality in its logical aspect in that it claims to ground certain of these principles: it does not refute the necessity of these principles but only the idea that this necessity can only be posited. But take note! We do not claim so much as to ground *all* the discursive principles of reason, but only those which are *not* dependent upon the conventions of language. To be clear: it is not a matter of grounding all the principles and axioms deployed by multiple logics and by contemporary mathematics—that would properly be viewed as absurd. On the contrary, it is a matter of distinguishing, amid these principles and axioms, those which have an ontological value and those which have only the value of “interesting” conventions. The factual will function as a kind of sorting mechanism between that which can legitimately be considered a concept applicable to beings as such (the Figures) and that which

is only applicable as a convention allowing us to describe such and such a being in its specificity—in short, the factual procures for us the procedure required to separate ontological propositions from ontic propositions.

Thus, the factual reveals to us the possibility of completely overcoming hypothetical reason in confirming its usual theses: the factual is no longer a mode of hypothetical reason because it demonstrates what the latter posits.

We can now “collect” the divergent arguments employed in the discussion. The weakness of hypothetical reason stems from its inability to elucidate the nature of the contingency of its primary statements. This contingency appears to it as a limit upon thought, as the non-knowledge which presides over all knowledge. But the factual is the operation by which contingency ceases to designate the limit of knowledge in order to identify itself, on the contrary, with the *a priori* knowledge of the effective absence of reason for that which is. This argument, which makes of non-knowledge the primary knowledge, is not a void wisdom knowing that it knows nothing, because the necessary contingency of beings leads to non-arbitrary consequences for beings—the Figures. In clarifying the nature of contingency, the factual proposes an argument that can no longer be linked to another statement of previous knowledge, since every other statement returns us to a newly unelucidated contingency.

The principle of factuality is thus identified with an unconditionable argument making knowledge the very essence of non-knowledge. It is justly said to be anhypothetical, grounded in a primary demonstration.

We summarize thus: *against hypothetical reason and the empiricism* which accompanies it, we affirm that reason can set out from a principle that is necessary but not posited; *against Platonism*, we affirm that the necessity thus attained is not that of a being (or of many) but of the contingency of every being; *against Kantianism*, we affirm that this necessity is a necessity in itself, and not simply for us; and finally, *against Hegelianism*, we affirm that this power of thought to attain a necessary and absolute beginning does not identify thought and being, but guarantees on the contrary the radicality of their differentiation.

NOTES TO TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

1. Selections from Meillassoux's ongoing work on *l'Inexistence Divine* have been translated in Graham Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011. Unfortunately, these translations are appended to an introduction to the philosopher's work that I find misleading.
2. Quentin Meillassoux, "L'Inexistence Divine" (doctoral dissertation, Université de Paris, 1997).
3. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*. Trans. Joan Stambaugh. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010, 314.

NOTES TO MAIN TEXT

4. *Important note.* Let us set these terms once and for all: my object is to determine the nature of the difference between contingency and necessity. Given that my goal is to rigorously define the difference contingency-necessity, initial use of the word "contingent" must rest upon a *provisional* and intuitive definition. This definition, grounded upon the usual meaning of the notion, must guide us, setting out from certain problems, perhaps certain impasses, to posit a definition with a final and rigorous sense, such as will not be very different from the usual meaning but that will appear clarified and free us from previous difficulties.

Being contingent thus designates *for now* indifferently the fact—without reason—of being thus and not otherwise, or the fact—always without reason—of existing rather than not existing. These two meanings are intuitively connected in that being thus or not being thus (being red, round, heavy, one, multiple, etc.) entails that such a determination (red, roundness, etc.) exists or not. Being contingent is thus being *de facto* thus, without ultimately requiring a reason according to which something cannot be otherwise. The term *facticity* is used here as strictly synonymous with the notion of contingency: it designates the character of being contingent or factual (and not, obviously, factitious). The substantives "contingency," "facticity"—to which correspond the adjectives contingent and factual—are thus used as terms entirely substitutable with regard to their signification.

The term "factual" (with an "i") is a neologism that I use indiscriminately as a substantive or an adjective (speaking of the factual, or of factual ontology): the factual is the name of the *theory*, explicated here, of the difference between contingency and necessity. This theory rests upon the notion of factuality, which is different than the notion of facticity (or contingency), and which I define in the following section.

5. The strangeness of this reasoning derives from telling us *why* non-contradiction bears ontological necessity, since this necessity is generally accepted as proceeding from the absolute itself. The reader will spontaneously say that the supposition "If a being were contradictory..." is such an absurdity that it can not give rise to any reasoning. If a being is contradictory, it is nothing, one will say, since nothing can be said of it. But the factual asks *why* a contradictory being can be anything—and if the reader retorts: "Because it is unthinkable"—the factual asks again *why* the unthinkable is impossible. It is to this last and ultimate why that we here provide a response.

6. Unthinkability of the unthinkable—is this not a circle, where I ultimately remain within thought? No, since to suppose that the unthinkable of the unthinkable is an unthinkable

only *for us* is to presuppose anew the contingency of this thought of the thought, etc.

what is a diagram (for a sign)?

james williams

THE SIGN AS SELECTION

Sign (*def.*): A *sign* is the selection of a set against a substratum, and a suite of diagrams enacting the processes accompanying the selection; ex. free water can be given by the sign {water, o\$} and diagrams expressing the social, environmental and existential effects of free water on a wider substratum of relatively stable things and ideas.

When it defines the sign as a selection of a set, process philosophy comes up against a deep problem.¹ Isn't a set a fixed entity, a collection of things?

The first stage in answering this objection rests on describing selection more precisely: first, it is a *selecting*, an ongoing process; second, this selecting is accompanied by changes in the set and its substratum (everything not included in the set); third, these changes are variations in the intensities of relations in and around all elements.

For example, in a tale of the desecration of a hallowed emblem by a foreign tribe, the set might be {our beloved pennant, fire, the unspeakable ones}. The set is both a name for the desecration and the naming of a process where a tightening—an increasingly intense—knot is drawn around the flag, the evil medium of fire and those whose name cannot be spoken.

In turn, the strands of this knot extend to all other things. Some are sadly familiar, in the way friendship, forgiveness and reason are cut loose and distanced, and in the parallel way hatred, revenge and folly are clutched close to the knot. Others are unexpected: cooking traditions are changed by nationalist myths (*freedom fries...*) and distant people become friends due to a mutual foe (*my enemy's enemy...*).

There are philosophical, historical and scientific justifications for the complexity of the processes in the sign, in ideas of ontological plurality, evidence of historical diversity and work on complex systems. However, this is a *speculative* philosophy. It has many influences and fields to test itself upon, but its formal core is proposed rather than deduced. Though the philosophy has wide evidential resources, its initial moves are deliberately speculative; not “it is the case that” but rather “let’s entertain this suggestion.”

Since any element can be selected into a set, since this selection of elements takes place against an underlying substratum, and since the selecting alters intensities of relations in and around all elements, the variations of intensity are in principle limitless in the relations they affect and in the elements they touch upon. Nothing can be excluded from the operation of the selection of a set and no element is left unchanged by the intense relations determining it as process.

We get an intuitive sense of this principle of non-exclusion from the unexpected connection of things and the surprising reach of historical events. The selection of a particular animal into an emblem in the distant past has effects on our behaviour towards animals in the present, in reverence for them, or hatred (the wise owl; the treacherous snake).

At first glance, the appeal to intense relations and changing elements is self-contradictory. If relations are between elements, then relations can change but the elements should not, otherwise relations will always be between different elements, with no grounds for comparison. This objection is based on the mistaken assumption that relations must hold between fixed terms. We should instead see relations as holding relatively within changing networks of further relations. In the sign, fixed elements are replaced by relative stability among changing relations.

An element is a zone of stability, rather than a settled being with a given identity. When relations are defined as “in and around” elements, this should be taken as meaning elements are neighbourhoods of relative stability formed by multiple relations. These relations are ever-changing and any element is a multiplicity of

stabilising and destabilising processes.

The selection of a set is therefore a way of naming a sign and drawing out its most distinct, or relatively stable, elements. When the sign is defined as the selection of a set against a substratum, this means the selected elements appear more distinctly among a multiplicity of varying intensities of relations.

There are risks in connecting stability to distinctness. Stability recalls relatively secure spatial location, but since there is a multiplicity of relations there is no good reason to privilege spatial ones. There is also stability in time, colour, genetic lines, heat, malleability, speed, spin and so on. It would be therefore more accurate to say that stability is relative to anything that can be said to increase and decrease in intensity across a series of changing relations. In turn, this can be formalised into anything that can be expressed by a verb and a qualifier of intensity; *to spin faster around a slowing core*.

Multiplicity and intensity are the special characteristics of process signs. This multiplicity is not of beings but of changing intensities of relations allowing neighbourhoods and directions to be identified and worked upon. Think of every sign as the turmoil of river water after it has passed a bridge, with different currents, whirlpools, eddies and rapids, each of which can in turn be investigated for its own internal multiplicity.

Intensity is a continuous change in the degree of something: growing, shrinking, increasing, decreasing, tightening, loosening, accelerating, decelerating, condensing, rarefying and so on. The rapids after the bridge are dynamic. There is an accelerating centre and slowing edges; stones are bending parts of the stream into new shapes and jetting spume upwards, while downward suction is pulling water to the murky bed.

When historians study the sign of a desecration in order to trace its effects through populations and ideas, they name a sign by selecting its elements: “It was the burning of that treasured pennant attributed to this tribe” becomes {Fire, pennant of the just ones, the unspeakable ones}. The selected set is not the point of historical argument, though. The changing intensities in the relations around elements of sign and substratum allow the sign to be associated with other processes. This provides material for explanation: “punishment by fire can be traced back to the tale of the burning of the pennant which brought fire into an ideology of revenge and purification.”

The historical naming of a sign is not simply the identification of an objective state of affairs or of a recognisable idea. Instead, it is to trace multiplicities of changes in intensity around many elements—of attraction and repulsion, distance and proximity, passion and disinterest. The coining of the sign is a critical act, because it is a free selection of elements and a speculative suggestion of connections between changing intensities and processes of stabilisation and destabilisation.

This does not mean that creation and critical power are necessarily good. The images on the front pages of tabloid newspapers are signs, with their own intensive variations and new zones of stabilisation and destabilisation designed around changing intensities of ignorance, fear and hatred. The process sign is not proof or argument on its own.

The selection of a set allows new signs into the debate (“What if a false accusation of desecration was crucial to the cycle of revenge?”). The dynamic and interconnected multiplicity of the sign allows for an unlimited range of creative and critical explanatory arguments (“Increasing proximity of fire to punishment in the sign explains the increase in house burning and the subsequent flight of populations.”)

Process philosophy is concerned with the significance of dynamic processes rather than with the current states of things. The former indicates the changing dependencies of a field: “the cult of revenge grew in significance.” The latter prioritises an accurate description of a state at a given time. The fundamental hypothesis of speculative process philosophy is that static representation is always a false picture without a sense of the movements transforming it in an open-ended manner. The sign as selected set is process because it is a selecting of neighbourhoods that are more distinct against a substratum of multiplicities of relations changing in intensity. These changing intensities are enacted on diagrams.

SPECULATIVE AND PRAGMATIC DIAGRAMS

Diagrams for process signs express dynamic changes in intensities and the relatively stable neighbourhoods and directions associated with the selection of a sign. They communicate a combination of zones, flows and patterns of increases and decreases. For example, as diagrams, weather maps combine place, many different kinds of directions, changing intensity of temperature, wind speed and air pressure, alongside weather patterns such as the spin of a hurricane or the blocking effect of a high pressure ridge.

Meteorological maps are also a good way of understanding the infinite inclusions and multiplicities of diagrams for signs. A map can connect its processes to biological and social ones, or to suggestions about as apparently incongruous links as high pressure to road rage, or heavy rain to migrations half a world away.

If signs and diagrams have a connection to things in the world and a logical coherence, does this not limit them in quite strict ways? Aren't some signs impossible and some diagrams false? When a meteorologist coined the sign Ridiculously Resilient Ridge, it mattered whether there was such a phenomenon over the North-Eastern Pacific and it mattered what claims were made for its behaviour and effects on rainfall. When a map shows changes around a place, isn't that place fixed and verifiable?

The process philosophy situates general claims about truth and validity outside the sign, as stipulations over it. A stipulation is a code or law that imposes limits on the selection of signs and on their diagrams. The complete account of any sign should include such stipulations. In contrast to stipulations, claims about accuracy and significance of diagrams for the sign are pragmatic considerations. They are to be debated between different selections of signs, their suites of diagrams and the different stipulations making claims over them.

The selection of the set is independent of any general stipulation except one: selection is undetermined. Anything can be included in a sign in any combination. Diagrams are also free of all stipulations other than those implied by the definition of signs. The point of the process definition is to maximise the critical and creative potential of signs. To be able to challenge established laws and codes, the sign must be as flexible and open as possible.

As an extension to the critical and creative role of signs, one of the main aims of the process philosophy is to be inclusive of all signs. It should be possible to define any sign in current usage as a process sign. Signs of art, signs in science, signs in nature, all the signs of history, visual signs and linguistic ones, all have process definitions. How can this be, if some of those signs are not consistent with the ideas of process?

Undetermined selection, suites of diagrams and stipulations of the sign are designed to allow for signs inconsistent with the process sign. It is possible to include other types of sign within the process sign by selecting them into a set or by situating them on a diagram. Since each diagram for a sign is in principle all-inclusive, anything can be shown on the diagram, even if it is a very low degree of

intensity.

The requirement for suites of diagrams implies that any diagram is but one suggestion that must invite others. Diagrams therefore interact critically with each other and change signs as they do so. This is why the sign is defined by an open suite of diagrams, rather than a single sufficient one. There cannot be such a diagram.

However, simply to include static signs and theories in a process sign is unsatisfactory, because it does not allow for their full force as contradicting the idea of process. There is therefore a third manner in which process signs can allow for non-process signs and theories. This is by listing stipulations that set out codes or laws opposed to the process suggestion alongside the process sign, in order to allow for critical debate with them. Such debates around signs can take account of scientific theories that contradict a sign and its diagrams.

Discussions about the respective worth and validity of process signs and stipulations over them are built into the definition of the sign. The speculative process philosophy is therefore doubly hypothetical. First, it proposes an overall speculative definition of the sign. Second, it is then subservient to wider critical discussion around the merit of each process sign and its suite of diagrams in relation to stipulations that contradict them.

The form of diagrams must fit with the definition of the sign as selection and with a pragmatist approach to the practice of defining particular signs and their diagrams. In turn, the study of a sign should encompass its critical and creative place in wider discussions; in particular, in terms of stipulations denying different aspects of the sign.

A diagram for a process sign is subjected to the following constraints:

1. The diagram will enact changing neighbourhoods, directions and intensities.
2. The elements of the selected set for the diagram will appear on it as neighbourhoods or directions.
3. Nothing will be excluded from a diagram. Exclusions only appear in external stipulations.
4. Diagrams will be continuous, but discontinuities can be added as stipulations.

Diagrams should accord with the following pragmatic principles:

1. A diagram should be a suggestion about the processes implied by the selection of a sign.
2. Each diagram should register its place in a suite of alternative diagrams.
3. A complete account of a sign should take note of stipulations that deny or limit it.

These constraints and principles give a great deal of leeway in terms of type, style and sophistication for diagrams. The diagram is a situated practical and political challenge. Diagrams can vary from the very simple to the highly complex and from the tentative to the nearly complete. A diagram could be a few points and some arrows, or a manifold digital computer simulation with detailed instructions and commentary. The best approach depends on the sign and its pragmatic situation.

RECENT WORK ON PROCESS DIAGRAMS

Simon O'Sullivan's application of diagrams to art and philosophy in *On the Production of Subjectivity: Five Diagrams of the Finite-Infinite Relation* posits the link between diagrams and process after having made a claim for the priority of process: "... any subject comes after, or is secondary to, a given process that is primary."² Stable objects and subjects are neighbourhoods and directions of stabilisation, rather than unchanging objects in their own right.

O'Sullivan connects the idea of the priority of process to diagrams:

[...] the diagram often leads the synthesis rather than merely illustrating a synthesis already made (it begins as an illustration... then spirals out...). It operates at a different speed to the discursive, and certainly in a more experimental manner. Diagrams are like fictions in this sense. They produce thought. I mean this in two senses: (1) [...] they often run ahead of the discursive work like a forward hurled probe [...]; and (2) they operate as a map for thinking life more broadly, for spotting passageways, openings and lines of flight.³

He insists on the creative and process-driven aspect of diagrams. They aren't fixed representations, but rather illustrations that go beyond themselves, they "spiral out" and make syntheses; enacting them, rather than reporting on them.

The reference to the fictional quality of diagrams should not be taken in the negative sense of fiction as opposed to reality. Fiction must be seen as critically and creatively valuable; effective when set alongside claims to truth and reality. A diagram is real because it interacts with other realities.

The diagram is a singular pragmatic intervention. It puts codes and laws into play, but does not operate according to them. Diagrams construct critical thought in the communication of dynamic prompts and sensations. They add a critical and speculative dimension to thought and to the sign. As O’Sullivan says, they are a kind of “speculative fiction.”

Speculative fictions in signs and their diagrams encompass and encourage wide critical and creative approaches to law-driven stipulations. The claims of a stipulation over signs can be included in a process sign and hence mapped as dynamic interventions: produced and producing changes across a multiplicity.

This means that semiology re-establishes its critical stance with respect to the sciences. It is not to deny the sciences or to restrict their ambit, but rather to insert them into a broad debate about ideas and processes that are overlooked by a given set of sciences at a given time. The arts and humanities should then not be seen as an alternative sphere or as a claim to a different realm to the sciences. They are instead a way of working alongside the sciences across all topics: neither servant nor master, more of a troublesome friend.

In *Post-Continental Philosophy: an Outline*, John Mullarkey defines a similar process function for the diagram: “The philosophical diagram works as a drawing, a process, a procedure, a temporary moment in between; not in the shape of a thing but the outline of a process (of thinking). Hence, dia-grammes should always be seen as moving forms, whether or not they are static.”⁴ The point is to move beyond things and towards process. Mullarkey adds the ideas of the in-between and of motion even in static representation. I have built these ideas into the speculative and serial nature of diagrams for signs, through intensity as change in relation, and through the definition of stasis as relative stability.

O’Sullivan and Mullarkey are Deleuze scholars. Alongside Peirce’s pragmatism, Deleuze’s philosophy has done much to bring the concept of the diagram into philosophical work over recent years. Kamini Vellodi has studied the connections and differences between Peirce’s and Deleuze’s definitions of the sign as vehicle for thought. She also criticises Mullarkey’s analysis of the diagram in Deleuze.

According to Vellodi, Mullarkey misunderstands “the diagram as a visual map/‘graphic image.’” He therefore mistakenly describes Deleuze’s diagram “as a ‘philosophical drawing’ ... [that] takes both a transcendent view (representing immanence) while also remaining immanent.”⁵ There are therefore two perceived faults: overemphasis upon the visual and assigning a transcendent representational function to the diagram.

Mullarkey’s definition is taken to be wrong because it returns Deleuze to transcendence, whereas for Vellodi “it is precisely for the sake of a thought of immanence liberated from any ‘transcendent view’ [that] Deleuze conceives of the diagram as a map of new concepts...”⁶ I think this is a misinterpretation of Mullarkey’s use of the term drawing. He says “as” a drawing, which does not mean *always* as a drawn representation, but rather that *like* a drawing the diagram works as a process between two further processes.

Mullarkey is justified in using the term drawing, since there are many instances of drawings of diagrams by Deleuze (a drawn diagram of Foucault, diagrams of other philosophers in *What is Philosophy?*, and diagrams of processes in *A Thousand Plateaus* and *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*). This does not imply that diagrams must be drawn. Mullarkey describes diagrams as moving forms, which should be read as “forms that move” in the double sense of introducing novel dynamics and affects into processes. The important thing is movement through some kind of form, rather than the representation of movement in the visual form.

There is a difference here concerning the role of transcendence in process. Mullarkey and O’Sullivan allow for a role of what we might call remnants and intimations of representation in the diagram. This means that, even for Deleuze, diagrams can have representations in them (a house without windows) but that the diagram will introduce intense processes of change which bring in transformations beyond known and established patterns (movement between the floors of the house).

A diagram can act as a line of escape to the radically new without having to expunge all transcendence and representation from it. The diagram can only enact movement by taking risks with remnants of transcendence, from the things it seeks to change, and by taking risks with novel intimations of transcendence in the directions of change. Suspended transcendence is a necessary and risky vehicle for the explanation and communication of process. The diagram must not be directed towards perfect representation but rather to the disruption of the

representations it has to take recourse to.

In the diagram, there is therefore a blend of temporary, suspended, transcendence and the intense events engulfing it. This is why my definition of the diagram has intense relations, neighbourhoods of relative stability, and selected elements. The priority in terms of process lies with intensities that undo the tendency to representative and ideal stability of the neighbourhoods and elements.

The exact nature of Deleuze's diagrams is the basis for different interpretations around which sources and which aspects of them are taken as the most important ones (among *The Logic of Sensation*, *A Thousand Plateaus*, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* or *Foucault*). It matters where the boundaries of the diagram lie in each of Deleuze's definitions; for example, with the "pure" diagram or with its effects on figures and forms.

Vellodi's description of the differences between Peirce and Deleuze is helpful for understanding the different roles played by the diagram and for showing the importance of an engagement with Peirce, but it is also too stark in describing their opposition. She points out that Peirce and Deleuze situate the diagram within a thinking process. That's right, but only if thought is defined in a very wide manner and if it is not exclusively about thinking.

She then distinguishes contrasting thought processes: "thought as a process of discipline, regulation and control that reasoning subjects enact (Peirce), and thought as violent encounter that happens to us in the groundless encounter with difference (Deleuze)." Peirce has a logical normativity and an aim towards consistent truth for his diagrams. However, these need not be strongly associated with discipline, regulation and control, since they also have aspects of experimentation, innovation and open debate.

It is not necessary to emphasise the role of reasoning subjects in thought for Peirce. It is also the case that subjects are gripped and changed by the sign and by the diagram as sign. On the other hand, it is too extreme to isolate the idea of a groundless encounter for thought in Deleuze, since any encounter requires repetition and variation as well as difference. There is a role for pure difference, independent of representation, but it is an abstract and incomplete one.

Vellodi distinguishes destructive thought and thought about the possible: "thought as grounded in the possibilities of thought as it already knows and recognises itself, and as the conditioning of a possible future continuous with its present

form (Peirce), and thought as a creative and violent destruction of thought in its present form for the sake of a new image of a thought without image (Deleuze).”⁸ This contrast is again too great.

Peirce’s pragmatism can ground extraordinarily different ideas and knowledge on the basis of new diagrams. It is not plausible to think of new scientific discoveries such as the double-helix as “continuous” with a present form and as allowing thought to recognise itself across scientific revolutions. Diagrams can take thought a long way from any image it might have of itself. His pragmatism is consistent with paradigm shifts that do not depend on continuity of past and future.

Finally, Vellodi draws a distinction between different kinds of pragmatic experimentation: “for the sake of the determination of real effects through their conception (Peirce), and [...] as the transformation of the existing state of liveable affairs in the genesis of the hitherto unthinkable new that shatters the experience of continuity as lived time (Deleuze).”⁹ Peirce was an expert cartographer. It is possible to see mapping as a kind of conservative continuity, but his pragmatism is more open to the revolutionary sense of novel maps and the way in which they can transform world views radically and with far-reaching and unexpected effects. In maps, the sign “nec plus ultra” at the Straits of Gibraltar gave way to shockingly new worlds, as the Atlantic was explored and charted.

This means that there is greater continuity between Deleuze’s and Peirce’s pragmatisms. It does not follow from concepts of pure difference and from the destructive experience of the new that Deleuze’s pragmatism is merely violence or involves shear breaks with the past. On the contrary, his concept of a diagram implies continuities across changing processes and these temper the violence of new encounters with a more modulated experimental practice.

This temperance is crucial to understanding the cautious aspects of Deleuze and Guattari’s experimentation. The difference with Peirce is then not about extreme novelty in pragmatism but rather about its specific practices. It is a matter of the structure of pragmatic thought; in particular, the place of logic and the nature of hierarchies of methods in pragmatic experimentation.

DELEUZE AND THE “FOUCAULT” DIAGRAMS

In his book on Michel Foucault, Deleuze defines the diagram as “non-formed dimension, as shapeless dimension.”¹⁰ As process, a diagram does not unfold according to a pattern, or admit to any form, or take on any specific shape; it

cannot be identified by them. This claim relates to ideas of pure immanence and the opposition between sedentary and nomadic distributions from *Difference and Repetition*. A diagram is a multiplicity of processes that cannot be taken to conform to recognised measures and identities.

The meaning of “cannot” is very important here. It implies that the processes do not conform to prior shapes, but also that they will not conform in future. We can think of maps as representations with specific content, where an external scale holds true for all parts of the map and for the contents. There is a prior shape and form for any object on the map, when it is not thought as diagram.

In a more abstract sense, there are many examples of forms that operate like such scales, whether it is the Kantian categories; or the metric scales we apply to standard maps; or, in the case of conventional readings of Hegel and of Peirce, a form of logic and a direction that apply in principle to every diagram and every process, as a prior form of spirit, or of thought.

Against these common images, Deleuze defines distinctness as emerging and disappearing with each diagram. So form is not a prior and independent dimension, nor a recognised identity, but rather a fleeting stability produced by movement on the diagram and then lost with the very thing giving rise to it. When I wrote of fleeting representations on diagrams earlier, it was as such transitory patterns of relative stability.

A number of objections to this definition of the diagram allow for a deeper understanding of its potential and significance:

1. How can a diagram claim to escape prior frames and patterns, if they exist alongside it and can therefore lay claim to it? For example, a drawing might claim to be contained strictly in its own world, but if it is surrounded by a wider general frame, why shouldn't that frame apply to it?
2. If a diagram must represent already known entities such as objects, subjects, borders, aims and ideas, how can it avoid being subjected to the scales and forms that apply to them? For example, if the diagram contains well understood objects, then don't scientific laws pertaining to the object also apply in the diagram?
3. Once a diagram has been given, why can't we discover its patterns and thereby generalise from them, not only for how a particular diagram works but also for others of similar form? While a diagram might introduce new movements, once these are understood they can be assigned permanent,

or semi-permanent, pattern through rational deduction, or inductively.

Deleuze's answer to the first objection is that each diagram is "coextensive with the whole social field."¹¹ This claim must be understood in a special way. We could think that a map coextensive with a field would correspond perfectly to the elements of the field; at the limit, this would be the perfect map imagined by Borges, where the map is the world's double. This is exactly what Deleuze is trying to avoid. He puts this negatively in terms of archives: "The diagram is no longer the audio or visual archive."¹²

Coextension is not correspondence, but rather transformation across a full extension. As novel process, the diagram is coextensive with the whole of the social field. This means that the diagram is not a limited entity existing alongside other forms which can lay claim to it. Instead, each diagram implicates or folds in all things and directions on the social field. It is for this reason that I have defined the diagram for a sign as without limit or exclusion. A sign implicates everything.

Since they are not in perfect correspondence, the diagram is abstracted from the social field. As process, it is independent from some things and transformative of others. Coextension must be understood not in terms of correspondence between places and parts—form to form—but rather as a process around those forms—a kind of machining: "the diagram is an abstract machine." The diagram makes something new:

Defining itself through non-formal functions and matter, the diagram bypasses every formal distinction between content and expression, between a discursive formation and a non-discursive one. It's a machine that is almost mute and almost blind, even though it is a machine that makes sight and speech.¹³

As shown in the final section, below, this is a reprise of ideas about content, expression and diagram from the discussion of Hjelmslev in *A Thousand Plateaus*. We shouldn't think of the world outside the diagram as its content. Nor should we think of the diagram as expressing something about that world. We shouldn't think of the diagram as a discursive representation of a world other than discourse. The reference to muteness and blindness is designed to emphasise the independence of the machine. It does not conform to the things it makes.

The diagram is a machine that constructs new ways of seeing and speaking. Against paradigmatic examples of diagrams, the diagram shouldn't be thought of as a simplified picture, for instance of the parts of the human body. Nor should it be thought of as a rational representation. It is not an explanation of an observed phenomenon, like the instructions for a mechanism.

It is because the diagram is a construction of the new that it cannot be reduced to a pre-existing transcendent frame. To the second objection, Deleuze answers that the diagram machines or constructs itself in ways that are novel and resistant to established orders. Each diagram is a new machining of the whole world. In the process philosophy of signs, the idea is extended into the claim that each selected sign machines a new world from the old. The diagrams for the sign enact this process.

The precise meaning of the new is very important here. The new should not be defined as relative novelty, based on a limited recombination of some parts. It is exactly the opposite. The diagram as new event makes everything different and new in multiple ways. This is why the process definition of the sign gives the selection of the characteristic set of the sign as a transformation of multiple intense relations in and around all things.

The idea of a machine is very close to some of the traditional functions of a diagram, but where these should not be seen as repetitive commands, but rather ways to make the new. This is why Deleuze and Guattari oppose language as order-words, commands demanding a matching act, and abstract machines, diagrams that create the new.

We must distinguish sedentary distribution, such as oft-repeated assembly instructions for a mass-produced flat-pack cupboard, and a nomadic diagram, such as a sketch drawn to explain a novel and transformative idea to an accomplice. The difference is between commands, such as "Go exactly through steps A to C," and whispered promises, "This is our plan for the heist of the century, for the fair society to come."

In Deleuze's nomadic sense, the diagram is uncertain and innovative. It operates in fields in order to change them, rather than copying them for easy reproduction. There is a revolutionary aspect to this diagram, challenging established order like the plot for a revolt. This is why Deleuze says content and expression are not appropriate for the diagram and why inside and outside are mistaken categories for it. Diagrams are working on the things they fleetingly represent, but only to

change them beyond the forms of that old order: “The diagram never functions to bring together a pre-existing world. It produces a new type of reality, a new model of truth.”¹⁴

For Deleuze, the making works through forces: “In a diagram forces work on other forces.” Instead of an immobile picture we have forces in and through the diagram. We should therefore think of a diagram as pushing and pulling, shaping and cutting, stamping and flattening, funnelling and spreading, accelerating and decelerating.

There are many diagrams because of the many ways forces can come together and be articulated: “diagrams vary in their relation of forces.”¹⁵ This multiplicity is also a facet of each diagram, because even if they only have a few forces, they extend without limit to the whole of the social field: “If there are many diagrammatical functions and much material, it is because every diagram is a spatio-temporal multiplicity. But it is also because there are as many diagrams as historical social fields.”¹⁶ There are many diagrams and each diagram is irreducibly multiple.

We can think of diagrams as battle plans or sketches for new constructions, but Deleuze is most concerned with kinds of historical diagrams, where societies are machined—like Foucault’s articulation of disciplinary forces, or Deleuze’s diagram for societies of control. This is not history as record but rather history as critical intervention: “Making history by undoing preceding realities and signification, constituting many points of emergence or creativity, unexpected conjunctions and improbable continuities. Overtaking history with its becoming.”¹⁷ It is the untimely and creative history of Foucault’s happy positivist: true to the facts by showing how they are transformed and articulated.

The irreducible multiplicity of diagrams and their becoming come together in Deleuze’s answer to the objection that it must be possible to reduce diagrams to some kind of transcendent order after they have been given. This is why Deleuze speaks of an undoing and constituting in the diagram. These are on going and uncertain processes of becoming; “Points of emergence,” “conjunctions” and “continuities” happen in diagrams. Diagrams are open-ended events rather than states.

Deleuze’s diagram of Foucault’s work includes organised archives or strata that might make us think we could systematise it, but then lines of becoming, fissures, movements and transformations intervene on the strata. These events turns history as record into a creation of truth, where truth is no longer fact or

coherence, but rather effective creation—resistant to atomisation as fact or to reduction as coherence.

This explains why diagrams for signs are never unique, but rather interventions suggesting the intense multiplicities accompanying the selection of a sign. The diagram takes its place in a suite of diagrams, with no rules or laws for the suite, no way of reducing it to a systematic series. Instead, there is a play or competition of diagrams.

Diagrams for a sign transform and challenge one another. Like a tumble of dialogue in a well-written play, each new statement changing the status and power of earlier ones, and open to a later retort: “The diagram is deeply unstable or fluid, ceaseless mixing materials and functions in order to constitute mutations. Finally, every diagram brings together many societies and is in becoming.”¹⁸

The diagram for a sign is a multiplicity in becoming. The multiplicity brings together changes in intensity relating different neighbourhoods of greater and lesser stability. The changes can be represented as directions and the neighbourhoods can be represented as points or zones, but this is not necessary. As creative suggestion, each diagram enters into critical relation with other diagrams by implying transformations and inconsistencies in them. As Deleuze says, quoting Foucault: “I have only ever written fictions...’ But fictions have never produced greater truth and reality.”¹⁹

Since a diagram is always a non-systematic process of becoming, systems, codes and laws are given, either, as internal to the sign, if they are subject to its transformation, or, as external to it, if they imply the diagram can be reduced to an ordered system. There is therefore a deep opposition to some of the fundamental tenets of structuralism, around the priority of a well-ordered logical structure for the sign.

ON THE PRIORITY OF BECOMING OVER STRUCTURE IN THE SIGN: A RESPONSE TO HJELMSLEV

The order of priority of structure and process is a problem of ontology and a problem of method. Ontologically, it is about the definition of the sign. Is it better to define the sign as depending on a prior structure or as resistant to structure as shown in its dynamic diagrams? Methodologically, the problem is about the approach to particular signs. Should we prioritise general structures in the description of a sign, or should we seek out singular processes as resistant to

general structures?

In terms of the role of diagrams in signs, these questions translate into two further questions. Should the sign be defined as incomplete, unless it comprises a diagram of its dynamic processes as resistant to external stipulations? Should each sign be described through diagrams which emphasise processes that depart from given structures?

Louis Hjelmslev's structural linguistics give answers to both problems in ways that run counter to the definition of the process sign. His methodological approach is about testing hypotheses about general structures for language. The conclusions to the tests confirm those hypotheses and the overall methodology is explicitly opposed to process: "It is the aim of linguistic theory to test, on what seems a particularly inviting object, the thesis that a process has an underlying system—a fluctuation an underlying constancy."²⁰

This methodological commitment is driven by epistemological and logical reasons. Hjelmslev wants a science of language and his ideas around such a science are dominated by principles of logical consistency: "The description shall be free of contradiction (self-consistent), exhaustive, and as simple as possible. The requirement of freedom from contradiction takes precedence over the requirement of exhaustive description. The requirement of exhaustive description takes precedence over the requirement of simplicity."²¹ A science of language should be consistent above all. It should then apply to all linguistic phenomena. Finally, it should aim to be as simple as possible, that is, as minimal in the number and complexity of its terms as possible. The proliferation of speculative diagrams determined pragmatically is anathema to Hjelmslev's methodological principles.

The negative impulse behind Hjelmslev's theory is a deep suspicion of subjectivism and of *a priori* rejections of systematic sciences of language. He associates such rejections with pleas for language as a process immune by its very nature to scientific systematisation: "Voices raised beforehand against such an attempt in the field of humanities, pleading that we cannot subject to scientific analysis man's spiritual life and the phenomena it implies without killing that life and consequently allowing our object to escape consideration, are merely aprioristic, and cannot restrain science from the attempt."²² To claim that spheres of human activity are not open to scientific investigation, because they cannot in principle be captured by scientific method, is a mere prejudice unless it is backed up by proof through argument and evidence.

For Hjelmslev, scientific investigation arrives at a systematic account of language and signs:

... a language is primarily something different, namely a system of elements appointed to occupy certain definite places in the chain, to contract certain definite relations to the exclusion of certain others. These elements can be used, in conformity with the rules that govern them, to form signs. The number of elements and the relational possibilities of each element are laid down once and for all in the linguistic structure.²³

This structuralism takes elements and their systematic combinations as prior to process in the strong sense of determining it and as immune from the variability of its processes. Processes leading to changes in languages and differences between them depend upon combinations of elements that must follow rules which are themselves independent of those processes.

Against Hjelmslev's defence of prior structures, the process sign and its diagram are defined as undoing stipulations, defined as codes and rules imposed over the sign, and as free from any intrinsic rules, other than speculative ones setting out the priority of process. So nothing is laid down "once and for all" and even main definitions are speculative. Instead of pre-given linguistic possibilities, limited by the number, type and structural rules for elements, the process sign is always a speculative and pragmatic challenge to pre-set limits.

In their notes and remarks on Hjelmslev's science of language, Deleuze and Guattari praise him for moving away from the dominance of the coupling of signifier and signified in linguistics. This is because he replaces the signifier and the signified in the sign by expression and content. These are "functives" which are two inseparable aspects of a single function: "... an expression functive and a content functive, a function, divided into two functives relating expression and content: The sign is, then—paradoxically as it may seem—a sign for a content-substance and a sign for an expression substance. It is in this sense that the sign can be said to be a sign for something."²⁴

The important thing is that those functives are arbitrary in relation to the definition of which one is content and which one is expression: "Hjelmslev's strength is to have conceived of the form of expression and the form of content as two entirely relative variables on one and the same plane, as 'functives of one and the same function.'"²⁵ So long as the naming is consistent, the labels can be reversed. This means that the idea of the sign as "sign for" something gives way to the idea that

the sign is the coming together of two arbitrarily assigned “for” processes relating two sets of elements.

We should no longer search for the signifier in a language and then seek to discover the signified. Instead, the method is first to seek out elements which operate as functives, as “for” things, in each of the sets, then to organise them into as minimal a structure as possible, and then to pair the two sets through these elements: “We shall call the entities that are inventoried at each stage elements. In respect of the analysis we give the following refined formulation of the principle of reduction: Each analysis (or each analysis complex) in which functives are registered with a given function as basis for analysis shall be so made that it leads to the registration of the lowest possible number of elements.”²⁶

The point is that we are not looking for things that look like a meaning or a placeholder for a meaning, or a signified and a signifier. Instead, we are looking for the most minimal structure of elements that can take on the role of expression for content and the role of content for expression. The search is then purely formal. “Can this be a content or expression functive?” replaces the questions “Is this a signifier?” and “What does it signify?”

Why would this approach not count as a process approach to language, since the functives are processes? Why is it opposed in principle to a diagrammatical approach? Here is Deleuze and Guattari’s answer: “This advance towards a diagrammatic conception of the abstract machine is, however, counteracted by the fact that Hjelmslev still conceives of the distinction between expression and content in the signifier-signified mode and therefore retains the subordination of the abstract machine to linguistics.”²⁷

While Hjelmslev avoids the signifier and signified relation in the sign, he returns to it in the definition of content and expression as a mode for their distinction. This means that although the character of being a signifier and being signified is avoided by Hjelmslev, the structure of paired elements found in signifier and signified theories is retained. Instead of the open and nomadic distributions of structure and its undoing, in diagrams of changing multiplicities, we have fundamental structures of paired elements which take precedence over—rule over—any other process.

The basic problem is in the idea of an element, the simplicity of the rules and the idea of paring of functions across two different realms. For Hjelmslev, there are definable basic elements in ruled structures whose functional relations give

us prior knowledge of language and determine how any possible language can be formed.

The process rejection of this view is that there are no such elements. Instead, there are relations of stabilisation and destabilisation determined by the selection of more distinct yet still unstable neighbourhoods and directions against a substratum of all others. There is never a well-defined element and the selection of a set of elements is only a way of naming the processes around neighbourhoods.

Neither are there any ruled structures which determine any possible process. Instead, such structures should be seen, either, as illusory stability with changing processes, or, as stipulations over processes which seek to impose order upon them. Structures and their rules must therefore be replaced by diagrams that enact the novel processes involved in any sign.

Finally, the pairing of structures according the model inherited from relations of signifier and signified is wrong for the sign, because any sign is a shifting multiplicity of relations rather than one-to-one functions across realms. The sign is never a sign for something, or even two functionives that are each for something. The sign is a process enacted by a suite of diagrams named by the selection of a set.

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polemic as logic in the work of alain badiou

aj bartlett and justin clemens

What has not yet been satisfactorily discussed in the extensive and expanding secondary commentary on the work of Alain Badiou is the particular way in which he orients and structures almost all his philosophical work, from his brief notes all the way up to his major treatises. Yet the structure of Badiou's writing is crucial to his argument, and in several ways. The key to this structuring is the order-relation that he establishes between the subsections of his presentations. Every beginning in Badiou invariably and explicitly takes on a form of *self-situation* in order to proceed through targeted argumentative negations to affirmative, constructive propositions—and this very organisation is itself intended to enact and exemplify the work of affirmative reconstruction that it calls for in the world.

This article limits itself to identifying, isolating, and describing this recurrent characteristic polemical structure in Badiou, as a prolegomenon to further investigations into the crucial relationship between polemic, logic and assertion in contemporary philosophy more generally. Its more general significance is directed towards establishing how certain philosophical conditions of presentation come to be presented in and by the presentation itself *as* a crucial conceptual task. If such a focus on formal questions can prove tiresome, the stakes here are to expose how particular “thematics” or “contents” can remind blind to un-thought implications of their own form.

In the present context, we offer a close exegesis of Badiou's rhetorical procedures. If such exegeses can seem to imply an uncritical adherence to their subject—perhaps precisely through their obsession with minor formal details—we do not intend this to be the case. Quite the contrary: the point is rather to ensure a rigorous basis from which a real confrontation can thereafter be rigorously launched (if there will unfortunately be only minimal space for that here).

Certainly, it is not the case that Badiou's *stylistics* have gone entirely unremarked. Almost every commentator has noted—whether with enthusiasm or repulsion—Badiou's aggressive and declarative tones.¹ Moreover, some go further. As Bruno Bosteels remarks in a section of his “Translator's Introduction” to *Theory of the Subject*, which “adopts the format of a seminar inspired by Lacan's example. Badiou's fidelity to this model is actually quite extensive.”² Bosteels proceeds to note the very different styles of Badiou's three great treatises, noting that each:

adopts a unique generic format, following three different models in the history of philosophy: *Theory of the Subject* is a Lacanian-inspired seminar; *Being and Event* is made up of 37 Cartesian or post-Cartesian meditations; and *Logics of Worlds* adopts a structure vaguely reminiscent of Spinoza's *Ethics*.³

Leaving aside the quibble that Lacan's seminars may not be so much an event in the history of philosophy as in psychoanalysis (or perhaps in “anti-philosophy”), Bosteels's suggestive indications don't draw out the conceptual implications of the form of presentation that is at stake beyond noting several broad generic and syntagmatic differences. For his part, Oliver Feltham identifies three different *figures* of the philosopher at work throughout Badiou's oeuvre, which he calls “the eagle,” “the old mole” and “the owl.”⁴ If such an identification usefully analyses the weave of heterogeneous *conceptual attitudes* that traverse Badiou's oeuvre, it nonetheless cannot account for the self-conscious formal unity of each of Badiou's texts. In a long review of *Logics of Worlds*, Justin Clemens makes several suggestions regarding the immanent tensions between structure and presentation in Badiou's work, including that, developmentally speaking—both in the sense of its historical becoming and at the level of individual philosophers—philosophy really requires a concept of the “sequel” to account for the regulated transformations of philosophy from text to text.⁵ Such “sequelization” should at once attempt to account for the drive-to-form exhibited by each text, the emergence of an immanent conceptual tension out of this form, and the subsequent attempt to

return to and treat that tension in another text, another form. Yet Clemens's account also lacks the appropriate attention to the 'little texts' that come between the 'major' ones, although this may well be precisely the places where the auto-thematization of unthoughts emerge point-by-point. Finally, although the philosophical commentary is usually happy to add that Badiou is a playwright, a novelist and librettist, it just as often sets aside the questions of form, genre and style thereby raised. Yet it is not a priori clear that philosophy can avoid the challenges of form without hamstringing itself.

We therefore ourselves begin with Badiou's *beginnings*, drawing from a simple example which stages this development in a stark and clarified form. In the short essay "Philosophy and desire," Badiou opens by invoking Arthur Rimbaud and Stéphane Mallarmé, before moving to a sketch of the *doxa* of the contemporary world. From there, Badiou moves to an analysis of the dominant modalities of contemporary philosophy, before offering his own account of the current tasks for philosophy:

This philosophical investigation begins under the banner of poetry; thus recalling the ancient tie between poetry and philosophy. Rimbaud employs a strange expression: "*les révoltes logiques*," "logical revolts." Philosophy pits thought against injustice, against the defective state of the world and of life. Yet it pits thought against injustice in a movement which conserves and defends argument and reason, and which ultimately proposes a new logic.⁶

The beginning of this essay thus constitutes a rapid double-shift. Its *incipit* is an astringent form of *captatio benevolentiae*, a recommendation deriving from classical rhetoric: open with an appeal of some kind, an anecdote or allusion to put the audience onside. Here, the allusion is to the 'ancient quarrel' that Plato speaks of between philosophy and poetry. We are at once returned to the most familiar and the most contested territory of the origins of philosophy and its first and greatest enemy. Yet this allusion also scrambles the received doxography around the polarities of poetry and philosophy, for Rimbaud and Mallarmé are invoked here in order to provide watchwords for philosophy itself. In doing so, they establish the terms in which the rest of the essay will be played out: revolt, logic, universality and risk. As such, they are immediately arrayed against the dominant tendencies of our world, which demands the liberty of commodities over revolt, inconsistent communication over logic, fragmented specializations

over universality, and security calculations over risk. Note, moreover, that this allusion at once establishes a direction *and* a directive or declaration: it directs us to the key terms whose discussion will constitute the bulk of the subsequent essay; it declares its position in such a way as to offer directives for contemporary thought in general.

What follows this opening is extremely illuminating in its operations. From the establishment of the key terms in a *general* polemical context, then, Badiou outlines three *specific* tendencies that have flourished in, even govern, this contemporary philosophical context (in this case, the late 1990s): hermeneutics, analytic philosophy, and postmodern philosophy. As he remarks, “together they form the most global and descriptive geography possible of contemporary philosophy,” and further specifies, “these orientations correspond, in some measure, to three geographical locations.”⁷ In line with the theme of self-situation, let us emphasize the term ‘geography’ here, for ‘spatial’ terms are implicitly deployed over and above ‘temporal’ ones (we shall return to this feature below). Note, too, that the late 19th century French poets are thereby treated as if they were *as contemporary as the contemporary philosophical orientations that they will simultaneously be shown to at once found and rebuke*. (We will explain these points further below.) Badiou himself makes it clear that he is using the poets at once “positively” and “negatively” (although these terms are probably inadequate here): *positively* insofar as they provide the crucial directives for our initial orientation to the problems, *negatively* insofar as these directives will paradoxically require us to depart from them in order to follow them.

At the moment that these poets are invoked to scramble the received distinctions between poetry and philosophy from within philosophy itself, they also prove exemplary acts of analysis and foundation. For Badiou these three philosophical tendencies share something which has been derived from these poets (perhaps without knowing it), as they simultaneously fail to live up to their challenges. The philosophers have followed the poets without knowing it—but have failed to draw all of the consequences. Moreover, even though Badiou himself is clearly drawing something essential from these poets, he is also, as we will specify, seeking to exceed the situation which their injunctions presuppose, expose and address. The paradoxes are clear: existing philosophies are covertly determined by poets that they perhaps ignore or rebuke; to escape these determinations, one must confront these poets by *affirming* the truly radical status of their utterances; in doing so, one must go *all the way*...and not tap out before the consequences are fully drawn.

As those already familiar with Badiou's work might recognise, Badiou's rhetoric here is implicitly stringently governed by his own *conditions*. He is taking Rimbaud and Mallarmé with an absolute philosophical seriousness. Yet to be conditioned is not simply to have to say this or that about this or that. Alternatively: even if one indeed make certain assertions on the basis of a conditioning, such assertions—however stringently or strongly expressed—do not thereby constitute a dogma or doctrine. Rather, they become the index of a *non-dialectical point* for what we will call the directives of philosophical *excession*.

Badiou's summary of the key aspects of these three orientations purports to target their key concepts, methods and aims. Hermeneutics, identified with the names of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, has *interpretation* as its key concept, its method to *confront* the nihilist technological closure, and its aim to *open* the 'closed' to meaning. Analytic philosophy has *the rule* as its key concept, its method a logico-grammatical analysis of propositions, and its aim is a therapy of meaning, "to shew," as Wittgenstein famously has it, "the fly the way out of the fly-bottle."⁸ Postmodern philosophy has the deconstruction of modernity as its key concept, propounds a rigorously mixed method, and proposes detotalization as its goal.

What Badiou then identifies are two features which these otherwise heterogeneous orientations share. First, there is the common conviction of the "end of philosophy": "the ideal of truth as it was put forth by classical philosophy has come to its end,"⁹ as evidenced in the work of Heidegger, Rudolf Carnap and Jean-François Lyotard. Second, there is the "central place accorded to the question of language" by all three.¹⁰ These two features, the first negative, the second positive, thereby link these orientations according to a logic that they themselves are resistant to examining—which exposes an initial moment of a non- or anti-philosophical tenor at the heart of contemporary philosophy itself.

Badiou then makes two further moves. First, he criticises these commonplaces on a number of grounds, above all in their resistant complicity with the general situation of thoughtlessness he had previously sketched. As he puts it, "if philosophy is essentially a meditation on language, it will not succeed in removing the obstacle that the specialization and fragmentation of the world opposes to universality."¹¹ Hence the tendency within each orientation to locate—with some desperation—a mode that will stabilise the generalising corrosion of global communications. Heidegger famously reverts to the priority of (the German)

language itself; analytic philosophy sutures itself to an image of scientific language (above all, to an image of logic); postmodern philosophy prefers and promulgates the elucubrations of literature and art. In each of these cases, an explicitly political, scientific, or aesthetic mode not only fails to establish itself universally, but falls into a unjustifiable condemnation or exclusion of other forms of thought. In Heidegger's engagement with Nazism, the deleterious implications are perhaps most evident, but they are certainly there too with the other orientations.¹² As Badiou points out, analytic philosophy's suture to scientific language leads not only to contempt for all other forms of thought, but an extraordinary political blindness to the fact that "even today the overwhelming majority of humanity is out of reach of such a language."¹³ Such sutures, in other words, entail and encrypt a certain esotericism and elitism, even when they genuinely attempt to speak "universally." This is not to say that universalisms cannot be elitist or "aristocratic" (an adjective Badiou himself employs at various points); only that the nature of such elitism would need to be laid out and justified, that is, established as egalitarian.

Second, Badiou uses this trinity of negative examples to forge his own position in a polemical fashion. To do so, however, Badiou has to locate the aforementioned "fixed point, a point of interruption" that is not corroded by the methods of these existing orientations. It is at this point that he once again has recourse to extra-philosophical elements, to his own conditions and to their enemies. Philosophy must confront commodification, media, technocratism and security. Having begun with a preliminary excursus in philosophical self-situation, Badiou turns to the world *outside* philosophy to show how the philosophies he is examining are simultaneously attempting to follow the directives of the poets yet, precisely because they are also sutured to one other condition above all, remain too in fee to the non-philosophic situation. The non-philosophical horror, the corruption of the world, must be confronted by philosophy as a foundational requirement. But the world too still yearns for philosophy, even at the very height—or depth—of its corruption.

This is a post-dialectical procedure on Badiou's part, then. One must establish oneself with regard to both contemporary philosophy and to non-philosophy at once. Such an establishment must break with both. But it can only do so by reference to both. One seeks the points at which philosophy falls back into the corruption of the world; but one also seeks the points at which the world itself demands philosophy. "Corruption" itself must be given a philosophical bearing:

a drive towards particularity, totality, inconsistency, injustice that nonetheless demands the restitution of universalism, infinity, consistency and justice.

But in this recourse to extra-philosophical elements, Badiou simultaneously has recourse to *an interpretation of the history of relations between the concepts and forms of presentation of philosophy itself*—a recourse that is simultaneously an auto-differentiation. We give two references here, although examples could be multiplied. The first announces the necessity of attending to variations of genre in philosophy, as well as to their necessity of their (self-) justification in and by the “genre” of philosophy itself. In the “Author’s Preface” to *Theoretical Writings*, Badiou begins: “Philosophical works come in a peculiar variety of forms...basically, anything whatsoever that can be classified as ‘writing.’”¹⁴ Does this statement not seem to return us to the very priority of language with which Badiou wishes to break? Certainly not. It is to raise a vital question that has rarely been explicitly raised (in analytic philosophy at least until recently), regarding *the generic status of the presentation of philosophy itself as integrally bound to the problem of conceptualisation*. As we shall see, this question is so important for Badiou that it perhaps constitutes the very heart of his philosophy: to anticipate radically, it will turn out that conditions are generic, while philosophy itself is a conditioned trans-generic enterprise.

Tending to rely on a particular form of the professional journal article or the technical treatise and a mode of proceeding that privileges the logical form of the proposition, analytic philosophy only rarely comes to recognise this genre *as genre* and, to the extent that this remains the case, it is therefore unable to recognise, let alone think, the institutional conditions that enable and corral it in the first place. Its formulas of thought, which it doesn’t know are formulas—or, worse still, thinks that these are the only proper modes appropriate to thought, thereby pathologising and indiscriminating its rivals—are thus essentially *transmissions-of-unthought*. This is especially peculiar given that the great progenitors of analytic thought were themselves extraordinary inventors of forms of presentation. Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, Wittgenstein, and J.L. Austin were all creators of new forms, new styles of thinking, whose attention was captured by the full gamut of conceptual requisites ranging from the most minimal, technical marks of inscription to the structuring or anti-structuring of the full-length treatise itself. Take Frege’s invention of new inscriptive systems in his revolutionary works; Russell and A.N. Whitehead’s vast treatise; or Wittgenstein’s own radical self-reinvention between the *Tractatus* and the *Philosophical Investigations*.

Such styles are forged because it is clear that, in thinking, there must simultaneously be what Harold Bloom calls a “breaking of the vessels” (of-received-form), in a way that is precisely *non- or anti-rhetorical* (if we accept the received modern sense of ‘rhetoric’ as persuasive-speech-without-any-necessary-rational-foundation). As such, for Badiou too, *polemic is separated from rhetoric*. To be polemical is not just to present contrary declarations or propositions, new methods and counter-methods, but is to engage an entire modality that must be up to the challenge of the ideas with which it is itself struggling. This is also why Badiou is very fond of the genre of the *Manifesto*, for essential philosophical as well as of course “political” reasons. A manifesto is a genre that declares its own generic status, from its title onwards.¹⁵ To put this another way, whose import will be evident to those already familiar with Badiou, the manifesto is a genre that generically declares its own genericity. As we have been suggesting, moreover, certain elements characteristic of the genre of the manifesto are found in Badiou beyond the self-denominated instances, above all in the structuring by self-situation, the declarative passages, the rhetoric of rebellion.

Yet if the modern continental tradition has tended to be more (explicitly and centrally) attentive to these questions than is often in evidence in the analytic tradition—since, especially in the wake of Heidegger, the technologies of philosophy themselves come to be considered finite means of revealing, with their own generic limitations emerging as a result and as a further goad to more profound trans-philosophical investigations of the vicissitudes of extra-propositional thought—this very attentiveness has paradoxically often induced thinkers to a concomitant dissemination or dissolution of the questions of truth, being and the subject. Heidegger himself is exemplary here, especially given that the thematic of technology is central to his oeuvre. Take the very famous early analysis of the “damaged tool” in *Being and Time*:

in a *disturbance of reference*—in being unusable for...—the reference becomes explicit. It does not yet become explicit as an ontological structure, but ontically for our circumspection which gets annoyed by the damaged tool... The context of useful things appears not as a totality never seen before, but as a totality that has continually been seen beforehand in our circumspection. But with this totality world makes itself known.¹⁶

What is crucial in the present context is what becomes of this analysis in the so-called “later Heidegger” following “the turn.” Here, it is the “disturbance of reference” that, in rendering impossible the execution of a task through accident or happenstance, forces out the exposure of a predigested totality and, through it, the contingent revelation of the contingency of *any* actual sense of the world. The damaged tool, in being damaged, simultaneously draws attention to itself as ‘unusable’ and the task that was to have been accomplished as un-doable, and thus has a double implication. The first is that the materiality of the thing, its thingness beyond-one’s-own-world-within-one’s-own-world begins to appear as such; the second is that this ontic exposure reveals the already-implicit structuring of one’s-own-world qua preconceived totality by constituting a local, punctual exception to it from within.¹⁷ This double operation of the disturbance of reference through a banal technological mishap—a completely quotidian non-event, suffused with ordinary everydayness—exemplifies the genuine radicality of phenomenology’s emphasis upon daily occurrences as having the potential to give rise to everyone’s coming-to-philosophizing in the first place. The forgetting-of-forgetting effected in and by the enacting of embodied know-how can also always already find the potential for anamnestic restitution by means of the little failed encounters of the everyday, towards materials always in excess of their context of use and towards thoughts always in excess of their context of consciousness.

What happens to Heidegger’s thought after his so-called “turn” with respect to the poem takes up these early analyses of technology-as-revealing-essence-in-its-breakdown by coupling it with an affirmation of poem-as-extra-legal-event-of-opening-to-Being. Why, then, and how? Simultaneously taking up and confronting the Nietzschean analysis of the work of art as the essence of form-giving-will-to-power, Heidegger comments that, for his great predecessor, “Art is not only subject to rules, must not only obey laws, but is in itself legislation. Only as legislation is it truly art. What is inexhaustible, what is to be created, is the law.”¹⁸ For Heidegger, however, it is not simply that great art establishes law as such, but that it opens a more fundamental relation of dwelling-with-Being. Because, as Heidegger notoriously announces, “Poetry that thinks is in truth the topology of being,”¹⁹ great poems become not merely legislators or legislative, but *events*: they are events which at once constitute a breaking-of-form (the novelty of the poem exceeding the limits of contemporary language and its genesis), a concomitant revelation of the status of the forms-that-they-have-broken (the “background conditions” of the constitution of language as such that they expose in the rupture), and a new bringing-of-truth that exceeds any technical closure

or operation of knowing, which, in its very presentation qua re-gathering of the disparate, opens the possibilities of different modes of thinking beyond any proposition or prescription.

We should briefly pause here to consider some of the key ways in which Heidegger elaborates this doctrine. First, if language is primary in the order of thinking, then we must interrogate the language, and the forms of language, in which thought has come to present itself *as* thought. Second, in this formal auto-interrogation of formal interrogation, it becomes clear that such forms are essentially contingent, finite inheritances, passed down to us without the passing-down itself becoming available as such: indeed, such forms necessarily entail an occlusion of precisely what they purport to transmit, and for a number of reasons. Third, language as such must therefore become a topic for thought, albeit in modes that are themselves localised by their (unthought) situation. Fourth, what leads us to thought cannot simply be what already passes-for-thought, but neither can we simply rupture with what conditions the historicity of our thought on the basis of any putative will-to-think. Fifth, this situation directs us towards the poem as the place in which the preceding concerns are exposed and re-framed, with a form of language-recreation that is tantamount to the event-advent of thinking itself.

On the “analytic” side, then, we have an invention of forms that are occluded *as forms* by the very tradition that comes to take up their challenge, while on the “continental” side we have an invention of forms that come to complicate the generic distinction between philosophy and its others to the point of dissolution of every traditional philosophical point of distinction. On the “analytic” side, we also have the privileging of mathematics and logic; on the “continental,” that of poetry and art. Yet these divisive tendencies simultaneously extend themselves *on the basis of shared convictions* about the ultimate priority of language over thought. Notably, such analyses set up precisely a structure of *situation* and *site* to which Badiou himself will directly respond in *Being and Event* and all his subsequent works, if sometimes covertly and with entirely different tasks in mind. It is perhaps remarkable that, in the secondary commentary to date, these connections have gone altogether unmade, even in writing dedicated to the links between Heidegger and Badiou.²⁰

Let’s consolidate these remarks by invoking a moment in which style and philosophy are explicitly examined by Badiou; indeed, our reference here further specifies the import of these operations with respect to a crucial founding

figure: Descartes. At first glance, however, Descartes does not seem to be a key interlocutor in any of Badiou's major texts: if we take, for example, the thinkers surveyed in the various meditations of *Being and Event*, we naturally find highly detailed technical meditations dedicated to Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Leibniz and Hegel, as well as to mathematicians and poets, including Cantor and Mallarmé. The final meditation is entitled "Descartes/Lacan," but one finds very little detail about Descartes there and certainly not an intervention of the order of the other meditations. On the contrary, this meditation explicitly announces Badiou's own program for a step-beyond the conception of the subject-qua-cogito, even in the limit-version of Jacques Lacan, where that subject has become "void, cleaved, a-substantial and ir-reflexive."²¹ Nor is there any direct or extended encounter in *Being and Event* with modern thinkers who are clearly in the Cartesian tradition: no Kant, no Husserl, no Sartre.

Yet, in his latest "great work" *Logics of Worlds*, Badiou expressly nominates Descartes as one of three key thinkers for him and his work, along with Plato and Hegel.²² Why? When we start looking more closely, Descartes is everywhere in Badiou. For Descartes announces a radical break of a kind that produces a new thinking of style along with a new thinking of thought in an inseparable "act." Hence Badiou declares in the very essay on which we are focussing here: "My position is to break with these frameworks of thought, to find another philosophical style, a style other than that of interpretation, of logical grammarian analysis, or of polyvalence and language games—that is, to rediscover a foundational style, a decided style, a style in the school of a Descartes for example."²³ The Cartesian reference is therefore no accident—on the contrary. Yet it immediately raises the question of the relation between style and thought, not least in a context that Badiou himself marks as marked by Lacanian psychoanalysis, for which, following Buffon, "style is the man."²⁴

In 1637, Descartes publishes in the French vernacular the unprecedented work *Discours sur la méthode*. Badiou notes that Descartes incarnates a division between the language of the people and an appeal to the savants of the Sorbonne, a division that continues—despite all the stylistic, temporal, philosophical and institutional differences—to be maintained in French up to and including Lacan and Deleuze themselves in the form of an irresolvable equivocation between philosopher and writer. Yet Descartes, in doing so, separates thought from natural language—which is why he can write so happily in either Latin or French.²⁵ Certainly, this is also a beginning in the French language—entirely unexpectedly by the way—of the

seduction of women as an elementary democratic step. Not the learned gentlemen of the Latin Sorbonne, but French *women* become the affirmed addressees of first philosophy. Yet this means that Descartes must also reject etymology as determining of sense, in favour of a syntactically-restricted semantic field. As Badiou glosses, Descartes' thus becomes "a language of decision, principle and consequence."²⁶

This further gives a political, polemical aspect to Descartes' style, which, in making a new incision into the language, means "in French, syntax politicises every philosophical utterance."²⁷ He continues: "the privilege accorded French has nothing to do with the language as such."²⁸ Indeed, Descartes never meditates on the singularity of the French language at all—in notable contradistinction from the German tradition whose peak moments are Hegel and Heidegger, both of whom expatiate at length and with often-bombastic profundity about the extraordinary priority of the Greek and German languages as such. Rather, we see the emergence of an explicit philosophical writing that simultaneously egalitarian and public in its language, as it takes upon itself the task of elaborating a subject that is absolutely universal. In doing so, it enjoins its public to undergo a singular meditation of their own, to follow the instructions it elaborates and justifies as a form of ethical reorientation to the fundamental problems of philosophy. Such an address is irrevocably *translinguistic*.

Recovering Descartes from the now-familiar image of the deleterious thinkers who introduced the Western self-present subject as correlate of imperial sovereignty, Badiou shows how Descartes instead develops: a philosophical style that privileges no natural language (it can be read in Latin or French or another translation); justifies its own clarity rationally; calls for rational ripostes to its claims (think of the "Objections" that are published with the *Meditations*); is eminently polemical, directed against the faults of other philosophers; is pedagogical (anybody can try this at home); experimental (nothing like this has been written before); separates truth from knowledge, insofar as the foundation of the cogito becomes that certain point at which thought touches being; and arrogates to itself a radical contemporaneity.

It is at this point that we begin to see the extraordinary powers of Badiou's method also operative in the little occasional essay "Philosophy and Desire" with which we began. He has begun by extracting paradoxical directives from certain poetic formulae which he arrays against a global context of thoughtlessness; in a second

stage, he outlines the three major variant forms of philosophical thought current in the context, in order to identify something that they unexpectedly share; in doing so, he pinpoints a fourth position that all the dominant tendencies reject; finally, in returning at another level to the directives with which he began, *he establishes himself in this impossible fourth position with a concomitant modification of the form of philosophical presentation itself.*

Let us quickly verify the recurrence of this approach in 3 further texts: *Being and Event*, *The Century*, and *Logics of Worlds*. In *Being and Event*, this is extremely clear. We cite from the very beginning of the treatise:

Let's premise the analysis of the current global state of philosophy on the following three assumptions:

1. Heidegger is the last universally recognizable philosopher.
2. Those programmes of thought—especially the American—which have followed the developments in mathematics, in logic and in the work of the Vienna circle have succeeded in conserving the figure of scientific rationality as a paradigm for thought.
3. A post-Cartesian doctrine of the subject is unfolding: its origin can be traced to non-philosophical practices (whether those practice be political, or relating to “mental illness”); and its regime of interpretation, marked by the names of Marx and Lenin, Freud and Lacan, is complicated by clinical or militant operations which go beyond transmissible discourse.²⁹

As we might now expect, Badiou outlines a fourth position—his own—on the basis of this initial self-situation. To do so, he “draws a diagonal” (a favoured image of Badiou’s, whose provenance goes back to at least Plato) through the three, simultaneously showing their differences, what they inadvertently share, how they can be used to confront each other, and what can be taken from them. This procedure creates a position that none of them could affirmed on their own, and which indeed could not be even minimally sketched without such a foundational and introductory self-situation.

We encounter this once again in *The Century*, on the face of it an altogether different kind of investigation in that it attends to major cultural achievements of the twentieth century, from Malevich through Freud and the Surrealists and

beyond, rather than to a formal meta-ontological reconsideration of the status of mathematics. *The Century* opens precisely by discussing three plausible contemporary accounts of the twentieth century. In Jan Voelker's words, "the Century is a time frame which can be counted threefold: as the 'communist century,' from the war of 1914-18 through the end of the Soviet Union, or as the 'totalitarian century,' dating from 1917 to 1976, the year of Mao's death. Then it can also be counted as the liberal Century, the 'victory of Capital,' lasting thirty years from the 1970s onwards."³⁰ Although Voelker has quite rightly discerned the introductory import of this "threefold," he does not expand further upon its function beyond remarking that "the threefold count seems to indicate that its intention is not historical." This is of course quite correct, but, in line with our demonstration here, we need to say a little more.

To summarize: each of these narratives (the communist, the totalitarian, the liberal) is indeed plausible; they nonetheless cannot all be held together without inconsistency; yet they must be held together; in placing them in apposition with each other, their respective strengths and limitations are exposed; this then also exposes their statist (representational) nature insofar as they don't take the century on its own terms although they precisely do! So we now have another conceptual implication to add to Badiou's procedure: in exposing the representational claims of such partial meta-narratives to each other, it also exposes the necessity to return to the sources themselves. "Back to the things themselves!" was of course a critical phenomenological catchcry, but it is one of the recurrent moves of philosophy. Badiou likes to (mis)quote the *Cratylus* in this regard: "We philosophers do not take as our point of departure words, but things."³¹ So such a self-situation further justifies a return to the matter beyond its representational capture, while using these contemporaneously dominant representations as an initial orientation.

Badiou's very staging of such dissensions in his opening self-situations is, let us say, a contemporary form of Platonic dialogue: not simply in the received terms of a strenuous local discussion between historical or fictional personages, but an analysis of the irreducibility and partiality of even the strongest forms of representation, by placing them in the same space, and thereby reducing them at once to their key operations *and* to the aporias which they cannot think. Note this also has the effect of making the allegedly old or outmoded newly contemporary, to return to it its powers as *forever young*.

A final example here: *Logics of Worlds*. This example, however, is exceptional, as it is one of the few places where the representative triplet breached by a fourth construction is not immediately in evidence. We therefore include it here as a kind of confirmation-through-exception of Badiou's formal approach. Indeed, as has been pointed out, Badiou doesn't begin with a particular philosophical situation but a much more general cultural one.³² He opens with a little thought experiment: "What do we all think, today? What do I think when I'm not monitoring myself? Or rather, what is our (my) natural belief? ... Today, natural belief is condensed in a single statement: *There are only bodies and languages*. This statement is the axiom of contemporary conviction. I propose to name this conviction *democratic materialism*."³³ Indeed, this is a first reason why "materialism" is no longer a very good signifier of anything: it literally signifies everyone and everything, if not in a good (philosophical) way. Neo-Darwinians, neo-liberal economists, neo-neos, all wrap themselves in the signifier's capacious embrace, with the usual consequences. As Badiou proceeds to unpack the standard view: "The humanist protection of all living bodies: this is the norm of contemporary materialism... Our materialism is therefore the materialism of life. It is a bio-materialism."³⁴ Second, this materialism presents itself as essentially democratic: "the assimilation of humanity to animality culminates in the identification of the human animal with the diversity of its sub-species and the democratic rights that inhere in this diversity."³⁵ In fact, the only thing that is intolerable for democratic materialism is intolerance itself: "intolerance" being implicitly defined as precisely those discourses and practices that refuse this total reduction to life. Confronted by those discourses that reject their own submission to democracy, military intervention to crush the intolerant becomes the paramount duty of the tolerant materialist powers of the present.

Badiou's own response is as follows: "After much hesitation, I have decided to name *materialist dialectic* the ideological atmosphere in which my philosophical undertaking conveys its most extreme tension."³⁶ He immediately continues:

What a way to conjure up a phrase from the realm of the dead! Wasn't my teacher Louis Althusser, more than thirty years ago, among the last nobly to make use of the phrase "dialectical materialism," not without some misgivings? Didn't Stalin—no longer what he once was, even qua exemplary state criminal (a career in which he's been overtaken by Hitler in the last few years), though still a tactless reference—codify, under the heading *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*, the most formalist rules of a communist subjectivity, the source of whose paradoxical radiance no one

can locate any longer?³⁷

Badiou, in other words, is well aware not only of the term's desuetude but its anachronistic offensiveness. Take the three terms at stake, *materialism*, *historical* and *dialectical*. Dialectical materialism was to be distinguished from historical materialism, insofar as the adjectives bore the brunt of doctrinal affiliation and practical methodology. Both dialectical and historical materialism were materialist insofar as they polemically directed themselves against the idealisms that stemmed from German idealism, and were to be rediscovered as always-already active in bourgeois thought of all kinds. Yet dialectical materialism as a general phenomenon adhered to and promoted, first and foremost, the proper mode of attention to all phenomena, positing them as inherently limited, entering via their very self-limitation into relations of contradiction with their negation, and, in doing so, progressing through a dynamic struggle out of which would eventually pop a third, unprecedented term. Whereupon the whirligig would be repeated at a higher level, forever preserving as interiorized difference the contradictions that had been incorporated in prior struggles in transformed and transforming presentations. "The real is the rational and the rational is the real" and "the whole is the true" are its notorious philosophical slogans, drawn from Hegel himself, and above all from the great "Preface" to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

Historical materialism, by contrast, in general foregrounded *chronological locales* over *method*, in order to, in its most sophisticated forms, confront the dialectical method with the historicity of its own emergence and hence its own non-dialectically-absorbable nature. When *dialectical* was the adjective, the emphasis was placed on contradiction, struggle, and the necessary self-overcoming of the Two; when *historical* wore the pants, as the expression has it, the singularities of the sites it designated led to multiplicity, negotiation, and contingencies of redescription, "concrete analysis of concrete situations." In both cases, of course, the point was political revolution; the problem was how to best hasten the triumph of the coming revolution.

Even Althusser's radical position turns out to have relied upon a variant of these presuppositions. Badiou, again:

Althusser regarded Marxism as a complex ensemble because it contained two creations (that of a science, historical materialism, and that of a new philosophy, dialectical materialism) enveloped in a single break, a single

historical discontinuity.... Two breaks—one philosophical (dialectical materialism) and the other scientific (historical materialism) were contained in a single intellectual *dispositif*, which took the form of a worldview: the proletarian ideology, Marxism-Leninism.³⁸

For Althusser, there was thus a necessity to think this double creation from a single historical rupture *and* the single *dispositif* from two conceptual ruptures as themselves constituting a dialectical advance. There is the further paradox that this chiasmatic dialectic constituted a break with traditional forms of ideology-critique, precisely because ideology could no longer be thought of as any kind of false-consciousness, but rather the *practical condition* for entering into any field of struggle in the first place. Under Althusser's description, ideology becomes transcendental and constitutive, and it is from *within* ideology that science and philosophy essay to break with its current structuring principles.

When “materialism” becomes naturalised and generalised, however, it pulls the rug out from under the critical power both of the adjectives and the programs they designated. As we regularly experience today, the discourses that have done best out of such naturalism are science and religion—or, more accurately, the parodies of science and religion that are scientism and fundamentalism. Their avatars will now undoubtedly continue to appear to be struggling with each other worldwide, at the very moment that what has been foreclosed from such discourse is the very matter at stake: the matter of the political. Under the descriptions offered by such socio-biologists, human politics is just another form of animal interaction; under the descriptions offered by such fundamentalists, human politics is just another form of fallen animal interaction. The apparent struggle is a *false* one—that is, *it cannot itself be thought dialectically from either of its poles nor within their antagonism*, not least because, if there is even any contradiction involved, the negation does not enter into a relation of self-transformation with its assertion—and the “debate’s” very ubiquity and virulence is a further effective distraction from the default of the political itself.

Despite these considerations regarding the fate of materialism, Badiou continues relatively undismayed. For him, the tenets of democratic materialism remain viable, only he adds: “except there are truths.” It is these truths—politics, art, love and science—that thus constitute exceptions to the democratic materialism of the present. In his parlance, then, calling his project a material dialectic not only has the rhetorical force of its syntagmatic inversion, but the process of struggle

itself is primary. Whereas dialectical materialism, like historical materialism, like our contemporary democratic materialisms, implicitly had materialism as a substantive, thereby encrypting the primacy of substance at its base, with Badiou the substance disappears from materialism. *Material* becomes adjectival; as it does so, the *dialectic* itself must rearticulate the “real and the rational” which was the essence of Hegel’s program. This rearticulation leads to a shattering of the unity—as well as the duality!—of the dialectic. Or, rather, the new materialist dialectic articulates being and becoming in such a way as to make any movement between the two non-dialectical, non-total, and non-temporal.³⁹

What, then, is privileged by Badiou’s construction? It is the primacy of situation and the irreducibility of struggle. Here, it is absolutely crucial to understand how Badiou’s rationalism founds his position vis-à-vis “diversity.” The “materialist dialectic” bespeaks a unified approach to diversity. What is this diversity? In *Logics of Worlds*, it is the diversity and intensity of appearances themselves, and such diversity and intensity require a phenomenology. What sort of phenomenology? It can be neither of the Hegelian kind, despite the reprise of the term phenomenology itself, nor of the Husserlian or Heideggerean varieties. Why not? Because the former’s phenomenology depends on a logic of the becoming of contradictions as totality and teleology. For Badiou, contemporary logic neither tolerates contradiction as dynamism, nor totality as a consistent concept. There are forms of logic—such as paraconsistent logic—which, even if often allegedly inspired by Hegel himself, only tolerate true contradictions under very specific circumstances. These contradictions, moreover, are not dynamic relations. All forms of modern logic resist the category of the whole, which Bertrand Russell showed to be inconsistent in a famous 1904 letter to Frege (and of which Badiou makes a good deal in many of his metamathematical arguments throughout his *oeuvre*). On the other hand, Badiou also rejects the descriptive phenomenology whose peak moment in the twentieth century was Heidegger. Such a phenomenology places the emphasis on a linguistic-historical unfolding of the site into which *Dasein* is thrown, and tends towards an in-principle unlimited hermeneutics of opening to being against its nihilist closure in technology (we have already briefly touched on this above).⁴⁰ Nor is Badiou happy with allegedly naturalistic descriptions of the phenomenal world: for him, evolutionary biology remains a wild mess of empirical observations, and not a real science at all.⁴¹ Finally, and in the most rigorous perspective, the challenge boils down to the recreation of an acceptably contemporary problematic of negation. In an interview with *Critical Inquiry* in 2008, Badiou asserts: “Contrary to Hegel, for whom the negation of the negation

produces a new affirmation, I think we must assert that today negativity, properly speaking, does not create anything new. It destroys the old, of course, but does not give rise to a new creation.”⁴² He immediately proceeds to reiterate “our contemporary need to produce a non-Hegelian category of negation.”⁴³

In *Being and Event*, Badiou drew on post-Cantorian set-theory in order to explore his claim that “mathematics is ontology.” Mathematics is the paradigm of rationality, necessary for all empirical sciences, as well as in itself establishing the limits of the pure structures of thought. But a phenomenology is not and cannot be an ontology in this sense, since it is not dealing with such structures and their limits, but with intensities of appearing. Given that Badiou is unwilling to abandon reason to think appearing, he has recourse at this point to contemporary logics to formalise and ground his approach. In fact, he defines logic as the cohesion or consistency of appearing; outside of such logic, one has only the extra-rational if not entirely irrational claims of “experience.” Several key points follow. First, unlike the Hegelian dialectic and its Marxist inheritors, there must be a gap for Badiou between being and appearing that is irreducible in principle. This gap cannot be thought as “base” to “superstructure,” and, if one wishes to retain such metaphors, the articulation between them must be reconfigured in rationalist and not empiricist terms. Badiou’s genius is to propose that the historically-unstable relationship between pure mathematics and logic maps onto the relationship between being and being-there, ontology and phenomenology. Pure mathematics becomes the science of being qua being, being as such, being *without* its appearance in a world. Pure logic, however, must be then a science of appearing without its being; being-in-its-appearing, that is, localised being. Mathematics becomes an axiomatic ontology, logic a transcendental phenomenology.

One of the many benefits of such an approach is that it enables a genuine critique of the oppressiveness of situations, of real situations, as themselves not merely irrational, but oppressive insofar as they are anti-rational. Rationality, moreover, can thereby be shown to be *inherently egalitarian*—refusing all and any claims of authority in its elaboration. As such, it is also necessarily atemporal, or what Badiou would call *eternal*. It’s not that mathematics and logic aren’t historically variable; rather, it’s that this variability or development is absolutely and in principle independent of authoritarian dictates; moreover, every radical renovation of maths and logic enables its predecessors to be rewritten without loss in its own terms (but not vice-versa). This means that contemporary mathematics and logic are differing limit-inscriptions of reason, whose *actual* limits they establish and

enforce as such. It is on the basis of such rational principles, and such principles alone, that Badiou can maintain that political action, for example, is *ultimately* independent of economic directives, both theoretically and practically.

Although this is not the appropriate place to examine some of the more controversial aspects of Badiou's post-*Being and Event* doctrines, it is perhaps worth noting that it must be the case "in the last instance" for Badiou that, though political action *must always emerge from and treat of its specific situation in terms necessarily drawn from that situation itself*—exactly as we have been arguing that he does in his own writings—strictly speaking this "situation" can no longer be restricted to the terms and teleology of inherited forms of revolutionary class struggle. Rather, à la Badiou's abstract accounts of the operations of truths, *every* procedure emerges from an event that *exposes the foreclosed void* (ontologically considered) or the *minimum-becoming-maximal* (phenomenologically considered) of the existing situation. Briefly, if class-struggle is indeed bound to certain kinds of economic structure, radical politics in Badiou's sense is not only not always reducible to class-struggle (although such may constitute the central *material* or *theme* of a sequence of political action), but politics necessarily transforms both matter and structure (and thus for example the "meaning of class-struggle") in the course of its activity.⁴⁴ (This is partially also what Badiou's notorious term "subtraction" means.) Finally, this approach enables Badiou to return to historical situations in a new way, rereading them according to the directives of logic. This entails that "historical materialism" is itself compromised insofar as it insists on the priority of either history or substance, and therefore that to pursue their primacy is, whatever the motivation, to uphold the oppression of unfair shares.

In other words, and despite the apparent exception to Badiou's own usual stylistic practice in *Logics*, the pragmatic upshot of his self-situation in terms of the materialist dialectic comes to precisely the same point: *to create a rational metaphysics in a new style that affirms the egalitarian character of all true thought, at once simultaneously situated, singular and universal*. In fact, on the basis of our rule and our exception, we can now formalize the logic of polemic *chez* Badiou in an acceptably grounded fashion.

As we have been suggesting, we see this formal demonstrative procedure—of what we might call the "Five Cs" of context@commonplace@critique@condition@construction—recur throughout Badiou's work. Aside from any other considerations, this procedure is surely one model of argumentative writing, indeed one kind of

generic paradigm for contemporary philosophical practice. To begin each time with another effort of self-localisation immediately emphasizes not only the necessity of foregrounding situation as such, but the singularity of each presentation. To *not* do so—as we find so often in philosophy today—is to risk assuming a pre-existing institutional framework that is thereby itself occluded as its routines quietly organise and authorise inherited, invisible distinctions between what is permissible and unacceptable. This is what “Philosophy and Desire”—as indeed Badiou’s other work—sets out to expose and, in doing so, lays out a possibility for a philosophy that can exist beyond any particular form of institutional closure. It is certainly not the only, nor necessarily the best, possible model for philosophical practice. But it certainly has a number of clear and present benefits.

Such attempts to attend to the situation of (one’s own) thinking as such, forces the presentation itself to present the conditions of its own presentation, and in such a way as to stage the problem of the grounds of its auto-differentiation in its relation to the extension of its conceptual consistency and referential claims. Badiou thereby forces himself to return again and again to establishing and exposing, clearly and openly, the situation, site and means by which his own arguments will take place. One consequence of this is that every principle, argument and conclusion is openly staged for the reader; it is incumbent upon the latter to assent or contest, that is, *participate*, and, by the same token, to participate with the same commitment to public reason shown by Badiou. Each point of articulation offers the possibility for contesting Badiou’s decisions—if one can indeed *demonstrate* that his articulations are false.

Badiou’s forms therefore invariably propose *a challenge of rational participation*. The challenge is triple: first, regarding the plausibility of the context presented; second, if one can show that Badiou’s articulations on that basis demonstratively fail, then Badiou himself must assent to such a demonstration; third, one might also show that, if Badiou is not “wrong,” there were other routes to be taken at those decisive points which bear *undecidable* rational claims. In other words, Badiou’s forms in themselves *polemically* provoke a challenge of rationality, even if one ultimately decides for another route than Badiou himself on the basis of extra-rational — but not irrational—grounds.

This is the logic—yes, the *logic*—of polemic in the work of Alain Badiou.

NOTES

1. See P. Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.
2. B. Bosteels, "Introduction," to Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*. Trans. B. Bosteels. London and New York: Continuum, 2009, xxvii.
3. Bosteels, "Introduction", xxvii.
4. See O. Feltham, *Alain Badiou: Live Theory*. New York and London: Continuum, 2008, *passim*.
5. J. Clemens, "Had we but worlds enough, and time, this absolute, philosopher..." *The Praxis of Alain Badiou*. Eds A. Bartlett et al. Melbourne: re.press, 2006, 102-143.
6. A. Badiou, *Infinite Thought*. Eds J. Clemens and O. Feltham. London: Continuum, 2003, 39.
7. Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, 42.
8. L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 4th edition. Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and J. Schulte. London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, n. 309, 110.
9. Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, 46.
10. Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, 46.
11. Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, 47.
12. See A. Badiou, A and B. Cassin, *Heidegger: les femmes, le nazisme et la philosophie*. Paris: Fayard, 2010.
13. Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, 48.
14. A. Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*. Eds R. Brassier and A. Toscano. London and New York: Continuum, 2004, xiii-xiv.
15. See J. Lyon, *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern*. Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1999; M. Puchner, *Poetry of the revolution: Marx, manifestos, and the avant-gardes*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.
16. M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*. Trans. J. Stambaugh. Albany: SUNY, 1996, 70.
17. For an influential recent reinterpretation of the status of the broken tool in Heidegger, see Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*. Illinois: Open Court Publishing, 2002.
18. M. Heidegger, *Nietzsche, Volume 1: The Will to Power as Art*. Trans. D.F. Krell. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981, 130.
19. M. Heidegger, *Poetry, language, thought*. Trans. A. Hofstadter. New York: Harper and Row, 1971, 12.
20. See J. Clemens and J. Roffe, "Philosophy as Anti-Religion in the Work of Alain Badiou." *Sophia* 47 (2008, 345-358); G. Harman, "Badiou's Relation to Heidegger in Theory of the Subject," *Badiou and Philosophy*. Eds S. Bowden and S. Duffy. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012, 225-243; M. Hewson, "Heidegger," *Alain Badiou: Key Concepts*. Eds A.J. Bartlett and J. Clemens. Aldershot: Acumen, 2010, 146-154.
21. A. Badiou, *Being and Event*. Trans. O. Feltham. London and New York: Continuum, 2006, 3.
22. A. Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*. Trans. A. Toscano. London and New York: Continuum, 2009, 527.
23. Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, 50.
24. J. Lacan, *Ecrits*. Trans. B. Fink with H. Fink and R. Grigg. New York: Norton, 2006, 5. Note, of course, that Lacan invokes this classicism in order to distinguish it from the psychoanalytic thinking of the object a which is both cause of the subject and its occlusion.
25. This is a key point, and implicates a very wide range of seventeenth-century authors who contributed to what is often broadly (and perhaps misleadingly) called "the scientific revolution,"

including, beyond Descartes himself, Francis Bacon, Galileo Galilei, Thomas Hobbes, and others. The point is *not* that Descartes or his contemporaries were *simply* indifferent to the language in which their thought was presented, but that, by the very *act of writing* in vernacular languages as well as in the Latin in which all *educated men* had to be fluent was a crucial aspect of the radical transformations in the possibility of address that they were forging. This is undoubtedly why most accounts of Descartes' work are constrained to at least mention this aspect of method, e.g., "After the Galileo affair, Descartes did not give up his project of reforming the sciences. In 1637, he tested the response to his new ideas by offering a sampler, the *Discourse on the Method* together with essays on *Dioptics*, *Meteorology*, and *Geometry*. These works were also written in French, making them accessible to literate people outside the universities, including artisans, people at court, and 'even' women. (Descartes held that all human beings, irrespective of gender, possess the same intellectual power.)" Gary Hatfield, *Descartes and the Meditations*. London: Routledge, 2003, 20-21. Precisely along these lines, Stephen Gaukroger opens his "Introduction" to a collection on the *Meditations* by underlining "The *Meditations* aim to make one responsible for one's cognitive life in a way that the devotional texts of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation—where a range of exacting moral standards, accompanied by demands for self-vigilance which had been the preserve of monastic culture throughout the Middle Ages, were transferred wholesale to the general populace." *The Blackwell Guide to Descartes' Meditations*. Ed. Stephen Gaukroger. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006, 1. Whatever an individual's reservations and hesitations, ambiguities and complications, to write philosophy in the vernacular was at this time in itself an assault against the dominant institutions of knowledge. We might also note the impact of Montaigne's *Essais* upon so many of the major philosophical writers: Bacon himself almost immediately started writing his own *Essays* in English; Descartes frankly refers to some of his own works as "*essais*."

26. A. Badiou, "Français: de la langue Française comme evident." *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies*. Ed. B. Cassin. Paris: Editions du Seuil/Dictionnaires Le Robert, 2004, 468.

27. Badiou, "Français," 470.

28. Badiou, "Français," 471.

29. Badiou, *Being and Event*, 1.

30. J. Voelker, "Reversing and Affirming the Avant-gardes: A New Paradigm for Politics." *Badiou and the Political Condition*. Ed. M. Constantinou. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014, 147.

31. Cited Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, 50.

32. See Clemens, "Had we but worlds enough," *passim*.

33. Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 1.

34. Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 2.

35. Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 2.

36. Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 3.

37. Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 3.

38. Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 515-516.

39. For a different account of Badiou's putative "materialism," see Frank Ruda's book-length study, *For Badiou: Idealism without Idealism*. Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2015.

40. Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 46.

41. See A. Badiou, *Ethics*. Trans. P. Hallward. London: Verso, 2003.

42. A. Badiou, "'We need a popular discipline': Contemporary Politics and the Crisis of the Negative." *Critical Inquiry* 34 (2008, 652).

43. Ibid. See also the essays collected in *Badiou and Hegel: Infinity, Dialectics, Subjectivity*. Eds J. Vernon and A. Calcagno. Maryland: Lexington Books, 2015.

44. The resolute “abstraction” (in the common acceptation of this word) of Badiou’s theory often makes it difficult to see how, in the real sequences of politics (but this also necessarily holds for the other truth procedures), such action might be understood. By far the most ambitious and extended account to date that seeks to take up Badiou’s theories and apply them in detail to “real,” “historical” “sequences,” see Colin Wright’s extraordinary (and gigantic) *Badiou in Jamaica: The Politics of Conflict*. Melbourne: re.press, 2013. We have also learned a lot from another very detailed (if currently unpublished) paper by Robert Boncardo and Bryan Cooke, “Long Live the International Proletariat of France,” which takes up the relation between the SONACOTRA rent strike and Badiou’s *Theory of the Subject*.

lukács and nietzsche: revolution in a tragic key

baraneh emadian

György Lukács's Marxist phase is usually associated with his passage from neo-Kantianism to Hegelianism. Nonetheless, Nietzschean influences have been covertly present in Lukács's philosophical development, particularly in his uncompromising distaste for the bourgeois society and the mediocrity of its quotidian values. A closer glance at Lukács's corpus discloses that the influence of Nietzsche has been eclipsed by the Hegelian turn in his thought. Lukács hardly ever mentions the weight of Nietzsche on his early thinking, an influence that makes cameo appearances throughout his lifetime writings. During the period of his adherence to a Stalinist approach to communism, his new subjectivity seems to be re-constituted through a disavowal of his earlier romantic anti-capitalism. Implicit in Lukács's attack on Nietzsche in the *Destruction of Reason* (1952) is an acerbic reaction to the mute presence of the latter in his earlier thought. Apart from his ignorance of the unreliability of the collection of *the Will to Power* edited by Peter Gast and Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, his battle against the anti-proletariat Nietzsche in the *Destruction* is waged on a metaphysical, non-historical plain.¹ Lukács's pre-Marxist works (*Soul and Form*, *On Poverty of Spirit*, and *The Theory of the Novel*) in a sense betray the instance of a writer who writes most of someone where he omits his name. Thus perceived, Lukács's early corpus lends itself to a symptomatic reading.

This essay seeks to extract the Nietzschean undercurrents of Lukács's work through a reflection on the romantic anti-capitalist tendencies that the young Lukács shared with Nietzsche. For although it may appear that Nietzsche lacked a clear politics, his criticism of the bourgeois ethos as a structure based on debt/guilt [*Schuld*], and his critique of modern value-system and nihilism paved the way for the emergence of Lukács's theory of reification. Nietzsche's category of 'transvaluation of values' suggests a total transfiguration of reality, a radical rupture with the ordinary state of things, and as such carries within itself a revolutionary promise.

Drawing a distinction between political romanticism and romantic politics, I argue that romantic anti-capitalism contains a potential for the latter. The essay further traces the link between Lukács's 'romantic politics' and the persistence of a thought of the tragic (a 'tragic vision') in his texts that, despite its temporary decline during his *realist* period, is undismissable in different constellations of his thought.

ROMANTIC ANTI-CAPITALISM REVISITED

And because nature and fate have never been so terrifyingly soulless as they are today, because men's souls have never walked in such utter loneliness upon deserted paths, because of all of this we may again hope for the coming of tragedy—once all the dancing shadows of a friendly order which our cowardly dreams have cast upon nature to allow us a false sense of security, have entirely disappeared.

—Lukács, *Soul & Form*²

In Thomas Mann's novel, *The Magic Mountain*, Naphta speaks of "a fascinating double meaning" in Romanticism that incorporates both reaction and revolution.³ This character was modelled on Lukács.⁴ Even though Lukács never recognized himself in Naphta (at one point expressing his distance from him as well as Nietzsche), he represents the 'romantic anti-capitalism' that Lukács initially associated with Dostoevsky (1931), suggesting a moral, aesthetic, and political criticism of bourgeois culture as grounded on pre-capitalist social classes and cultural values.⁵ Even in the neo-Romanticism of the Heidelberg Circle—particularly in the work of Max Weber and Georg Simmel—Lukács gleaned a fascination with the so-called lost unity of the pre-capitalist world. In a spirit of auto-critique, Lukács attributed the same qualities to his own early works. Yet,

apart from the unfairness of the older Lukács's judgment of these early writings and the philosophical disposition behind them, they undoubtedly did represent romantic anti-capitalist thought, an observation most succinctly developed in Michael Löwy's book on Lukács. Löwy rightly notes that unlike Marx's conception of a determined economic formation or instances of 'primitive communism' as pre-capitalist models, Lukács was more enthusiastic about "the Homeric universe of ancient Greece; Russian literary or religious spirituality; Christian, Hindu, or Jewish mysticism."⁶

In a sense, Lukács's later objections against the notion of romantic anti-capitalism and its historical ambivalence—which he shares with some Marxists—mostly spring from the limitations of an orthodox interpretation of historical materialism and its tendency to accentuate the 'pre-modern' or pre-bourgeois character of this category in order to strip it of all subversive capacities. Once revolution and progress were merely deemed as modern events with the industrial working class as the only subject of dissensus, any pre-modern form of subversion would be labelled as reactionary. Even so, there are critical debates within Marxism that take issue with this tendency in historical materialism, arguing that pre-modern structures had not been devoid of revolutionary and egalitarian qualities. Silvia Federici's conception of capitalism as a counter-revolution that suppressed the revolutionary movements of the peasantry and the heretics against feudalism is an instance that puts stress on the subversive, radical, and egalitarian quality of these pre-capitalist movements.⁷ Such a historical trajectory that refuses to regard revolution as *merely* a modern phenomenon is requisite for conjuring up the possibilities within the notion of romantic anti-capitalism, rescuing it from the criticisms pitted against it—particularly Lukács's condemnation of this concept in the 1967 preface to his seminal *History and Class Consciousness*.

History and Class Consciousness (1923) indeed stumbles at the threshold between Lukács's early romantic anti-capitalist phase and the later realist one. Already in this work he assumes some distance from Romanticism, claiming that after Rousseau the concept of organic growth had regressed from a protest against reification into a "reactionary slogan."⁸ Although it is true that Lukács's stance towards Romanticism went through many ups and downs, his robust opposition to the idea emerged in his later Stalinist phase. A prelude to this opposition could be gleaned in his enthusiastic review of Carl Schmitt's *Political Romanticism* in which a young Schmitt rebukes excessive subjectivism and aestheticism of the Romantics. Although the accusation of excessive aestheticism is partly true and in

a sense reminiscent of Hegel's account of 'the Beautiful Soul,' Schmitt and Lukács over-exaggerate the extent of romantic depoliticization. Nonetheless, Schmitt draws a distinction between political romanticism and romantic politics that I would like to dwell upon. Schmitt's book targeted the political romanticism of those who had just come to power in the new Weimar Republic, describing how the German bourgeoisie was inflicted with passivity in politics precisely due to its romantic proclivity. Schmitt connects political passivity to what he refers to as the "occasionalist" essence of Romanticism:

... [T]he romantic sense of the world and life can be combined with the most diverse political circumstances and with antithetical philosophical theories. As long as the Revolution is present, political romanticism is revolutionary. With the termination of the Revolution, it becomes conservative ... This variability of political content is not accidental. On the contrary, it is a consequence of the occasionalist attitude, and it is deeply rooted in the nature of the romantic, the essence of which is passivity.⁹

As such, "[w]here political activity begins, political romanticism ends."¹⁰ Contra to political romanticism, however, romantic politics is to be found in a person who is not essentially a romantic, but can be "motivated by romanticized ideas ... [placing] his energy, which flows from other sources, at their disposal."¹¹ Whereas in the subjectified occasionalism of political romanticism occasion is the cause, here "the effect, the *terminus ad quem*," is occasional. An event takes on a romantic bent when an occasional object "is imputed to an important political intent that is to be taken seriously."¹² For Schmitt, Don Quixote is the immortal type of this form of politics, the romantic political figure par excellence. Rather than seeking the "higher harmony" of the political romanticism, Don Quixote can actually *make a decision* regarding the right and wrong, moving beyond the political romantic's passivity towards the problem of justice, beyond the attempt to dissolve the contradictions through their aestheticization or instrumentalization for the exercise of romantic imagination. It is the very indignation over supposed injustice that drives Don Quixote to bracket external reality, and yet, he does not recoil aesthetically into his own subjectivity, "composing complaints for a criticism of the present."¹³ He gets entangled in real treacherous battles rather than immersing himself in the so-called battle of 'the higher sort' such as the battle of the artist with his material. Even his infatuation with Dulcinea—indeed, with his 'idea' of Dulcinea—is a source of inspiration that compels him to commit great deeds. Thus perceived, in contrast to the 'ambivalence' that both thinkers

find in Romanticism, romantic politics rests upon the ability to make a decision and a great degree of ironic heroism. On the whole, this distinction seems to go back to the difference between Romanticism as a historical period or tradition and ‘the romantic’, more or less defined as a concept whose reference is unreal or fictional. Schmitt in fact draws attention to the etymological meaning of romantic or *romanhaft* as ‘fictitious.’¹⁴

As a spiritual, more or less mystical *Weltanschauung*, Romanticism is closely intertwined with philosophical thought, and in a sense the ambivalence in what the Naphta character calls “a fascinating double meaning” merging revolution and reaction is not only a romantic syndrome, but also a malady of philosophy itself. As for the ambivalence in the notion of romantic anti-capitalism, after WWI this ambiguity began to fade as the difference between the revolutionary and the reactionary proponents of this concept became palpable. According to Fehér and Wikoff, with the emergence of WWI, “romantic anti-capitalism, which could function undisturbed only as mere cultural criticism, had to abandon its disguise and show its true colours. It had to unequivocally show how seriously it took its anti-capitalist stance.”¹⁵ Under these circumstances, thinkers like Lukács and Bloch retained their fidelity to emancipation through rejecting the war, whilst figures as diverse as Weber, Simmel, Ernst, and Mann chose to support the war.¹⁶

Lukács’s commentators thus have been able to pinpoint the members of the two camps—revolutionary and reactionary—as a means to highlight the Janus-faced nature of the category of romantic anti-capitalism and ultimately Romanticism itself. Nevertheless, rather than being realized in opposite camps, this “fascinating double meaning” can be met in one thinker, and Nietzsche is perhaps the first figure that emerges under this light: the figure accused of being a precursor theorist of Nazism (even in Lukács’s *Destruction*), whilst simultaneously embraced for his anti-capitalist, aristocratic rebellion (as most forcefully argued by Domenico Losurdo). Although for Lukács in the mid 1950s the fate of Nietzsche was fused with that of romantic anti-capitalism (his attempts to wash his hands clean from one was accompanied with his desire to dissociate himself from the other), it appears that the Nietzschean Lukács carries within himself a pledge for which we can throw the dice.

LIFE AGAINST LIFE: TRAGIC SUBJECT AND THE ASCETIC IDEAL

To throw the human soul out of joint, plunging it into terror, frosts, fires and

raptures to such an extent that it rids itself of all small and petty forms of lethargy, apathy and depression, as though hit by lightning.
—Nietzsche, *Genealogy*¹⁷

To recapitulate, Schmitt and Lukács were both concerned with the political ambivalence of Romanticism, a predicament equally detectable in the category of romantic anti-capitalism before WWI. Nonetheless, I would argue that even prior to the clarification occasioned by the war the notion of romantic anti-capitalism had already carried within itself a promise, namely, the moment we have described as ‘romantic politics.’ This moment was present in Nietzsche’s corpus and is the meeting point between him and the young Lukács. In this section, I attempt to extract the Nietzschean undertones of Lukács’s early work, meanwhile trailing the tendency towards a romantic politics in their thoughts.

Perhaps, no idea or concept in Lukács’s early writings is more Nietzschean than the concept of life. In late Nietzsche, the concept of power is not reducible to a political category (just as the concept of will is not reducible to a psychological category), but instead evokes an excess or surplus in life. Power denotes what in life is more than life, thus indicating the level of intensity of existence. It is precisely this Nietzschean trajectory on life that informs Lukács’s theorization in *Soul and Form* (1910). Resonant in the distinction between two kinds of life in the essay, “The Metaphysics of Tragedy,” is the Nietzschean evaluation of life in terms of intensity, that is, the difference between passive nihilism and active nihilism as two forms of life.¹⁸ Ordinary life in this essay corresponds to passive nihilism. Nothing is ever quite fulfilled in ordinary life: “To live is to live something through to the end: but life means that nothing is ever fully and completely lived through to the end. Life is the most unreal and unliving of all conceivable existences ...”¹⁹ Since ‘real’ life is impossible in the midst of ordinary, empirical life, one “has to deny life in order to live.”²⁰ Whilst ordinary life is amorphous, never wholly lived out and only explicable in denials, living within the periphery of tragedy—translatable to active nihilism—is pregnant with the capacity for not merely negation, but *re-evaluation* of ordinary life. We are unmistakably within Nietzschean territories here.

Tragedy happens at the threshold between a yearning for unconditional values and the empirical, “corrupt and corrupting world.”²¹ Convergence of tragic life with empirical life, therefore, can only bear a disaster in the same way that, in psychoanalytic terms, realization or actualization of fantasy can only manifest

itself in a nightmare. In the eyes of the tragic hero all true encounters follow the category of ‘all or nothing,’ which, spurns the more and the less, rejects all degrees and transitions.

For the man who is aware of his condition, there are only the extremes of the authentic and the inauthentic, the true and the false, the just and the unjust, value and non-value; there is no point in-between. However, such a man faces a world in which absolute value is never encountered; everything there is relative and, as such, non-existent and totally devoid of value.²²

Hence, the chasm between two irreconcilable kinds of life, between pure, tragic, ‘living’ [*lebendige*] life and empirical ‘unliving’ life.²³ In tragic life, all relationships of ordinary life are rooted out, a phenomenological subtraction through which the relation to destiny may be established.²⁴ Notwithstanding the presence of *Erlebnis* in this essay, this treatment of the concept of life is not reducible to an example of Weber’s and Simmel’s *Lebensphilosophie*. This is the moment of romantic politics, the Nietzschean Lukács, at his best—the target of his later criticism and disavowal in *The Destruction of Reason*. Nothing could be held more responsible for Lukács’s future preference for the worst socialism over the best capitalism than the sedimentation of this desire for ‘all-or-nothing’ in his thought. The postulation of a gap between the living and the unliving is a stride away from reconciliation towards the resolution of a contradiction between the two that cannot be subsumed in a higher synthesis.

This irreconcilability between two kinds of life is palpable in the majority of essays collected in *Soul and Form*. So perceived, in the tragic vision of Lukács’s neo-Kantian phase (often interpreted as an early manifestation of the 20th century existentialism), we can detect the presence of Nietzsche, most accentuated in Lukács’s conceptualization of *the truth of tragedy as an interruption of ordinary life*. The counter-nature²⁵ quality of the Lukácsian tragic hero also brings to mind Nietzsche’s ascetic priest for whom excessive enjoyment becomes an antidote to “long-drawn-out pain and boredom,”²⁶ reaching out beyond the pleasure principle. In other words, self-flagellation and self-sacrifice of the ascetic priest are at heart a battle against ordinary life (the formlessness of ordinary life, in Lukács’s terms). Just as the tragic hero has to deny empirical life in order ‘to live’ (i.e., to strive for an excess in life), so is the acetic priest compelled to reject ordinary life for the sake of a more intense existence. Nietzsche refers to this tendency as “life

against life.”²⁷ This will to counter-nature and conflict [*Zwiespältigkeit*] breeds joy and becomes more self-assured and triumphant as “its own condition, the physiological capacity to live, *decreases*.”²⁸

The “sleepless, glowing, burned out, exhausted and yet not tired”²⁹ body of the ascetic priest is suggestive of the pursuit of joy in pain, a “passion for the real” in Alain Badiou’s terms.³⁰ Asceticism here has not much to do with moderation and temperance, but rather with *excess* of tragic passion. It goes beyond the pleasure principle, reeling on a path where pain becomes pleasure: “Even when he *wounds* himself, this master of destruction, self-destruction,—afterwards it is the wound itself that forces him *to live*...”³¹ As Zupančič puts it, pain and suffering are not merely “burdens that a true Christian (who, in Nietzsche’s argument, can very well be an ‘atheist Christian’) stoically endures; they are, rather, something in relation to which a Christian comes to life as a subject.”³² In a similar vein, Lukács’s tragic hero seems to become a *subject* in the ethereal air of tragedy, where “naked souls conduct a dialogue with naked destinies.”³³ At issue is the emergence of the subject at the wake of an event. As Lukács writes, “The soul, having become Self, measures its whole previous existence with a stranger’s eye. It finds that previous existence incomprehensible, inessential, and lifeless.”³⁴ The tragic hero resembles the ascetic figure who, in the words of Nietzsche, would prefer to will nothingness rather than not will,³⁵ transcending the paralysis of the will (which for both Nietzsche and Lukács was emblematic of the bourgeois individual).³⁶ Like Nietzsche, the young Lukács was engrossed in the modern problem of the absence of will, a preoccupation that persisted as late as his theorization of reification in *History and Class Consciousness*, where he describes the individual as will-less [*Willenslos*] under capitalism.³⁷

Although the image of Nietzsche as a detester of priests is hard to overcome, we should not forget that his most agreeable character, Zarathustra, was immersed in the logic of the ascetic ideal. The same contradiction that drives the Lukácsian tragic hero is at work in the pursuit of the ascetic ideal: “[T]his ascetic priest, this apparent enemy of life, this *negating one*,—he actually belongs to the really great *conserving* and *yes-creating* forces of life...”³⁸ In a word, the ascetic priest is an active nihilist. The aforementioned logic of the ‘either/or’ implies that the act emerges as a radical rupture or definitive transgression from the ordinary state of things. In this sense, the ‘either/or’ is not a modality of future (contra the Heideggerian confrontation with nihilism in terms of “only a god can save us”), but rather of past and present. The tragic hero and the ascetic priest become

a subject retroactively at the wake of an event that “is what determines and is determined: it bursts incalculably into life, accidentally and out of context, and ruthlessly turns life into a clear, unambiguous equation—which it then resolves.”³⁹ Nietzsche resorts to the metaphor of ‘lightning’ to explain the singularity of this modality of existence.

At stake is the creation of a criterion of valuation in opposition to the reality principle. In the context of the Lukácsian tragic hero, we could contend that the tragic nature of the act arises from the transformation of the act into the transcendental condition of the subject’s desire, since, in the grips of nihilism, the will is left with no objects except its own transcendental condition.⁴⁰ It is only through the tragic act that what is excluded from the given, or that which, in Adorno’s terms, “falls on the wayside” actually becomes possible. The sublimation in the act stems from its attribution of *value* to what is hitherto devoid of value or meaning. This, once again, indicates that there are no shades in between. This idea of ‘valuation’ is also at the core of Nietzsche’s logic of the ascetic ideal.⁴¹

This parallel reading of two irreconcilable forms of life in the work of both thinkers hints at their predilection for romantic politics. To reiterate, this predilection, which is reflected in Nietzsche’s ascetic priest and Lukács’s tragic hero, can be captured in their repugnance for the ambivalence and formlessness of ordinary life, distaste for passivity and indecision, adherence to the ‘either/or,’ refusal of aesthetic withdrawal, and on the whole, the tendency to grapple with the problem of nihilism rather than remaining a nagging spectator. In what follows I will further explore the footprints of Nietzsche on Lukács’s corpus.

FROM THE ABSENCE OF GOD TO THE ABSENCE OF HUMAN ACTIVITY

The thought of young Lukács is steeped in a form of negativity that resonates with Nietzsche’s state of mind concerning the ‘nihilist’ Europe. This negativity could be glimpsed in his total lack of consensus with the state of things, his philosophical abnegation of any kind of reconciliation or synthesis, and his rebellion against Christianity, bourgeoisie, and even the actually existing socialism of his time (i.e., German social democracy that he detested with a Nietzschean fervour).⁴² His rejection of the bourgeois society or modernity as the age of “absolute sinfulness” and his idea of a leap towards “a new epoch of world history” in *The Theory of the Novel* (1916) is closer to Nietzsche’s active nihilism as revaluation of values than Heidegger’s half-hearted godlessness or even the negative religiosity

of Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard with whom the romantic anti-capitalism of his youth is usually associated.⁴³ We can locate the philosophical stance of the young Lukács at the threshold between a Kantian, tragic view (where Kant regards the modern civilization as the “glittering misery”⁴⁴) and a Nietzschean affirmation of tragedy or acceptance of the non-reconcilability of subject and object as a kind of *amor fati* or gay science, which at moments supersedes the Kantian melancholic science. This fusion of negative mysticism and vitalism,⁴⁵ which coagulates into absolute negation of bourgeois values, runs through *The Theory of the Novel*. It is precisely this value-oriented, ethical standpoint that later on falls under the axe of his self-criticism—i.e., in the wake of his political compromise, and his uncritical acceptance of the primacy of economy and Lenin’s anaemic reflection theory.

The form of *The Theory of the Novel* shares more than a few similarities with Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*. Apart from the fact that both works focus on the occurrence of a literary form (the novel and tragedy, respectively), this development in both cases entails a fascination with ancient Greece and advances through a reflection on the epic form. Furthermore, both works are redolent with Kantianism and fall prey to their writers’ auto-critique later in life. However, as maintained before, the philosophical affinity drawn between the two thinkers in this essay addresses the influence of later Nietzsche on Lukács. In this context, I suggest that even the conceptualization of the famous category of ‘second nature,’ initially coined in *The Theory of the Novel* and later elaborated in *History and Class Consciousness*, would not have been possible in the absence of Nietzsche’s influence.

In *The Theory of the Novel*, the notion of second nature, as “the nature of man-made structures”⁴⁶ is indicative of a world that “does not offer itself either as meaning to the aim-seeking subject or as matter, in sensuous immediacy, to the active subject.”⁴⁷ So in the words of Lukács: “This second nature is not dumb, sensuous and yet senseless like the first: it is a complex of senses—meanings—which has become rigid and strange, and which no longer awakens interiority; it is a charnel-house of long-dead interiorities...”⁴⁸ Being made “as a prison instead of a parental home,” the realization of the concept of second nature gives rise to a sense of estrangement (oddly coupled with modern sentimentalism) from the first nature, which is but a projection of the experience of a man-made world. It stands for “meaningless laws in which no relation to the soul can be found.”⁴⁹ Detectable in these passages is first and foremost the experience of nihilism, best expounded in the work of Nietzsche. The concept of second nature implies the loss of meaning

or *value*, but it is precisely this loss of the object—which in a sense never existed—that could transform nostalgia into a capacity for affirmative action. Even though it is to Novalis that the early passages of *The Theory of the Novel* pays tribute, Lukács's godless world, as Moretti aptly puts it, does not so much suffer from the absence of God as the absence of human activity.⁵⁰ This insight chimes with Lukács's own impression of Tintoretto's *Crucifixion*, in his assertion that in this painting humans are more immersed in their own affairs than in God or even Christ's suffering.⁵¹ The tragic dimension, however, is palpable in the debasement of humans in such a world, a debasement that uncannily accompanies the absence of human activity. The romantic anti-capitalist overtones in this text betray themselves in the way he chides the de-territorialization (what he describes as the 'unboundedness') of modern society for making a return to the old society—as a closed totality—impossible.

The radical leftism that follows this early period—as crystallized in *Tactics and Ethics* (1919)—is still suffused with his tragic, Nietzschean ethics, for it relies on the 'active,' Faustian affirmation of the false values of bourgeois life, never settling for pacifism. He contends in an article of the same title that in certain *tragic* situations one is compelled to sacrifice the ethics of one's ego on the grand altar of a historical mission, a murderous act that is *tragically moral*.⁵² What he calls the tragedy of communism (i.e., only through becoming evil could the communists defeat the domination of evil) entails *transformation through acceptance* and as such is comparable to Nietzsche's notion of an active, creative acceptance of nihilism. On the whole, Lukács's work in his Marxist period still leans towards an ethico-political preoccupation with value, and at best, the transvaluation of values. This, once again, shows that a mere tracing of Lukács's thought back to Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky—let alone Hegel, whose influence is indisputable—in the absence of Nietzsche tends to neglect a great deal. "The reversal of all values", or transvaluation of all values, is the true subversive act for Nietzsche, the act that overcomes the Christian value-judgment. This transvaluation or counter-evaluation of values, as Nancy asserts in his interpretation of Nietzsche, does not merely vanquish or devalorize values, but entirely revolutionizes them. Its aim is a *fundamental transfiguration of circumstances*.⁵³

It is worthwhile to notice that Nietzsche arrives at the notion of value through the category of exchange. Through a numerical conception of value, Nietzsche problematizes the relativity of value, that value always entails comparison and hierarchization. Through *Beyond Good and Evil* to *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche

assumes a re-evaluation of the concept of value (of goods, drives, and humans). Value is thus intimately connected to life, and is requisite for decisions. As he puts it in *Daybreak*, “All the actions may be traced back to evaluations.”⁵⁴ The same echoes are present in the thought of the young Lukács, “...there is a value-judgment in everything that has been given form.”⁵⁵ Intermingled with the recognition of the urgency of values for quotidian life is Nietzsche’s criticism of the good and evil dichotomy precisely for its involvement with hierarchical orders of values, i.e. a ranking based on appetites and aversions. The degrees of the intensity of good or evil actions are at stake here. Granting low value to certain actions and pushing them towards the category of evil never ceases to be accompanied with a demeaning of humans or granting them low value.

“One Law for the Lion and Ox is Oppression.”⁵⁶ Blake’s well-known statement expresses the common root of Nietzsche’s and Lukács’s critique of bourgeois values: measurement, management, and manipulation of all values or differences through their forced incorporation into wholly abstract, quantified, and rule-bound systems. For, as Lukács notes in *History and Class Consciousness*, “[T]he unmediated juxtaposition of natural laws and imperatives is the logical expression of immediate societal existence in bourgeois society.”⁵⁷ In this book, Lukács shifts our attention to a parallax in value-theory between the productivist Marx (via a political-economic take on value) and the meta-ethical Nietzsche (via a social trajectory on value). Moreover, even in this text (his most Hegelian moment, so to say), Lukács is still under the spell of his early Nietzschean tragic vision once he dresses up the proletariat in the costumes of the novelistic hero. The singularity of his Hegelian Marxism indeed arises from his tragic bringing together of Hegel and Marx in a non-mediated fashion, where the space between Hegel and Marx is not occupied by Feuerbach and the left Hegelians. I would argue that it is precisely this persistence of Lukács’s early romantic anti-capitalism and tragic vision in *History and Class Consciousness* that rescues this work from the grips of dogmatic objectivism and economic determinism. The promising Nietzschean moment manifests itself in Lukács’s entanglement with the antinomies of bourgeois thought as a critique and transvaluation of values of bourgeoisie—whose ‘sickness’ Nietzsche had originally prescribed—rather than an objectivist, economic approach.

THE ETERNAL RETURN OF REACTION

Our discussion built upon the ‘double-meaning of revolution and reaction,’ as

associated, conceptually and historically, with the term, ‘romantic anti-capitalism’ (coined by Lukács who also used it to criticize his own earlier work). It would therefore be pertinent to briefly look at some instances of the reactionary aspect of Nietzsche’s and Lukács’s oeuvre. The fragment called *The European Nihilism* from Nietzsche’s late notebooks is most significant in the way it offers a constellation of his central ideas from the eternal return to the will to power, whilst presenting the notion of the eternal return as the apex of the process of self-destruction of Christian morality. Nietzsche’s idea of the “hierarchy of forces” [*die Rangordnung der Kräfte*]⁵⁸ in this text crystallizes in his depiction of the figure of the ones whose action is destructive [*schlechtweggekommen*]. Nietzsche locates the latter in *all* social classes.⁵⁹ In §§ 9-15, a formulation of nihilism is put forward according to which morality belongs to people who are violated and oppressed by *people* (rather than nature and time, as portrayed in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*): “...for it is powerlessness in the face of people, *not* powerlessness in the face of nature, that generates the most desperate embitterment against existence.”⁶⁰ This substitution of people for nature means the threat no longer comes from finitude and an all-pervasive nature, but from the oppression suffered by certain people from certain oppressors.

Just as Hegel’s master, whose winning card is bravery at the face of death, Nietzsche’s strong man does not fear misfortune and comes to represent the will to power—a trait that Nietzsche deems essential to life.⁶¹ The will to morality is in this sense a mere veil over the countenance of the will to power and even the revolt of the oppressed is seen as its expression. However, since the will to power is not exclusive to one class, the oppressed man comes to “realize that he is *in the same boat* as the oppressor and that he has no *prerogative* over him, no *higher status* than him.”⁶² Upon losing belief in the legitimacy of his derision for the will to power, the oppressed man descends into hopeless desperation; the collapse of morality leads to the destruction of the oppressed.⁶³ Nietzsche surmises that this “perishing presents itself as a—self-ruination, as an instinctive selection of that which *must destroy*...”⁶⁴ The elimination of the weak is an upshot of loss of belief in morality, which deprives them of their only solace. The overcoming of nihilism in this text takes place through a teleological destruction of the weak.

A similar trajectory can be found in the *Genealogy of Morals*. Although the notion of the eternal return is largely replaced with that of the will to power in this text, the logic of selection and purging (more accurately, self-destruction) is still at work in this version of nihilism. The disenchantment from morality, as Nietzsche

unabashedly explicates, brings about the self-destruction of the oppressed, or makes the weak conscious of their own resentment as power-will [*Machtwille*]. Once the world emerges as the will to power, the weak find themselves in the same boat as the strong. This is an example of what makes Nietzsche's radicalism 'aristocratic', or his association with the 'dictatorship of the elite.' However, Nietzsche's aristocratic radicalism, as Losurdo perspicuously points out, is fused with a curious Marxian quality, that is, the capacity "to decipher every domain of history, morals, religion, science, and art as a 'status and class struggle' [*Stände- und Klassenkampf*]"—with the difference, however, of considering it ahistorically as an eternal struggle between masters and slaves."⁶⁵ We could indeed turn to the radical dimension of Nietzsche's thought, which, in the words of Losurdo:

... highlights in a clear and pitiless way the weak points of the revolutionary project, and the democratic agitation for the 'rights of man.' The universalism which characterizes such a project and such agitation can easily assume an aggressive and imperial form, transforming into an instrument of domination.⁶⁶

The encounter between Nietzsche and Lukács in a sense takes place in this space between revolution and reaction. As for the reactionary moment in Lukács, we have to turn to *The Destruction of Reason*, whereby he curiously calls Nietzsche a "Jekyll-and-Hyde character," a decadent, and the founder of philosophical irrationalism whose philosophy more or less anticipated the emergence of Nazism.⁶⁷ He also refers to Nietzsche as a romantic anti-capitalist in this text, though he immediately tries to persuade readers of the former's abandonment of romanticism later in life.⁶⁸ Irrationalism in this book alludes to hostility towards the dialectical-historical concept of progress, which according to Lukács was coeval with the occurrence of the proletariat as an independent social force in the revolutions of 1848. So although Lukács's comprehensive attack on Nietzsche takes as a point of departure the justifiable path of the latter's abhorrence of the Paris Commune (in a sense, confirming Lukács's view of Nietzsche as an advocate of the dictatorship of the elite), it falls prey to a unilinear conception of history as the development of the forces of production, not only towards a more equal but also a "culturally richer" life for the people. Oddly enough, even in the midst of this Stalinist, anti-Nietzschean harangue—i.e., where Lukács is supposed to be inclined towards the non-revolutionary *realpolitik* of Stalin—he is still not far from Nietzsche, as evident in his unceasing preoccupation with culture.⁶⁹

Abiding with the young Lukács, however, as the main concern of this article, we may touch upon a 'bad' Nietzschean moment in an otherwise brilliant piece ("The Metaphysics of Tragedy"), which we have been considering. Nietzschean elitism is the downside of Lukács's position in the following passage, whilst the more philosophically justifiable aspect is the distaste he shares with Nietzsche for the anti-tragic quality of modern, bourgeois notions of democracy:

In vain has our democratic age claimed an equal right for all to be tragic; all attempts to open this kingdom of heaven to the poor in spirit have proved fruitless. And those democrats who are consistent about their demand for equal rights for all men have always disputed tragedy's right to existence.⁷⁰

Lukács's hesitation about the democratic tendency also stems from his conception of tragedy as a 'will-to-form.' "On Poverty of Spirit" (1912) is another early work in which Lukács portrays a hierarchical system reminiscent of Nietzsche's hierarchization of values. In this work, which is written as a literary dialogue, Lukács goes as far as portraying a system grounded on a hierarchy of virtues belonging to different social estates, where a distinction is drawn between those with the capacity of being possessed by 'Goodness,' and those caught up within the boundaries of a sombre empirical life. So Goodness (as a gift of *grace*) is differentiated from ordinary life. The dialogue hence revolves around a metaphysics of castes, reflecting different 'castes' of life: the caste of everyday life, the caste of 'works,' and the caste of 'living life,' which is the highest caste. Individuals can only live in accordance with the laws of their own caste, whilst women and men are differentiated from one another.⁷¹The main character in the dialogue finally commits suicide, because he does not believe himself to be capable of Goodness.

This exposition of some examples of the reactionary moments in the thoughts of Nietzsche and Lukács was meant to further disclose the ambivalence that dwells at the heart of the category of romantic anti-capitalism. It so appears that the aristocratic Nietzsche is least reactionary and the communist Lukács is least Stalinist, when inebriated with their *tragic vision*. This vision was disavowed by the older Lukács, and yet, ultimately offered him a way out of political and philosophical determinism.

TRAGEDY, OBSOLESCENCE, REVOLUTION

In the most refined stage of his work, Lukács believed that the tragedy of a situation could be only comprehended from the point of view of its overcoming, albeit *a revolutionary rather than utopian overcoming*. A conception of tragedy as revolution, which came to grow stronger roots in the course of Lukács's life, was by no means foreign to his early thinking. As he wrote in 1969, reminiscing on the old Heidelberg days, "a certain worldview," which he considered to be "revolutionary," had made him some sort of an outsider in the Max Weber circle. Unapologetically, he took issue with their "lack of a consistently tragic vision," and particularly, Dilthey's and Simmel's tendency towards moral and human reconciliation [*Versöhnung*] with society.⁷² In an autobiography written near the end of his life, Lukács elaborated on this age-long tendency: "... Synthesis of the problematic of my childhood and youth: a meaningful life impossible under capitalism; the fight for such a life: tragedy and tragicomedy..."⁷³

The early Lukács's proclamation of the impossibility of the tragic experiential form in the modern world was paradoxically coupled with his envisaging of tragic action in crisis in the wake of an event or rupture. This idea of formlessness of historical *experience* is indeed more congenial to Walter Benjamin's thinking than existentialism. In later Lukács, tragedy as the inevitable invariant of human condition increasingly gives way to tragedy as crisis or contradiction:

...the real, dialectical analysis of human progress and its contradictions can only be undertaken from a point of view dominated by a belief in the ultimate victory of progress, despite all contradictions. Only the perspective of a classless society can provide a view of the tragedies to be encountered *en route* without succumbing to the temptations of a pessimistic romanticism.⁷⁴

Toscano puts forward the thesis according to which tragedy should be treated "with respect to the historical form of collective action;" it must be thought as revolution and transition rather than "a warning *against* revolution—a thinking that can be threaded through Hegel, Marx, Lukács, C.L.R. James, Raymond Williams, Sebastiano Timpanaro and others."⁷⁵ Although tragedy invokes the impossibility of a position outside the contradictions of modernity, it is "only from the standpoint of revolution, and its practice, that these contradictions become tragic."⁷⁶ Recalling the distinction between 'Romanticism' and 'the

romantic' discussed earlier, a similar case could be observed apropos of the notion of tragedy. Rather than being concerned with tragedy as an art-form, Lukács theorizes a 'metaphysics' of the tragic in *Soul and Form*. Even so, what is the implication of a tragic vision for Lukács and his repressed romantic anti-capitalism? We could propose that 'the tragic' in this context is the element that bridges the gap between politics and romanticism, making possible a 'romantic politics.' In a word, the *tragic vision* has the capacity to bestow on the romantic category a political significance. The tragic vision has the potential to conjure up the surplus in life and in so doing to overcome the occasionalist subjectivity (in Schmitt's terms) and aestheticization of politics.

Löwy argues that, at the age of eighty-three, "Lukács entered a new stage in his political-ideological development, which was, to a certain extent, a return to the revolutionary orientation of his youth."⁷⁷ Accordingly, although the Lukács of 1969-71 cannot be the same person he was in 1919-24, near the end of his life he began to excavate and re-appropriate the ideas of his youth whose contours became visible in his defence of the 1968 movements, and particularly in his essay on Lenin (1968) where he "contrasts the socialist democracy of Lenin with Stalinist bureaucratic manipulation."⁷⁸ At this stage, Lukács brings out of the closet his old theoretical toolbox to discern *the 'living' life of the Workers Soviets of the end of 19th and beginning of 20th century* from the ordinary, 'unliving' life under capricious bureaucracy and bourgeois democracy. Löwy rightly insists on the eventual *return* of the romantic anti-capitalist bearings of Lukács's thought, which had been bottled up throughout his Stalinist, realist years. In the context of the thesis put forward in this essay, this also means a return of the Nietzschean idea of "life against life." Furthermore, we could pinpoint another *return*, evoking what has been omitted from this picture: Lukács's passionate support of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956.

The idea of radical rupture or 'miracle,' elegantly delineated in *Soul & Form*, is once actualized in Lukács's life with the event of the October Revolution—supplemented later with the collapse of the old order in Hungary (1918). After this event, the old despondency, which hitherto had its roots in actual capitalist social relations and absence of a subversive force (the absence of a value-creating force in Nietzsche's terms), gives way to an immanent conception of emancipation, making tragedy possible in a new revolutionary key. "October gave the answer. The Russian Revolution was the world-historical solution to my dilemma," Lukács remarks in the early 1970s.⁷⁹ The heart of the matter is that the desire for

this conversion to communism—once the possibility of change was no longer remote as in the days of *Soul & Form*—dwelled in Lukács's tragic ethico-political bearings (which, to a great degree, had its roots in the thought of Nietzsche) rather than a belief in scientific Marxism. We could also catch a glimpse of this tendency in his claim in the 1967 preface to *History and Class Consciousness*, where he emphasizes that right from the beginning his ethics “tended in the direction of praxis, action and hence towards politics.”⁸⁰ Not only did Lukács's tendency towards a romantic politics, coupled with a persistent, life-long ‘tragic vision,’ enable him to move beyond a neo-Kantian version of Marxism, but it offered him a way out of Stalinism and economic determinism later in life.

It seems, or so one could argue, that despite Löwy, Lukács's reiteration of his tragic, revolutionary stance at the last stage of his life would do little to rescue him, as it echoed the sort of classical deathbed repentance of an old wolf who comes to regret the over-indulgence of his youth. In contrast to this rueful preaching of a tottering revolutionary, his participation in the Hungarian Revolution as a collective, world-historical experience had been a concrete anti-Stalinist praxis that, rather than being tragic merely in its proclamation of crisis (political romanticism), attempted to stretch tragedy towards the horizon of a struggle against the disorder. In brief, Lukács does not fail to act at this specific historical juncture—a reactivation of the truth of the October Revolution. This becomes an ‘either/or’ matter for him. The definition of tragedy that emerges through this act is neither tragedy as an invariant of human condition, nor even as catastrophe, but tragedy as “instituting rupture” (in Badiou's parlance), as an act of bringing out what within repetition remains unrepeatable.

Having experienced *loss* in relation to the October Revolution, Lukács's faith on the Hungarian Revolution—on the *return* of revolution after some three decades—is a (Benjaminian) “hope in the past.”⁸¹ Hope in the past, as Comay puts it, “...has nothing to do with nostalgia: it's about extracting the critical resources of obsolescence itself. It's about redeeming the belated possibilities or aborted futures of the past.”⁸² Such a loss can therefore “counteract every form of nostalgia and to fuel the desire for all revolutionary change.”⁸³ At a time when Stalin had throttled the Revolution, Lukács was no doubt most conscious of revolution as a missed experience. Therefore, his wager was for a redemption that could only come too late: the brutal suppression of the Hungarian Revolution by the USSR led to his arrest and exile.⁸⁴ Embodied in this instance, this tribute to a recommencement of the revolution, is the effectuation of a radical rupture at the

wake of an irrecoverable loss.

This affair has been hardly stressed in Lukács's scholarship. Nevertheless, this fervour for the historical event in Hungary and the abandonment of—a pseudo-Hegelian—historical determinism is indicative of the primacy of *political rupture* in his thought over the teleological penchant of scientific socialism, a tendency that has its roots in a transvaluation or transfiguration of reality as the only overcoming of nihilism. Lukács's gesture evokes a praxis in the spirit of Nietzsche's "dancing at the edge of the abyss," while *(re)turning* Nietzsche against Nietzsche in its inversion of the aestheticization of politics.

NOTES

1. Domenico Losurdo refers to Lukács's attack on Nietzsche and his immediate association of the latter's thought with Nazism in the *Destruction of Reason* as a "historiographical distortion." See Domenico Losurdo, *Nietzsche il ribelle aristocratico. Biografia intellettuale e bilancio critico* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2004), 901 ff. Cited in Jan Rehmann, "Re-Reading Nietzsche with Domenico Losurdo's Intellectual Biography," *Historical Materialism* 15 (2007, 3).
2. György Lukács, "Metaphysics of Tragedy" *Soul & Form*. Ed. John T. Sanders & Katie Terezakis. Trans. Anna Bostock (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 177.
3. Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*. Trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter (London: Vintage Books, 2011), 694.
4. Alasdair MacIntyre, "Marxist Mask and Romantic Face: Lukács on Thomas Mann" *Against the Self-Images of the Age: Essays on Ideology and Philosophy* (London: Duckworth, 1971), 60-69.
5. For Lukács's take on Dostoevsky in different phases of his life see Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre, *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity*. Trans. Catherine Porter (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 108.
6. Löwy & Sayre, *Romanticism*, 104.
7. Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004).
8. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness—Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. Trans. Rodney Livingstone (MA: MIT Press, 1967), 47 ff, 214.
9. Carl Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*. Trans. Guy Oaks (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 115.
10. Schmitt, *Political*, 160.
11. Schmitt, *Political*, 146.
12. Schmitt, *Political*, 147.
13. Schmitt, *Political*, 148.
14. Schmitt, *Political*, 30.
15. Ferenc Fehér and Jerold Wikoff, "The Last Phase of Romantic Anti-Capitalism: Lukács' Response to the War" *New German Critique*, no.10 (Winter 1977, 146).
16. It is noteworthy that, despite his interest in Nietzsche, Mann criticized him for not acting as wisely as Wagner in making peace with the Bismarckian Reich. See Fehér and Wikoff, "The Last Phase", 146.
17. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morality*. Ed. K. Ansell-Pearson. Trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 103.
18. Friedrich Nietzsche, "European Nihilism" (1887), *The Nietzsche reader*. Eds Keith Ansell-Pearson, Duncan Large. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2006).
19. Lukács, "Metaphysics," 176.
20. Lukács, "Metaphysics," 176. Lukács's focus on tragedy in this piece is not to be associated with Nietzsche's early book on tragedy. In my reading, the comparison is drawn between the young Lukács and later Nietzsche.
21. Löwy, *Lukács*, 100.
22. Lucien Goldmann, *Kierkegaard vivant: Colloque organisé par l'Unesco à Paris du 21 au 23 avril 1964* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 130-131, quoted in Löwy, *Lukács*, 102. This Kierkegaardian category of "either/or" is also employed by Badiou in *Being and Event*, translated, in logical terms, into "either P, or not P."
23. Lukács believed that romantics, as well as Kierkegaard (for his notion of *Lebenskunst* or 'art of

- living'), tended to reconcile the two forms of life. See also "The Foundering of Form Against Life" *Soul & Form*, 43-58.
24. Lukács, "Metaphysics," 178.
 25. The counter-nature quality of tragedy is reflected in the "Metaphysics;" for instance, in this passage: "Drama alone creates—'gives form to'—real human beings, but just because of this it must, of necessity, deprive them of living existence." See Lukács, "Metaphysics," 179.
 26. Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 68.
 27. Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 87.
 28. Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 86.
 29. Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 105.
 30. Alain Badiou, *The Century*. Trans. Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 31-2.
 31. Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 89.
 32. Alenka Zupančič, *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Two* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2003), 49.
 33. Lukács, "Metaphysics," 178.
 34. Lukács, "Metaphysics," 178. The young Lukács refers to the event as "the miracle of accident", which suggests that this miracle is not supernatural, but immanent to life: "There, at the point to which the miracle of accident has raised a man and his life, tragedy begins" (179). The miracle "is a gleam, a lightening that illumines the banal paths of empirical life: something disturbing and seductive, dangerous and surprising..." (176). It allows "no relativity, no transition, no nuance" (177).
 35. Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 68.
 36. Nietzsche writes: "...Our Europe of today... is thoroughly skeptical... and often sick unto death of its will! Paralysis of the will..." Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*. Trans. Marion Faber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 34. This resonates with the skeptical attitude of the contemporary individual at the face of a tragic act that could bring about the destruction of the subject. As Zupančič puts it: "...most of what is described today as postmodern disillusionment, an attitude that no longer believes in any Cause (and is shocked by those who are still ready to die for some Cause) is precisely this kind of passive nihilism corresponding point by point to Nietzsche's description of skepticism..." Zupančič, *Shortest Shadow*, 67.
 37. Lukács theorizes this 'lack of will' in his analysis of the contemplative character. See Lukács, *History*, 89, 140, 317.
 38. Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 88.
 39. Lukács, "Metaphysics," 176.
 40. Lacan refers to this opposition to the reality principle in search of a different criterion as "sublimation." See Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. Trans. Dennis Porter (London: Routledge, 1992), 109.
 41. Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 85.
 42. According to Paul Honigsheim, a member of Weber Circle, Lukács "was very much opposed to the bourgeoisie, liberalism, the constitutional state, parliamentarianism, revisionistic socialism, the Enlightenment, relativism and individualism." See P. Honigsheim, *On Max Weber*. Trans. Joan Rytina (New York: Free Press, 1968), 24. Nietzsche, however, went too far in his reduction of all forms of socialism to Duhring-like anti-Semitism and Bebel-type statism.
 43. Goldmann famously claimed that Heidegger's *Being and Time* was to a certain extent a response to Lukács's work. However, as radical critics of bourgeois Christian modernity, the works

- of Nietzsche and Lukács mark a more distinct break from onto-theology than Heidegger's, which never leaves the misty terrains of religiosity. In our depoliticized age, such 'spiritual' gestures can be appealing, regardless of their tendency to reverse the historical trend that jettisoned the political ambiguity of romantic anti-capitalism. See Lucian Goldmann, *Lukács and Heidegger—Towards a New Philosophy*. Trans. William Q. Boelhower (New York: Routledge, 2009).
44. Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View" (1784). *On History*. Trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co. 1963), Seventh Thesis.
45. Concerning Lukács's broader interest in mysticism, we could take into account his Heidelberg notebooks, which contain comments on the works of Eckhardt, Anselm, and Jewish mystics. His letters in 1911 cast light on his interest in Buber's work and Hasidic mysticism around this time. See Löwy, *Lukács*, 94,104 (fn 47). In "On Poverty of Spirit," Lukács resorts to Meister Eckhardt's mystical notion of 'poverty of spirit' (*Armut am Geiste*) as a precondition for virtue or 'Goodness', that is, as a negative principle, offering a way out of the bad infinite of life, "out of the unreal world of the many." Lukács, "On Poverty of Spirit: A Conversation and a Letter," *Soul & Form*, 213.
46. Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel. A historico-philosophical essay on the forms of great epic literature*. Trans. Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1971), 63.
47. Lukács, *The Theory*, 62.
48. Lukács, *The Theory*, 64.
49. Lukács, *The Theory*, 113.
50. Franco Moretti, "Lukács's Theory of the Novel—Centenary Reflections" *New Left Review*, 91 (January, February 2015, 40).
51. Arpad Kadarkay, *Georg Lukács: Life, Thought and Politics* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 451-52.
52. Georg Lukács, "Tactics and Ethics" *Political Writings, 1919-1929—The Question of Parliamentarianism and Other Essays*. Ed. Rodney Livingstone (London: NLB, 1972), 11.
53. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure. The Deconstruction of Christianity*. Trans. Bettina Bergo, Gabriel Malenfant, Michael B. Smith (New York: Fordham University press, 2008), 76. It is in this sense that Lukács's transition to Bolshevism could be seen as a 'conversion,' notwithstanding the fact that he still viewed tactics (as a means to an end) in terms of an inevitable *sin*. His Hegelian phase, which follows this period, is marked with a movement towards reconciliation of the means and ends and dissolution of their antinomy, hence, partly moving away from tragedy.
54. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*. Eds Maudemarie Clarke, Brian Leiter. Trans. R. J. Hollindale (New York: Cambridge University Press), 1997,148.
55. Lukács, "Metaphysics," 197.
56. William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (London: Oxford University Press, xxvii), 1975.
57. Lukács, *History*, 197.
58. Friedrich Nietzsche, "European Nihilism" (1887), *The Nietzsche reader*. Eds Keith Ansell Pearson, Duncan Large. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2006), 385-389. The concept of the eternal return as a cycle of repetitions shows up in *The Gay Science*, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and *Beyond Good and Evil*. In the "European Nihilism," Nietzsche presents the idea of the eternal return as an outcome of devaluation of values in Christianity. In this fragment, Nietzsche speaks of nihilism as a crisis that "... forces together related elements and makes them ruin each other... bringing to light the weaker, more insecure among them and thus initiating a *hierarchy of forces* from the point of view of health: acknowledging commanders as commanders, obeyers as obeyers." (§ 14).
59. Nietzsche writes: "The *unhealthiest* kind of man in Europe (of all classes) is the ground of this nihilism." See "European Nihilism," (§ 14).

60. Nietzsche, "European Nihilism," §9.
61. Nietzsche, "European Nihilism," §15.
62. Nietzsche, "European Nihilism," §9.
63. Nietzsche, "European Nihilism," §10.
64. Nietzsche, "European Nihilism," §11.
65. Losurdo's historical-comparativist study illustrates that Nietzsche's position as a philosopher *totus politicus* cannot be allegorized away via a hermeneutics of innocence. Domenico Losurdo, *Nietzsche il ribelle aristocratico*, 901 ff, quoted in Rehman, "Re-Reading Nietzsche," 4.
66. Domenico Losurdo, quoted in Peter Thomas, "Over-Man And The Commune" *New Left Review* 31, (January-February 2005, 144). Echoes of a similar idea can be heard in Pierre Klossowski's and Alain Badiou's writings on Nietzsche's 'grand politics' apropos of his anti-philosophical tendencies. Badiou draws attention to late Nietzsche's intensified mimetics of the revolutionary event, which, rather than involving dialectical sublation, revolves around an incalculable rupture. "I would say that [the Nietzschean] act is *archi-political*, in that it intends to revolutionize the whole of humanity at a more radical level than that of the calculations of politics... It is the philosophical act itself that is an *archi-political* act, in the sense that its historical explosion will retroactively show, in a certain sense, that the political revolution proper has not been genuine, or has not been authentic." See Alain Badiou, "Who is Nietzsche?" Trans. Alberto Toscano, *PLI: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy* 11, (2001, 4); Pierre Klossowski, *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*. Trans. Daniel W. Smith. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997; For further reading see Bruno Bosteels, "Nietzsche, Badiou, and Grand Politics: An Antiphilosophical Reading" *Nietzsche and Political Thought*, Ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 229.
67. Georg Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*. Chapter III. Trans. Peter R. Palmer (London: Merlin Press, 1980) Available at: <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/destruction-reason/ch03.htm>>
68. Lukács writes: "Nietzsche was frequently associated with the Romantic movement. The assumption is correct inasmuch as many motives of Romantic anti-capitalism—e.g., the struggle against the capitalist division of labour and its consequences for bourgeois culture and morals—played a considerable part in his thinking. The setting up of a past age as an ideal for the present age to realize also belonged to the intellectual armoury of Romantic anti-capitalism." Lukács, *Destruction*, Part 3.
69. It is astonishing that the style of the *Destruction* is too romantic (at times, poetic) to fit its content, namely, its cast-iron defence of rationalism. This is evident in its references to *Faust* (e.g., he closes the final chapter with a passage from *Faust*). Another prominent example of Lukács's reactionary phase (which begins after 1926) is his essay on Moses Hess.
70. Lukács, "Metaphysics," 197.
71. Lukács, "Poverty," 201-14.
72. See Michael Löwy, *Georg Lukács— From Romanticism to Bolshevism*. Trans. Patrick Camiller (London: NLB, 1979), 96 (fn 24).
73. Georg Lukács, *Record of a Life: An Autobiographical Sketch*. Trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1983), 98-9.
74. Georg Lukács, *The Young Hegel: Studies in the Relations between Dialectics and Economics*. Trans. Rodney Livingstone (MA: MIT Press, 1977), 399. Needless to say, the reconciliation to which Lukács is alluding here is not the same as the (bad) Hegelian one. Although a new image of Hegel arises from some recent readings of his corpus (e.g., Zizek), a conception of the Hegelian synthesis as reconciliation was common in the works of Lukács and the Frankfurt School.

75. Alberto Toscano, "Politics in a Tragic Key" *Radical Philosophy* 180, (July/August 2013, 26).
76. Toscano, "Politics," 26.
77. Löwy, *Lukács*, 209.
78. Löwy, *Lukács*, 209.
79. Georg Lukács, "Lukács on His Life and Work" *New Left Review* 68, (July/August 1971, 53).
80. Georg Lukács, "Preface to the new edition (1967)" *History*, xi.
81. Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. 4, 1938-1940. Eds Howard Eiland, Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 391.
82. Rebecca Comay & Joshua Nichols, "Missed Revolutions, Non-Revolutions, Revolutions to Come: On Mourning Sickness" *PhaenEx* 7, no.1 (Spring/Summer 2012, 318).
83. Rebecca Comay, "Redeeming Revenge: Nietzsche, Benjamin, Heidegger, and the Politics of Memory" *Nietzsche As Postmodernist essays pro and contra*. Ed. Clayton Koelb (New York: The State University of New York Press, 1990), 33.
84. Fehér and Heller refer to Lukács as the greatest figure in the oppositional Marxism of the Hungarian Revolution: "...the inconsistent Bolshevik; the man with the sincere conviction of being 'the authentic Bolshevik,' and who precisely because of this inconsistency, could become the defender of the revolution of 1956—an indefensible cause when viewed from strictly Bolshevik premises." In "On the Transcendence of State and Revolution," Norman Levine locates Lukács in the Leninist opposition to Stalinism in this Revolution: "By the phrase 'Leninist opposition' I mean a political reform movement which did not want political pluralism, or a market economy, or to have Hungary withdraw from the Warsaw Pact, but saw the Leninist tradition itself as offering possibilities for the reform of Stalinism..." See Ferenc Fehér and Agnes Heller, *Hungary 1956 Revisited (The Message of a Revolution—a Quarter of a Century After)*. (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1983), 118; Georg Lukács, *The Process of Democratization* (New York: State University of New York), 1991, 5.

**how do we live here? abyssal
intimacies in jean-luc nancy's
*la ville au loin***
marie-eve morin

*C'est toute l'habitation qui est ouverte,
béante, et tout son habitus à réinventer*
—Nancy, *La ville au loin*

It might seem rather strange to turn to Nancy, the thinker of exposition, to rethink the figure of intimacy. Indeed, it is Nancy who said, in “The Intruder,” that “the subject’s truth is its exteriority and its excessiveness: its infinite exposition” and, in “On the Soul,” that “the body is always outside, on the outside. It is from the outside. The body is always outside the intimacy of the body itself.”¹ We also find in Nancy a powerful critique of the nostalgic paradigm of the lost community and of the community of lovers as harboring the truth of the lost community at a remove from society. Here again, no intimacy, at least if by that we mean an immanence, an inside that would be so compact or so full that it would absolve the community from any contact with itself and with others. But of course things are not so straightforward. Indeed, already in the early book on Descartes, *Ego Sum*, we find the word “intimate” under Nancy’s pen, but in conjunction with

another word: “abysmally” (*abyssalement*).

The passage I have in mind appears in the fourth chapter, “*Mundus est fabula*,” and speaks of the abyssal intimacy of the ego that withdraws in the moment at which it utters “ego sum”: “Everywhere in this world, the I withdraws within and from its *for*. And it is this *withdrawal*—which is, or rather makes neither absence nor rift, neither fiction nor truth, but forms the ‘subject’ in a much more abysmally *intimate way* [*abyssalement intime*]*—that remains to be thought.*”² And since in the Preface to the English edition, Nancy also says of the book *Ego Sum* that “it has never ceased reworking, repeating, and renewing itself within [him] — somewhere in an obscure region” and that it “still resonates, always producing new scions”³ in his work, it might not be too abusive to attempt to tie the abyssal intimacy of the subject’s withdrawal with other figures of intimacy that appeared subsequently in his work. I will only attempt here to draw one of these possible lines, the one that goes from *Ego Sum*, through the critical engagement with the Western figure of community in *The Inoperative Community*, up to a lesser known book on the contemporary city, and more specifically on Los Angeles, *La ville au loin*, tying together withdrawal, abyss, exposition, and transit. I will leave completely aside another scion of abyssal intimacy, namely that of art.

The questions that guide my foray into Nancy’s work are the following: even if we recognize that communal intimacy is impossible, are we not condemned to attempt to rebuild forms of intimacies wherever we live together? Is not intimacy an unfulfillable but necessary desire? What would a life together without the phantasm of intimacy, that is, a life together that puts into play an abyssal intimacy, look like? I believe that raising these questions is important today, amidst calls of border protection and immigration control. I also believe that Nancy’s deconstruction of the Subject and of community offers us a promising avenue for reconfiguring—reinventing—our being-with in places that seem to breed only individualism.

1. THE SUBJECT AS ABYSSAL INTIMACY

Nancy’s reading of Descartes in *Ego Sum* is not only difficult, but also estranging since it is often at odds with the picture of Descartes we are so often presented with: the father of modern philosophy, the thinker who founded the edifice of knowledge on the absolute self-certainty of a Subject fully transparent to itself. By paying attention the mode of presentation of Descartes’s subject, to the masks,

portraits, feints, and fables that populate his writings, Nancy is able to uncover in the texts another thinking of the subject at odds with the traditional interpretation of the cogito. Rather than following this reading closely, I just want to sketch the movement at the heart of the uttering of the ego so as to tie intimacy with the abyss, and hence with exposition. Turning then to *The Inoperative Community*, we will be able to distinguish another kind of intimacy, one that would be related to a completely different kind of abyss.

The withdrawal that, according to Nancy, “remains to be thought” is first of all the withdrawal of the subject. A subject, a true and living subject, Nancy says, never takes place, never happens. Yet the uttering of *ego* happens. This *ego* “is not”, Nancy writes, “neither a nature, nor a structure of subject, not even it [ça]. But something that nevertheless makes up the very act of *ego*, its self-position in the form of: it withdraws *itself*, and this *happens* to it, at the extreme point of its fabulation—of its *saying*.”⁴

The uttering of the *ego* happens. At this point, it is important to underline the ambiguity in the phrase “the uttering of *ego*.” It oscillates between the subjective and objective genitive at the same time: is *ego* the subject of the uttering or is it the object of the utterance? While it seems that the *ego* must pre-exist the expression of its existence—first I exist and only then can I utter: *I exist*—Nancy will read *ego sum* as sort of pure performative, a performative without underlying substrate or subject. What passes itself off as a constative utterance, as the expression of a prior existence, in fact lets this existence come about or come to itself.

It is, we could say with Derrida but changing a bit the context in which he used the term, a kind of teleiopoetic uttering. In *Politics of Friendship*, the word “teleiopoetic” names the movement of a sentence that begins at the end, travels at infinite speed, “advances backwards; ... outruns itself by reversing itself ... outstrips itself [*elle se gagne de vitesse*].”⁵ A teleiopoetic utterance is one where the subject who seems to be pre-existing the utterance is in fact made possible by the utterance itself. Such utterances are impossible since the sentence must already have reached its goal before it can set itself in motion. An example of such sentences, one Derrida discussed a decade before *Politics of Friendship*, and without using the word of teleiopoiesis as such, is found in the American Declaration of Independence: “we, the people,” who will only come to be at the end of the Declaration, anticipate their own independent existence in order to be able to declare it; “we” will have been the one who uttered the sentence only once the sentence is completed.⁶ As

Derrida explains: “Such an utterance can only be destined (that is addressed) with the precipitative supposition of a *we* [or, in the case that interests us, an *ego*] that, by definition and by destination, has not yet arrived to itself. Not before, at the earliest, the end and the arrival of this sentence whose very logic and grammar are improbable.”⁷ If we were to follow Derrida further, we could say that the abyssal intimacy of the subject is the mystical foundation of its authority,⁸ of *ego* as the author of its own saying, of its own fable. No foundation sustains *ego*, or, as Nancy will say many times in *Ego Sum*, *ego* sustains itself with nothing (*il se soutient de rien*).

The word I have up until now been rendering with withdrawal is not *retrait* but *retranchement*. The subject *se retranche*: withdraws, cuts itself off, retreats or hides behind a fortification. But to call this *retranchement* abyssal is to introduce an excess in the movement of withdrawal so that the interior to which the subject is thought to withdraw does not form a ground but itself withdraws deeper and deeper, further and further away from any ground. The word “intimacy” is the superlative of *intus*, the most *intus*, the most interior, the innermost. “It is the inner,” Nancy writes,

such that there is no deeper or higher inner. But the depth in question has no ground: if there were a ground, somewhere it could be grounded or founded (in whatever sense), and it (or he or she) could not even enter into relation. This is because a ground assures and fixes a being on its proper substance. The intimate is always deeper than the deepest ground. ... But the intimate is also the place of a sharing, both of oneself and of the other.⁹

This movement of withdrawing or of *retranchement*, which is also a movement of distancing, distinction since it gives rise to *ego*, *I*, leads not to a protected interiority but to an exteriority.

The withdrawal of the subject, where *ego* is sustained by nothing, happens “as soon as I open the mouth.” The mouth, as the place of intimacy, is abyssal. Why? Because it is in a sense impossible to say that it belongs to me, that it is mine. “The subject,” Nancy writes,

ruins itself and collapses into this abyss [the mouth]. But *ego* utters itself there. It externalizes itself there, which does not mean that it carries to

the outside the visible face of an invisible interiority. It means, literally, that *ego* makes or makes itself into *exteriority*, spacing of places, distancing and strangeness that make up a place, and hence space itself, primordial spatiality of a true *outline* in which, and only in which, *ego* may come forth, trace itself out and think itself.¹⁰

In the opening of the mouth, the inside is thereby “turned on itself, extravasculated, exogastrulated, exclaimed, expressed and thrown—not ‘outside’ but ‘as the outside.’”¹¹ It is not that I, in the uttering, carry what was hidden inside of me to the outside. Rather than speaking of an outside of me, we should speak of a “me-outside,” of me as outside, especially when the exclamation *I am, I exist* seems to come out of my deepest heart of hearts: “Not ‘outside me,’” Nancy writes,

because in truth the only inside is not “me” but the gaping in which a whole body gathers and pulls itself together in order to find a voice and announce itself as “self,” reclaim itself and call itself, desire itself in desiring the echo that will perhaps come back from the other bodies around it.¹²

Here Nancy is perhaps very far from Derrida, for whom every other remains an absolute secret, hidden behind the unbreachable wall of her alterity, so that every address is a promise—promise to tell the truth, promise of relation, which is always essentially threatened by perjury.

In Nancy’s reading of Descartes’s *cogito* as the uttering of *ego*, we have a torsion of inside and outside. This torsion is probably laid out most clearly by Antonia Birnbaum in “To exist is to exit the point,” which appears in *Corpus*. During doubt, I seem to retreat from the world (the outside) into the intimacy of thought. But “in cutting itself off from the world, the ‘auto’ of auto-affection and the ‘I’ of the ‘I am, I exist’ don’t regain an interiority closed in upon itself but experience themselves in the concentrated extremity of thought.”¹³ Here we have the torsion or inversion: the world as extension is interiority; this world has no outside and I am in the world, yet, “during the time of doubt,” the *ego* “determines exteriority by exempting itself from everything that renders it present to the inside of the world.”¹⁴ While this exemption looks like a withdrawal from exteriority and a “return to intimate self-presence,” a *retranchement* to something solid and stable, it in fact pushes the withdrawal to its outermost extremity, to the extremity of *la pointe*. Nancy writes of the extremity:

the *extremity* constitutes, in all respects, the position and the nature of the *cogito*. *Extremum* is the superlative of *exterum*: The extremity is that which is most exterior. It is, *of all the things that are interior*, the one that is farthest out [*le plus à l'extérieur*]. In all extremity, not only do the interior, the inside, or the property of a being reach their limit, the ultimate point of their completion and of their closure, but they also exceed this closure and undo their own completion.¹⁵

In uttering “ego cogito,” ego withdraws away from the absolute inside that we call the outside world into an “inside” where it calls itself “I.” At the extreme point of this withdrawal, ego distinguishes itself as what is farthest out, as the *extremum* (the extremity, the most exterior) of all the things that are inside the world. It is as such that the I is a point without extension or, in Descartes’s vocabulary, a non-extended thinking substance.

In *Being Singular Plural*, we find a similar torsion of inside and outside, but instead of the inside being what is the most outside, the farthest out, it is the “outside” that is “inside,”

in an inside more interior than the extreme interior, that is, more interior than the *intimacy* of the world and the intimacy that belongs to each “me.” If intimacy must be defined as the extremity of coincidence with oneself, then what exceeds intimacy in interiority is the distancing of coincidence itself.¹⁶

What is most inside is not some me that would finally coincide with itself but always something more or other than me that exceeds any identity, distances me from myself and opens me up to relation. The distancing of self-coincidence as the most interior is “a coexistence of the origin ‘within’ itself, a coexistence of origins,” which means that being-with is not the “secondary dispersion of a primordial essence.”¹⁷ The movement of *retranchement* in which I distinguish myself, insofar as it does not lead to a ground but to an abyssal intimacy, is necessarily tied to exposition as the turning toward the outside (which remember is the inside of the world) of the existent.

What we are led to understand with the movement of withdrawal or distinction that is concomitant to the expression of *ego* is 1) why expression is not a secondary movement, the carrying outside of what already existed inside, but

also 2) why exposition cannot be a melting or blending together since it is always the other side of a distinction. It is such double movement of contact/separation or entanglement/disentanglement that will form the basis of Nancy's thinking of singularity and that runs the risk of being forgotten if one overemphasizes the category of "exposition" in Nancy's work.

2. INTIMATE COMMUNITY

In *The Inoperative Community*, another valence of the word "intimacy" appears, one which, as I mentioned in the introduction, ties "intimacy" to the Romantic paradigm of the lost community, to immanence and unity, to the sense of closeness that is thought to have been lost in modern society. Whereas society relates separated individuals on the basis of rational calculation and self-interest, and thus allows these separated individuals to live peacefully beside one another, community fosters a feeling of belongingness, familiarity, and intimacy, joining its members together at the affective level.¹⁸ Whether one celebrates the birth of society or mourns the loss of community, in each case community is thought to be "not only intimate communication between its members, but also the organic communion of itself with its own essence."¹⁹ The members are, in their plurality, impregnated with the same identity so that each member identifies himself or herself and each other by identifying with the living essence or the living body of the community.

But community, as we readers of Nancy know well, is not something we have lost. The reason is simple: this experience of the so-called loss of community is an experience we make in common; hence we are there, in common, in the "absence" or "loss" of community:

The era of the limit abandons us together on the limit, for if not, it would not be an "era" or a "limit," and "we" would not be there. If we suppose that there was before (or elsewhere) something else, we can say that there remains this remainder of community that we are in common, within—or faced with—the disconnection of common sense.²⁰

We can go further and affirm with Nancy that this is the only possible community, namely the community that experiences its own absence or the interruption of fusion and communion. Indeed Nancy writes of community: "What this community has lost—the immanence and the intimacy of a communion—is lost

only in the sense that such a loss is constitutive of ‘community’ itself. It is not a loss: on the contrary, immanence, if it were to come about, would instantly suppress community, or communication, as such.”²¹ Communion, if it were to be realized, would lead to the black hole of immanence, a black hole that is a different kind of abyss than the one discussed in the first section. In *Corpus*, Nancy describes this pure immanence in the following way: “total absence of exteriority, a non-extension concentrated in itself, not something impenetrable, but rather its excess, the impenetrable *mixed with* the impenetrable, infinite intussusception, the *proper* devouring itself ... in an abyss where the hole absorbs even its own edges.”²² On the contrary, the abyssal hole of the mouth was “the primordial spatiality of a true outline in which, and only in which, ego may come forth, trace itself out and think itself.” There, the abyss was not the place of a total collapse unto oneself, but the possibility of a coming forth, of expression.

What informs our thinking of community as communion is the same logic that informs our thinking of the individual: the logic of “the absolute.” The absolute is, etymologically, that which is detached, separated, without relation. But, Nancy shows in *The Inoperative Community*, the logic of the absolute is self-contradictory. Its existence implicates it in a logic of relation that its essence precludes. As Nancy writes:

A simple and redoubtable logic will always imply that within its very separation the absolutely separate encloses, if we can say this, more than what is simply separated. Which is to say that the separation itself must be enclosed, that the closure must not only close around a territory (while still remaining exposed, at its outer edge, to another territory, with which it thereby communicates), but also, in order to complete the absoluteness of its separation, around the enclosure itself. The absolute must be the absolute of its own absoluteness, or not be at all.²³

This is what Nancy meant that the hole must “absorb even its own edges.” Only in this way is all contact avoided.

Given this self-contradictory logic of the absolute—either the absolute is exposed and hence not absolute, or else it is absolutizes itself by collapsing completely upon itself, but cannot ex-ist or come forth— we also need to complicate the relation between the community of the lovers, which might provide us with the figure of intimacy par excellence, and the social community. Without going into

the details of Nancy's reading of Bataille here, I just want to outline how this complication is carried out by means of the logic of arealization. "Areal" is a word Nancy already used in *Ego sum* to describe the mouth.²⁴ Playing on the double origin of areality (in relation to the word "area" or with a privative alpha), arealization first means that the community is beyond the dichotomy between the real and the unreal, understood as the imaginary, the nonexistent, but also the ideal: the community is not some ideal to be realized. On the contrary, community has to be, or is always, arealized. This arealization relates to the nature of community as area, as extension; it means that a community is spread out. A community is "not a territory [not something delimited and enclosed], but the areality of an ecstasy."²⁵ Nancy speaks of a double arealization of ecstasy and of community, the play between them consisting in the resistance to immanence and to fusion. Ecstasy opens up the subject and places it outside of itself. But what an ecstasy encounters in this movement of existence is another ecstasy. As a result, the community of lovers is never their fusion but their encounter on the limit of their respective ecstasy. Hence, "community" is the name of what resists the rebuilding of immanence at a higher level, here at the level of the couple. At the same time, the logic of arealization also means that there cannot be any "private" community of lovers that is not already "woven, arealized, or inscribed"²⁶ (IC 20) in a larger community, for example in the social community. Intimacy as the play between two ecstasies—as communication rather than communion and as the unworking of intimacy—is necessarily spread out so that the lovers are exposed at their limits—the limit between them and around them—to the community. "Touching the limit—which is the possibility of touch itself," Nancy writes,

the lovers however defer it. ... Lovers know joy in drowning in the instant of intimacy, but because this foundering [*ce naufrage*] is also their sharing and dividing since it is neither death nor communion—but joy—even *this in its turn is a singularity that exposes itself to the outside*. In the instant, the lovers are shared (out), their singular beings—which constitute neither an identity nor an individual, which effects nothing—share each other, and the singularity of their love is exposed to community.²⁷

Having shown that the paradigm of the loss of community as loss of intimacy, loss of some *thing* that would be more interior, hence more essential, to me than myself, is a phantasm, we are left with the abyssal intimacy of community: the spacing or dislocation of the interior, the interior always pushed to the extremity where it undoes any possibility of completion and passes outside, exposes itself.

Hence, we are not wrong if we claim that Nancy is the thinker of exposition. At the same time, we should not forget that he also insists on distance and distinction, on *retranchement*, even as this *retranchement* leads us farther than any interior, at the extremity of the interior where the being does not reach its completion but, rather, undoes itself. It is such abyssal intimacy that is the reason for both the impossibility of the Subject (as self-grounding ground) and the community (as communion).

3. BEING-WITH IN THE CITY

At this point that I would like to turn to *La ville au loin* to ask, finally, the question that is raised in title of this article: How do we live there, in the city? That is, Can we only bear to live there by rebuilding a certain form of intimacy? The turn to *La ville au loin* might seem strange, but it will certainly appear less arbitrary if one recalls that in that small book, Nancy speaks of the city as the place of the “with.” “In it rules,” Nancy writes, “neither the intimacy of community, not the arrangement of collectivity, not the regulation of assembly,” but a “multitude that mingles [*mêle*] and distinguishes in the same movement.”²⁸ Here we have again the double movement of existence: *retranchement*, withdrawal, distinction on the one hand; exposition, contiguity, touch on the other: “Whether one wants it or not, the city mingles and shuffles at the same time as it separates and dissolves. One rubs shoulders, one passes close to the other, one touches and moves apart: it is one and the same way of treading [*une même allure*].”²⁹ If the city exposes the full force of being-with, then it seems essential to try to understand what kind of place this is and how we can or should dwell in it. It seems crucial to ask, as Nancy does, what the *ethos* of the city is. One might be tempted, in asking after this *ethos*, to ask: can we inhabit this place *meaningfully*, can we live a *meaningful* life there? But putting the question in this way might have already tempted us to cast the question in terms of a lost meaning and hence to assume that this meaning could only come to our life in the city from beyond and above it. Put in such a way, we would miss the specific regimen of the “with” that it exposes.

The text *La ville au loin*, we should make clear, is not a treatise on the city in general but rather a meditation on a specific, singular city: Los Angeles. The first part, “Au loin... Los Angeles,” was written in 1987, after he was guest professor at the University of California at Irvine (1976–78, 1984) and at San Diego (1985–87). Though he visited the city during that time, he never lived there.³⁰ The second part of the book, “La ville au loin,” was written twelve years later, in 1999,

without Nancy having returned to Los Angeles in the meantime. It is important to remember that Nancy speaks of a specific experience of a specific city, and that the specificity of this experience was responsible, as he says, for his “love affair” with Los Angeles.³¹ There is something idiosyncratic and singular, not only about Los Angeles, but also about Nancy’s personal experience of Los Angeles. Yet, Los Angeles is also exemplary of the truth of all cities. Despite the specificity of Nancy’s experience, or maybe because of it, something came to light, as if the strangeness of Los Angeles, and Nancy’s position as a fascinated outsider, operated a sort of phenomenological reduction that brought to the fore the modality of the “with” proper to the city. This tension between the singular and the exemplary means that the text oscillates between affirmations about Los Angeles, and even more specifically about Nancy’s own personal experience of Los Angeles at the end of the 1980s, and general, universal affirmations about the modern city as such and the relation of the city to the “with.” As if this city, this experience of this city, could teach us something about existence and being-with in general. Now this tension—some might even say this confusion—between the personal and the ontological, the contingent and the essential, is not only a feature of *La ville au loin*, but can found in many of Nancy’s writings. We could even say that it is a feature of his philosophical method, insofar as it is attentive to the phenomenological power of “the end” or “the extremity.”

On the one hand, Nancy often describes “our times” as the epoch where something has come to an end: end of sense as signification, end of the world as organized whole, end of community as communion, and so on. On the other hand, Nancy’s ontology of finitude describes the fundamental structures of existence so that the coming to an end of signification, world, and community cannot be what first makes us finite. That finitude and the being-with of existence are revealed to us now is a function of what Nancy calls “ecotechnics,” a world without reason, end, or figure, but whose loss of origin and end, whose loss of direction, is only effective under the names of “planetary technology” and “world economy.”³² Today, in the epoch of “ecotechnics,” we are brought face to face with the impossibility of the closure of signification. Our desire for closure—our desire for a final end—is brought to an end when it appears for what it is, namely an impossible desire: the desire to put an end to existence itself in its singular plurality. By undoing of all ends, ecotechnics lets our naked, figureless, and meaningless being-together appear. Of course, this by no means denies or underplays the destructive nature of ecotechnics. The question is whether ecotechnics also uncovers other possibilities for enacting our being-with. Los Angeles plays a similar role as the more general

figure of ecotechnics: in it something comes to an end but something also comes to light for the first time.

In *La ville au loin*, Nancy describes Los Angeles as a city at the extremity of the city, again: the extremity, the city that passes over to something that is not quite recognizable as city anymore, undoing itself along its edges, along edges that do not delimit or circumscribe a territory but cut across it (Nancy speaks of the freeways) and turns this place into a space made of lines and axes, a space of passage, transit, movement, of agitation and dispersion. This city might expose, Nancy writes, “the unheard-of capacity of the city to push back, repel or repulse the interiority or intimacy that still plagues our idea of the city.”³³ *Une ville*, not *une cité*. *Ville*, as we can read in Littré, more generally than *cité* (and city), expresses a significant agglomeration of houses and inhabitants. *Cité*, even when rid of its ancient meaning, adds to this idea the representation of the *ville* as a political person with rights, duties, and functions. Hence, while the city denotes a certain kind of organization and unity, a *ville* like Los Angeles, spreads itself out—urban sprawl, as it is called, is a big problem in North American cities—it spreads itself out without downtown, without a heart around which the town organizes itself and without city walls or limits that would keep its extension contained. This sprawling gives the impression of indifference and randomness, of a lack of “urban planning,” a lack of unity. The city changes and grows from within, without anyone occupying a God’s eye perspective to control or guide this growth from above.

As we should not mourn the loss of communal intimacy in the coldness of society, we should not mourn the loss of the intimate inhabitation in the town or the village at the expense of the coldness of our modern city. Of course, there are the incessant complaints about life in the city: “inhuman, atomized, condemned to cars, pollution and congestion.”³⁴ The nostalgia for the village, the countryside or the villa haunts the city’s inhabitants, “always the dream of communal immanence,” of the “intimacy of community.”³⁵ Why this nostalgia? Because, Nancy says, and I think this is important, “it is difficult for us to think that the truth of community is a sharing (or a sharing out) in the two senses of the words and that if the city partakes of communal life and truth, it is also insofar as it shares out, separates, divides with all its power of spacing.”³⁶ And so the question, “What ethos for the city?” arises as an attempt to figure out the ways in which the city—and more specifically a city at the limit of the city, a city that pushes its limits to the extreme so that it is on the edge of becoming undone— might partake of communal life and might teach us something about being-with.

There are two Greek words, which we transliterate as “ethos.” The first one, written with eta, means, in the words of Heidegger translating a fragment of Heraclitus, *Aufenthalt*, sojourn or abode, *Ort des Wohnens*, dwelling place. The second one, written with epsilon, is the one that gives us the word ethics, and means, conduct, habit, or custom. When it was a question of the globalised world, Nancy wrote of these two senses that they “contaminate each other in the motif of a stand [*une tenue*], a ‘self-standing’ [*un se tenir*, a holding oneself].”³⁷ The question, “What ethos for the city?,” asks after the stance or hold of the city as a place of dwelling and the modality of our stance within it. Heidegger defined dwelling in the following way: “To dwell, to be set at peace, means to remain at peace within the free sphere that safeguards each thing in its nature. *The fundamental character of dwelling is this sparing and preserving.*”³⁸ Of course, for Heidegger, inasmuch as the human being is the most *unheimlich* (the most unhomey), inasmuch as the human being is always beside or outside of him- or herself, dwelling does not mean standing firm on a ground, since there is no such ground. Yet, at the same time, to learn to dwell for Heidegger is to find peace, to hold firm, to gather oneself (or rather to be gathered) and hence to arrest the movement of dispersion. But if the city is, “first a circulation, it is a transport, a run [or an errand, *une course*], a mobility, a motion or commotion, a vibration,”³⁹ and if there can be an ethos of the city, then we need to rethink the *tenue* or the *se tenir* away from both the connotations of firmness and concentration.

In the city, one inhabits in passing (*en passant*) or as a passer-by (*comme un passant*), a passer-by who, Nancy writes,

goes alongside and rubs shoulders with other passers-by, so close and so far, familiarly strange, whose stations are only provisional, in the middle of traffic, errands, transports, journeys, doors always opened and closed upon spaces of dwelling set back from the street but still penetrated by the rumbling of the street, by the noises and dust of a world that is entirely passing or passing-by.⁴⁰

These passers-by are close, sometimes very close, pressed into a subway car or an elevator, but this closeness is without proximity, familiarity, or intimacy. The passer-by is “far but within reach and at an earshot. Between us blinks the feeble exchange of signals, an imperceptible and random correspondence.”⁴¹ A hand stretched toward the lady who smiles and hands me the metro newspaper every morning, a glance in the direction of the man who plays classical music on his slide

whistle in the subway station, a step aside to step out of the way of the older man with blue hair pushing his floor scrubber in circles, a smile at the grandmother of the child who lets out a genuine ‘Wow’ when she sees the high-level bridge light up from the subway car. These moments are not moments of intimacy, they are not community-building, barely moments of fleeting complicity, of being for a moment folded together. But always there remains not only a movement of transit, transport, and passage, but also a sense of distance, of withdrawn presence.

In *La ville au loin*, Nancy captures this double movement in the following passage, which I want to quote at length:

Faces keep hurrying: tight, compact, busy, furtively offered in a mobility that carries them away. Infinitely, traits, skins, ages, charms, wrinkles, folds, postures, accents, effaced faces, fleeting figures, a multiplied pleasure of non-exposed portraits [a portrait, from the Latin *protraho*, is something that extracts or draws out an intimacy], carried away toward the inaccessible distances of their worries, their thoughts, and their very intimate images [that is, withdrawn and exposed at once]. One touches it without touching it, one is touched [contact/separation]. One observes sideways, surreptitiously [à la *dérobée*], one observes the slipping away [*le dérobement*] itself. ... [All looks] are for one another strangers, intruders, unwelcomed visitors, one so close to the other, so similar, coming back again and again in unmistakable types: young girls, old gentlemen, elegant ladies, undecided clients, attractive guy, generic beings, styles, fashions, infinitely mingling singulars in a great unsettled tension between the universal and the particular, between vague extension [that is, anonymity, dispersion] and secret precision [that is, singularity, distinction].⁴²

Of course there are also nostalgic ways of inhabiting the city. Neighbourhoods are one of them: “The neighbourhood,” Nancy writes “is the city that attempts to reconstitute itself, to fold itself back into the city.”⁴³ In other words, it is the city that attempts to delimit itself, to draw a border, but this “local temptation or tendency” is always carried away by the movement of the city. The place, the inhabitable, delimited place, passes into extension, spread, sprawl because the neighborhood is, like the community of lovers, never enclosed, never fully absolved from contact with the city. Not only is it always traversed by strangers but it itself is always in movement: new buildings spring up, old ones are demolished or restored, businesses close, new ones open. In a sense, this is true even of gated

communities. It is true that these communities with their thick walls and their restricted access look like attempts at absolving themselves from any contact. They are neighborhoods that attempt to absorb even their own edges, as we saw in the second section. Here we could turn to Derrida's meditation on the home and on hospitality to underline the fact that the home, in order to be livable, has to be opened to what comes from the outside. As one needs to cross the gate to go shopping or go to work, friends and emergency services (the good stranger), but also workers (who often can't afford to live in these communities) must be also allowed inside. This opening or openness, despite all attempts at control, has always already opened the community to what or who comes.

But it is not only the walls of gated communities that attempt to arrest the mobility of the city. Both their calculated design—from the width of sidewalks to the color of the pavement—and the necessity of policing the behavior of inhabitants in order to ensure that the calculated design remains intact are attempts at preventing the community from being transformed by existence, by the lives of the inhabitants: no clothesline, no red front doors, only windows of this type, green grass no longer than 2 inches long (and no weeds!). In some communities you can even be fined for uttering a swearword on the sidewalk. While it might be easy to diagnose the phantasm of community as work of death in the phenomenon of the gated community, I would also like to point out a different kind of attempt at rebuilding intimacy, a way of traversing the city, of being in transit without being-with.

The examples of urban encounter I mentioned above were all taken from what we call public transit. Indeed one might think that public transit is the place where being-with is most explicit, most unavoidable. One might think that one is more exposed in public transit than in one's car, that driving a car is a way of being alone, separated, of avoiding contact. At the same time, while driving one necessarily remains turned toward the outside, exposed to others, even if it is just to cut someone off or honk between two text messages. To repeat a passage I quoted above: "Between us [necessarily] blinks the feeble exchange of signals, an imperceptible and random correspondence."

The second part of *La ville au loin* was written in 1999, before electronic devices invaded our lives, and especially our daily commutes or transits. These have of course affected the ways in which one moves around in the city. I am not thinking about the problem of distracted walking or inattentional blindness, people falling in ditches or hitting poles while talking on their phones, or of the famous violinist

Joshua Bell playing more or less incognito for hours at a Washington subway station to commuters who couldn't hear him with their headphones or were too distracted to lift their head from their phone.

Rather, what I have in mind is the following: A student in my department, a woman, admitted to only travelling on public transit with her headphones on, even when she was not listening to any music, and staring at the screen of her phone, even when she was not actually looking at anything on her phone. She was clear that this was her way of avoiding any conversation, avoiding any form of contact. It might even be an attempt not merely at being left alone, since one must be exposed to be alone, but at absolute concentration, at absolving oneself from one's extension, at absorbing one's edges and returning back to the point, rather than exiting from it, to play on the title of Antonia Birnbaum's text mentioned above. This reminds us how contact, however fleeting, can be unwelcome, how exposure can be taxing, even violent.

4. CONCLUSION

Were I to attempt, in conclusion, to summarize what life in the city teaches us about community, about being-with, I would venture the following: First, others—other singularities—always remain a withdrawn presence, even in our most intimate relationship. They are always “non-exposed portraits, carried away toward the inaccessible distances of their worries, their thoughts, and their very intimate images.” Access always remains suspended on the limit; what is touched always also withdraws or remains withdrawn. This does not mean that it remains hidden in an interior, but rather that it withdraws in an abyss that is like the mouth. This withdrawal is the other's distinction or discreteness. If the intimate encounter of the lovers effects neither death nor communion, if they remain shared out, withdrawn, touching on/at the limit, then the “truth” (or the model) of being-with is in the random encounter of the passer-by, and the lovers are but an example of such encounter.

Second, the desire for enclosure—be it of oneself or of the community—is not merely an attempt to absolve oneself from any point of contact, to absorb even one's own edges (as we saw in the case of the gated community or of the student with her headphones and her screen); it is also an attempt at arresting the movement of passing-by, the mobility or *empotement* of existence. It is not just a suppression of the ex- but also of the trans-, and not just one's own but

also that of a world “that is entirely passing or passing by,” as Nancy said. If our intimate life—our being at home with our loved ones, our family, our friends—tends to cover over this mobility through our renewed encounters, life in the city exposes the trans- as a truth of being-with. It attunes us to the movement of transit, passage, and dispersion that is inherent even in what appear as our most stable ways of dwelling, our most reliable relationships and encounters.

Though this does not entirely answer the question regarding the ethos of the city, and remains in that respect a philosophical theory, I think it also proposes a basis upon which to engage in the city, and to reimagine our being-with one another. It also has, as I pointed out at the beginning, wider implication for our conceptualization of borders and immigration. By reversing the ontological priority of rest over movement, Nancy shows us that the mobility of existence is more fundamental than the home, that the stability of the home is only ever partial, itself transient. As a result, there is no originary experience of the home to be defended and protected. This does not necessarily call for the abolition of borders or the removal of all regulations concerning passage, but it does require that we let go of our phantasm of control and the rhetoric of protection and defense that accompanies it. By reversing the priority of the intimate over the foreign, Nancy’s theory also attunes to the strangeness, the withdrawn presence inherent in all the passers-by we encounter, including those we called our loved ones. As a result, if we are all passers-by, if we always remain withdrawn even in our most intimate encounters, then the immigrant, the refugee, the real stranger, are not other than those who are familiar to us, but only a mode of withdrawn presence among others.

NOTES

1. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 170, 129.
2. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Ego Sum*, trans. Marie-Eve Morin (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 87.
3. Nancy, *Ego Sum*, vii.
4. Nancy, *Ego Sum*, 87.
5. Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London & New York: Verso, 2005), 32.
6. See Jacques Derrida, “Declarations of Independence,” trans. Tom Keenan and Tom Pepper. *New Political Science* 7, no. 1 (1986): 7-15.
7. Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 77.
8. See Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority,’” in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. David Gray Carlson, Drucilla Cornell, and Michel Rosenfeld (New York: Routledge, 1992).
9. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus II: Writings on Sexuality*, trans. Anne E. O’Byrne (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 18.
10. Nancy, *Ego Sum*, 112.
11. Nancy, *Corpus II*, 88.
12. Nancy, *Corpus II*, 88.
13. Nancy, *Corpus*, 147.
14. Nancy, *Corpus*, 147.
15. Nancy, *Ego Sum*, 79, my emphasis.
16. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O’Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 11-12.
17. Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 12.
18. This basic differentiation between society and community is first explicitly developed in Ferdinand Tönnies’s *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (1887) and taken up by Max Weber in his *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (1921–22).
19. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 9, trans. mod.
20. See Jean-Luc Nancy, “Of Being-in-Common,” trans. James Creech, in *Community as Loose Ends*, ed. Miami Theory Collective (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 6.
21. Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, 12.
22. Nancy, *Corpus*, 75.
23. Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, 4.
24. See Nancy, *Ego Sum*, 112: “But the human being is that which spaces itself out, and which perhaps only ever dwells in this spacing, in the *areality* of his mouth.”
25. Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, 20.
26. Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, 20.
27. Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, 39, trans. mod.
28. Jean-Luc Nancy, *La ville au loin* (Paris: La Phocide, 2011), 40.
29. Nancy, *La ville au loin*, 43.
30. Nancy, *La ville au loin*, 21.

31. Nancy, *La ville au loin*, 21, in English in the text.
32. Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 133.
33. Nancy, *La ville au loin*, 15.
34. Nancy, *La ville au loin*, 21.
35. Nancy, *La ville au loin*, 22.
36. Nancy, *La ville au loin*, 22.
37. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World or Globalization*, trans. François Raffoul and David Pettigrew, Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 42.
38. Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. A. Hofstadter (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), p. 147.
39. Nancy, *La ville au loin*, 34.
40. Nancy, *La ville au loin*, 45.
41. Nancy, *La ville au loin*, 43-44.
42. Nancy, *La ville au loin*, 44-45.
43. Nancy, *La ville au loin*, 19.

axiomatic set theory in the work of deleuze and guattari: a critique

jon roffe

Over the last decade, or more precisely since the translation of Alain Badiou's *Being and Event* in 2005, the significance of mathematics in the trajectory of twentieth century French thought has become increasingly perspicuous. Indeed, Badiou increasingly appears to as the recipient of a rich but often overlooked tradition of philosophers who engaged with mathematical problematics.¹

To make this observation is also to note that an adequate familiarity with certain strains of French thought make the rather steep demand of a concomitant familiarity with mathematics. This is true even in cases where the mathematical references might appear at first glance to be somewhat slight. The paradigmatic case in this regard is the work of Gilles Deleuze. While his references to various branches of mathematics—calculus, group theory, model theory, analysis, and differential geometry for instance—may appear to be fleeting, they constitute important and sometimes even indispensable points of reference.²

The aim of this piece is to consider a branch of mathematics that is treated even more fleetingly than many others by Deleuze, the one which Badiou's work has done so much to focus attention on: axiomatic set theory.

Deleuze and Guattari's *What is Philosophy?* includes two short invocations of set theory. The first appears in the chapter devoted to science, defined as the

act of thought that organizes and measures states of affairs. This capacity itself turns around the creation—science being an act of creation in their view, equal if different to philosophy and art—of the limits and independent variables that compose scientific functions. These limits are of necessity engendered in relationship to the movement of infinite speed that characterizes what they call chaos, that is, being as such. Given this situation, Deleuze and Guattari note, one can ask how it is that a created limit (such as zero, the speed of light or zero Kelvin) can gain a foothold in what seems to absolutely exceed it: “It is difficult to see how the limit immediately cuts into the infinite, the unlimited.”³ A first answer comes in the form of a brief presentation of Cantorian set theory:

Cantor provides this theory [according to which the determination instantiated by a limit immediately relates to the infinite] with its mathematical formulas from a double—intrinsic and extrinsic—point of view. According to the first, a set is said to be infinite if it presents a term-by-term correspondence with one of its parts or subsets, the set and the subset having the same power or the same number of elements that can be designated by ‘aleph-0’, as with the set of whole numbers. According to the second determination, the set of subsets of a given set is necessarily larger than the original set: the set of the parts of aleph-0 therefore refers to a different transfinite number, aleph-1, which possesses the power of the continuum or corresponds to the set of real numbers. (WP 120, translation modified)

Contracted here is an account of certain of Cantor’s famous contributions to mathematics. First, he shows that we need not conceive of the infinite in terms of the Aristotelian *apeiron*. Instead, we can take as a whole collection—a set—an infinite series like the series of natural numbers (1, 2, 3 ...). This set, written as \mathbb{N} , is a first-order infinite set, but not the only one. It can be demonstrated that the set of all even numbers, the set of all integers \mathbb{Z} , the set of all rational numbers \mathbb{Q} , the set of all prime numbers, and any set produced by adding to or multiplying any of these sets (for example, $\mathbb{N}+100$ or $2\mathbb{Q}$) are the same size. These sets are said to be equinumerous, having the same *power*, or possessing the same *cardinality*.

Cantor proves these *prima facie* counter-intuitive claims by way of his famous method of diagonalisation, a *reductio ad absurdum* that demonstrates that there are sets which are not included in \mathbb{N} and thus exceed it in size. Principal among these is the set of real numbers, \mathbb{R} . Most importantly, it is also possible to define

a set on the basis of \mathbb{N} that exceeds its size. This set, called the power set of \mathbb{N} or $P(\mathbb{N})$, is the set of all of the subsets of \mathbb{N} , whose size is 2^n , where n is the number of members that belong to \mathbb{N} .⁴ Moreover, the same argument also shows that \mathbb{R} and any sets of the same or higher cardinality are uncountable or non-denumerable in nature—essentially due to the fact that $P(\mathbb{N})$ has the same cardinality as \mathbb{R} —a result that is now known as Cantor’s theorem. That is, a set is non-denumerable if a) it is infinite, and b) there is no bijection between the set and \mathbb{N} . We will return to this point in what follows.

The final element of Cantor’s work that Deleuze and Guattari invoke in this passage is the continuum, which to this day marks an unresolved issue in set theory. Famous results due to Kurt Gödel on the one hand and Paul Cohen on the other have shown that the continuum hypothesis, as it is known, is independent of axiomatic set theory—that is, it can neither be proven nor disproven on the basis of the axioms of ZFC. This hypothesis, which Cantor spent the last part of his life trying in vain to prove, asserts that there is no set whose size falls between those of \mathbb{N} and \mathbb{R} , \aleph_0 (aleph zero) and \aleph_1 .

Cantor’s failure to prove the continuum hypothesis was only the first critical development, however, since, when thinkers like Russell and Frege attempted to formalise the foundations of mathematics in versions of first-order predicate logic, they discovered a number of crippling paradoxes. These paradoxes are numerous, and include the paradox of self-belonging—which, in Frege’s own words, “the sole possible foundation of arithmetic,”⁵ on logical grounds—the Burali-Forti paradox of the largest ordinal, and that of the largest cardinal.⁶ Various forms of axiomatic systems were developed—the Zermelo-Frankel (ZF) axiomatic being only the most well-known—developed in order to address these paradoxes and Cantor’s inability to prove CH.

Given that Badiou’s use of set theory is the object of the note in *What is Philosophy?*, it is clear that they are making reference to ZF set theory in particular, which has, on the now standard presentation, ten axioms.⁷ For the most part, the axioms are operational, defining what one is capable of doing on the basis of a given set (for example, the Power Set axiom that we have already seen). However, there are also two existential axioms, axioms that assert the existence of a certain set: the axiom of Infinity, which asserts the existence of the infinite set constituted by \mathbb{N} ; and the axiom of the null-set, which asserts the existence of a unique set with no members. Finally, there is axiom of Foundation (or Regularity), which rules

out sets that belong to themselves, and, more generally, allows for the ordered ranking of sets.

The effect of this axiomatisation of Cantorian set theory was to render it remarkably (if not provably) coherent. Even in light of the famous Gödel results, which show that there is no way to absolutely set theory on its own terms, it is widely taken to be the most fundamental branch of mathematics, and the one in which most others can be formulated.

While the above otiose summary of certain set theory basics may not yet seem particularly interesting or relevant, this final point is obviously significant, for it exactly contradicts what Deleuze and Guattari state at the end of the citation above. We cannot say of aleph-1 that it possesses the power of the continuum, a claim that also conceals a second error and that we will return to below. This is a strange error of presentation to make, made stranger yet again by the fact that they invoke, in the context of their second reference to set theory in a short text on Badiou (WP 150), precisely the excessive character of the power set that makes its location with respect to the hierarchy of alephs problematic.⁸

There are further problems too. By equating the infinite with both speed and the figure of the unlimited, Deleuze and Guattari's account sets them at odds with set theory. On the one hand, sets are extensive multiplicities, entirely static in character and thus incommensurable with any dynamist interpretation of the infinite, and here the development of set theory of a piece with the more general trend in 19th century mathematics to evict dynamism that Deleuze remarks in *Difference and Repetition* in the course of his presentation of differential calculus.⁹ On the other, and while there may be other ways of defining the infinite, there is no way to reconcile the notion of *apeiron* with the set theoretic conception of the infinite, and it is the latter that is manifestly at play in this citation but also throughout *What is Philosophy?*



What makes this mismatch between set theory and Deleuze and Guattari's presentation of it particularly troubling is the fact that a substantial reference to set theory forms the lynchpin of their account of capitalism as a social formation.¹⁰ If, that is, their analysis of set theory is fallacious, unfortunate consequences may accrue on this front also. This latter is not quite the object of what follows, however. My aim instead is to trace the fault-line in Deleuze and Guattari's understanding

of set theory that leads to these passages in *What is Philosophy?* While the context of the most detailed discussion of set theory is their account of the capitalist social formation, there is no need to insist that set theoretic mathematics and capitalism share *literally* the same object. This assertion however undergirds Deleuze and Guattari's argument. It is enough to traverse the serial treatment of set theory in *A Thousand Plateaus* to demonstrate that the analysis of capitalism is poorly founded, and this is what the following argument is meant to demonstrate. However, this does not lead to the conclusion that the analysis of capitalism through the concept of the axiom is entirely misplaced. In the final section of the article, I will present a more modest way of framing this concept that does not require the falsification of set theory.

After briefly outlining the account of capitalism as an axiomatic presented in *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus* and some of its examples, we will consider the use they make of Robert Blanché's *L'axiomatique*, the most significant secondary reference deployed by Deleuze and Guattari in accounting for what they call the capitalist axiomatic in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Third, we will critically consider the "summary sketch"¹¹ of the axiomatic mode of thought for the analysis of capitalism that closes the thirteenth plateau of the same text, considering it from the point of view of its fidelity to axiomatic set theory. Again, let me emphasise that this effort, technical though it may appear, is essential if we are to properly take the measure of one of the most frequently espoused elements of Deleuze and Guattari's thought: their politics.

WHAT IS AN AXIOM FOR DELEUZE AND GUATTARI?

Deleuze and Guattari define capitalism as "the only social machine that is constructed on the basis of decoded flows, substituting for intrinsic codes an axiomatic of abstract quantities,"¹² in which nation-States function no longer as overarching structures but diverse models of realization. That is, in the capitalist formation, the absolute role of qualitative hierarchies gives way to an ensemble of mechanisms that treat social reality on quantitative terms, which Deleuze and Guattari call axioms.

The most direct definition of the term 'axiom' that Deleuze and Guattari give is found in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Axioms, they say, are rules that deal "directly with purely functional elements and relations whose nature is not specified, and which are immediately realized in highly varied domains simultaneously." (TP 454) An

axiom is thus a rule indifferent to the nature of what it is applied to and to the context of its application. They immediately oppose this to the kinds of rules, namely *codes*, that characterize other social formations: “codes, on the other hand, are relative to those domains and express specific relations between qualified elements that cannot be subsumed by a higher formal unity (overcoding) except by transcendence and in an indirect fashion.” (TP 454) By extension, then, to mark the indifference of axioms in this way is to mark their absolute neutrality with respect to qualitative or evaluative positions. Nor, we should note, are they strictly speaking *mediated* by qualitative concerns (a point that we will return to below). It is worth insisting too that for Deleuze and Guattari, axioms are never found in isolation. Even in the case of totalitarian States, they will insist that at least three sets of axioms are to be found. This is one reason, though not the most consequential as we will see, why they tend to speak of the capitalist axiomatic rather than discrete sets of axioms. If we compare this to the brief sketch of ZFC provided above, it is clear at the two approaches are indeed perfectly compatible in general terms.

Before proceeding, it is important to locate the role of the State in capitalism, for it is not the case, in Deleuze and Guattari’s view, that this mode of social organization is entirely dissolved upon the advent of capitalism. Instead—and this is a claim we will return to in what follows—the State takes on the role of “model of realization” for the capitalist axiomatic itself. By this, they mean that the State, no longer ultimate locus of political sovereignty, functions as a pluralized set of regulatory apparatuses, effectively assuring that the axioms have the appropriate material and expressive matters required for their functioning—infrastructure and material requirements, but also elements like appropriate legal frameworks and political alliances. It is therefore *through* States that capitalism is realized—not *in accordance with* State regulation but *by way of it*.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari will provide a tripartite typology of States conceived in this way. Summarily speaking, they suggest that all States as models of realization of the capitalist axiomatic can be contrasted in terms of 1) the number of axioms that are deployed therein, 2) the respective relations of production (in Marx’s sense of the term), and 3) the forms in which States co-opt peripheral economic systems in the service of the realization of the axioms currently in play. Together, these three axes allow for the construction of a phase-space of global capitalism, in which every concrete State apparatus can be located.¹³

BLANCHÉ'S *L'AXIOMATIQUE*

This summary provides a general sense of the stakes of the concepts of axiom and axiomatic from the point of view of Deleuze and Guattari's account. Behind the presentation they give, there is, as is so often the case in their work, a broad set of references, among them Marx, Clastres, Childe, Amin, Braudel, Lévi-Strauss, and Dumézil. However, concerning the mathematical provenance of the concept of the axiom, we find in all of Deleuze and Guattari's texts on the matter only a single touchstone, Robert Blanché's 1955 *L'axiomatique*.¹⁴ To be more specific, and while they marshal a number of proper names around their invocation of axioms, including a roll-call of intuitionist mathematicians, only Blanché's text is deployed directly (the single exception to this case, concerning the included middle, will be examined in what follows). Moreover, the invocation of intuitionism¹⁵ does not bear on the use that Deleuze and Guattari make of axiomatics, but only the need to mark a point beyond which the framework of axiomatics is no longer adequate—beyond the capitalist axiomatic, there is the calculus of problems involved in the creation of revolutionary connections, a claim with which Deleuze and Guattari close the “Apparatus of Capture” plateau.

Blanché's text is devoted, not to set theory as such, but to the axiomatic method more generally—from its beginnings in Euclid through to post-Gödelian mathematical logic—and also considers the significance of the axiomatic method in science and its consequences for philosophy. He is particularly concerned to clarify the limits of the method as they appear, on the one hand, in relation to the irreducible intuitive commitments of the method: “it is only in books that that an axiomatic begins with axioms.” (A 87) On the other, he insists on the kinds of paradoxes (notably Skolem's paradox, to which we will return below) that seem to show the inevitable relativity of axiomatic systems, and more generally that there are metamathematical questions that are unable to be resolved by the axiomatic method on its own terms. But Blanché's key contention is the obverse and complement of this point, namely that the axiomatic method allows for a regulated rapprochement of the formal and the empirical, a broaching of “the old distinction between rational and empirical science.” (A 103) It does this precisely by providing a means to systematically formalize the role of the basic experiential elements of mathematical science, like the ‘scribble’ that makes up numbers on a piece of paper or blackboard.

Deleuze and Guattari make use of the parts of Blanché's text that address certain central problematics in the axiomatic method itself, those which arise primarily (if not exclusively) in the axiomatisation of set theory. To these problematics, Deleuze and Guattari devote a numbered list that closes the argument of "Apparatus of Capture" and constitutes an indispensable part of their account of capitalism in *A Thousand Plateaus*. They frame this treatment with the following remark:

Our use of the word 'axiomatic' is far from a metaphor; we find literally the same theoretical problems that are posed by the models in an axiomatic repeated in relation to the State [...] These 'problems' become singularly political when we think of modern States. (TP 455)

Later they will add that "It is the real characteristics of axiomatics that lead us to say that capitalism and present-day politics are an axiomatic in the literal sense." (TP 461) This is key. Whatever Deleuze and Guattari hope to accomplish by deploying axiomatics, it will not be of the order of a metaphorical gloss. Second, the value of the axiomatic method will be with respect to the relationship between the State and capitalism. Third, it is by treating problems of the axiomatic method in this setting that they reveal their political character. We set aside here the third point, and focus on the first—that is, the key question will be whether or not the elaboration of these problematics of the axiomatic method presented by Deleuze and Guattari is literal in character. The answer can be found by treating each of the seven problematics that they discuss in turn.

Before doing so, we need to consider the second point, since what is fundamentally at issue in Deleuze and Guattari's treatment is less axiom-systems on their own terms than the relationship between a set of axioms and the various models of realization through which they may be deployed. In a nutshell, this second claim amounts to the assertion that the pair axiomatic/model in the mathematical deployment of set theory is the means by which we can think the pair axiomatic/State.

Rather than considering ZF, let's take a simpler case, that of Peano arithmetic (PA).¹⁶ PA is a set of axioms that define the natural numbers, and the basic arithmetical operations of addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, and comparison by size (that is, linear ordering). It contains nine axioms, of which five are basic,¹⁷ and can be paraphrased as follows:

- 1) *Zero* is a natural number
- 2) The *successor* of a natural number is a natural number
- 3) No two natural numbers have the same successor
- 4) Zero is not a successor
- 5) If a property belongs to zero, and if, when this property belongs to a number it also belongs to its successor, it belongs to all numbers

Which numbers, though, do these axioms pertain to? The answer is that there are an infinite number of *models* of PA. It is important to see that model here does not mean a prior ideal structure, and “should not suggest the idea of an archetypal anteriority.” (A 46n1) Rather, a set of axioms is modeled in the way that a mold is filled with plaster; a model of an axiomatic system is some ensemble of propositions, groups, or sets—in a word, various structures—for which all of the claims of the axiomatic system hold. One such model of PA is clearly \mathbb{N} , the set of all natural numbers. However, the set of all even numbers is also a model, since all of the axioms hold for this set as well, since the successor relationship does not rely upon any prior ordinal series. The same holds for the set of numbers beginning with 100, since the first axiom above can take this as zero. Thus, while models vary, they are models *of* an axiom set to the extent that they are various expressions of the axioms it includes. At the limit, the axiomatic method turns on the capacity to show that, for the entire range of possible models, there is a single axiom set to which they correspond. In Blanché’s words, “The axiomatic method is interested precisely in revealing isomorphisms between apparently heterogenous concrete theories, by referring them back to the unity of an abstract system.” (A 46)

ADDITION, SUBTRACTION AND SATURATION OF AXIOMS

With this example in hand, we can turn to the seven points that characterize the capitalist axiomatic and its realization. The first two revolve around the issue of saturation.

Deleuze and Guattari begin by considering the very variable forms of the State under capitalism, with respect to the number of axioms deployed. What happens though in the two limit cases? On the one hand, can there be a capitalist State that lacks axioms altogether? On the other, can there be such a State in which no further axioms can be added? In the first case, the answer for Deleuze and Guattari is—both in principle and in fact—no. No State may exist in capitalism

without axioms, since to be such a State is simply to be a model of realization of the capitalist axiomatic. They consider totalitarian and fascist States as the extreme cases here. In both, there is a “tendency to restrict the number of axioms,” (TP 462) but without eradicating them altogether. Furthermore, in the case of fascism, the restriction is doubled by what they call a “tautological or fictitious proliferation [of axioms], a multiplication by subtraction,” (TP 463) that arises because of the war economy embodied by such States. The term in mathematics to describe this situation is apt—we are looking at a *weak* axiomatic system, not an absence of such a system. (A 53-4)

What of the second case, the possibility of saturation? With respect to set theory, a saturated model is one to which no further independent axiom can be brought to bear—it is a model whose entire structure is accounted for by the axioms already in play. For Deleuze and Guattari, however, saturation is not possible.

On the one hand, the impossibility of saturation arises because of what they call the fundamental law of capitalism, expounded for them above all by Marx in book three of *Capital*: “Capitalist production seeks continually to overcome these immanent barriers, but overcomes them only by means which again place these barriers in its way and on a more formidable scale.”¹⁸ In Deleuze and Guattari’s words, “capitalism confronts its own limits and simultaneously displaces them, setting them down again farther along.” (TP 463) Consequently, there is no opportunity for the situation of saturation to arise, since the most general level of the capitalist system is dynamic rather than static. As they write in *Anti-Oedipus*: “How much flexibility there is in the axiomatic of capitalism, always ready to widen its own limits so as to add a new axiom to a previously saturated system!”¹⁹

On the other hand, the criterion of contradiction has no purchase on the ensemble of axioms deployed in capitalism. Indeed, on Deleuze and Guattari’s view, this is part of the very flexibility of the capitalist system itself. To once again cite the searing remark from *What is Philosophy?*: “Human rights are axioms. They can coexist on the market with many other axioms, notably those concerning the security of property, which are unaware of or suspend them even more than they contradict them.”²⁰ This is reminiscent of a claim central to psychoanalysis, viz., that there is no negation or contradiction in the unconscious, the drives being subordinate to no logical exigency. The same holds for the axioms in capitalism: contradiction is strictly irrelevant, given that their (meaningless) functioning as vectors of price is all that is at stake.

Already in these first two claims we see a rift appearing between Deleuze and Guattari's use of the notion of the axiom and that which is found within mathematics, a rift that grows as the sequence of points continues.

PRIORITY AND INDEPENDENCE

Deleuze and Guattari's third point concerns the variety of States, no longer from the point of view of the axiomatic, as above, but from the point of view of the States as models of realization. Here, since they make what seems to be a correct, indeed strictly literal, use of the mathematical framework, we can be brief.

We saw earlier that States qua models of realization of the capitalist axiomatic vary along three axes: isomorphic heterogeneity, heteromorphy and polymorphy. Regarding the isomorphy of States, they write that

The general rules of this are as follows: the consistency, *totality* [l'ensemble] or *unity of the axiomatic* is defined by capital as a 'right' or a relation of production (for the market); *the respective independence of the axioms* in no way contradicts this totality but derives from the divisions or sectors of the capitalist mode of production; *the isomorphy of the models*, with the two poles of addition and subtraction, depends on how the domestic and foreign markets are distributed in each case. (TP 464)

Clearly, this is an elaboration of the trivalent typology of States. State heteromorphy can be conceived in terms of the differing deployment of a coherent set of axioms that constitute the States in question at a given moment. By putting it in the way they do, Deleuze and Guattari wish to emphasise what they consider to be the secondary role of Marx's concept of mode of production in capitalism. Modes of production are, on their view, expressions of a given set of axioms in a capitalist State, and thus subordinate to the axiomatic in a more general sense.²¹

In turn, the concept of State polymorphy relies upon the independence of the various axioms. In its mathematical deployment, independence describes a relationship between axioms such that no one can be derived from any other. There is, at the level of the axioms that make up an axiomatic system, no relation of dependence. Deleuze and Guattari use this formulation in their analysis of capitalism in order to note that this State polymorphy involves enrolling other States, even those whose relations of production are non-capitalist, in the realization of the capitalist

axiomatic. Given this, it is clearly the case that a different subset of axioms will be required in these satellite or second-order States—the axioms that govern the market in high end sports shoes will necessarily differ from those deployed in the third-world countries where the shoes are manufactured.

But now a further problem now arises around the notion of saturation. We can characterize States as models of realization of the capitalist axiomatic by deploying the notions of totality, independence and isomorphy, but only insofar as we are speaking about a single axiomatic variously modeled. But the first two points (concerning addition, subtraction and saturation) are framed in such a way that we are speaking not of one axiom system but a plurality. In other words, what we have seen so far is an insistence on a plurality of axiom-sets and a plurality of models of axiom-sets. The State is what specifies the latter, which is to say that States are themselves these plural models of realization. But what specifies the former? The question then seems to be the following: what is it that divides up the system of axiomatic conjunctions that, in a general sense, constitutes global capitalism? To say it is the States seems to give up the emphasis on capitalism as being the general determinant of contemporary social organization.

At the same time, it seems difficult to see what kind of agency we might invoke at this global level that would deploy axiomatic systems without itself being a part of the axiomatic systems in question, as if there were a super-State governing these deployments—the very position or role that Deleuze and Guattari's account of capitalism (as a system of decoding) begins by undoing. Nonetheless, the citation above seems to point in this direction when it invokes capital as possessing a general power of definition—"defined by capital as a 'right'"—but in an extremely unclear way. This problem goes well beyond the deployment of the categories of the axiomatic, and will thus be put aside until later in the analysis, although this same passage also indicates in passing what will provide the means of recomposing in a more consistent fashion Deleuze and Guattari's position, namely the market.

PUISSANCE

Deleuze and Guattari's fourth point falls under the heading "Power [*Puissance*]." It is here that the gap between mathematics and their political analysis begins to yawn more widely. It is also here that the mathematical sense of the problematic in question is presented in the most impoverished, not to say erroneous, fashion.

In set theory, let's recall, power means *size* and not *capacity*; thus \mathbb{N} has the same power as \mathbb{Q} or \mathbb{Z} , but is weaker in power than \mathbb{R} . In the simplest case, as Blanché notes, “two sets are said to have the same *power* [*puissance*] when a bi-univocal correspondence can be established between their elements (that is, when every element of one corresponds to one and only one element of the other, and vice versa).” (A 88n1) The word ‘power’ in the axiom of the Power Set is also to be understood in this sense, since the power set is always larger in size than the set on which it is based.²²

What is specifically at issue in Deleuze and Guattari, and in the text from Blanché to which they refer, is the power of the continuum. The note just cited continues:

Recall that [...] for finite sets, to have the same power comes down to having the same *number* of elements; for infinite sets, the weakest power is that of the *denumerable* (the indefinite series of the natural numbers); the power of the *continuum* [*la puissance du continu*] (that, for example, of the points in the line, or the set of real numbers) is superior to that of the denumerable; and finally, a set whose power surpasses that of any set whatever can always be constructed. (A 88n1)

When we turn to Deleuze and Guattari, what is most striking is that their extrapolation threatens to confuse the respective questions of size and capacity. The key moments of their discussion for our purposes here, found in the context of a remarkable analysis of war, are as follows:

Let us suppose that the axiomatic necessarily marshals a power higher than the one it treats, in other words, than that of the sets serving as its models. This is like a power of the continuum, tied to the axiomatic but exceeding it. We immediately recognize this power as a power of destruction, of war, a power incarnated in financial, industrial, and military technological complexes that are in continuity with one another [...] There is a continuous ‘threshold’ of power that accompanies in every instance the shifting of the axiomatic’s limits; it is as though the power of war always supersaturated the system’s saturation, and was its necessary condition. (TP 466, translation modified)²³

There are many peculiar things in play here. It is strange to see, first of all, two analogical formulations that trouble any simple literality: “this is *like* the power

of the continuum,” and “it is *as though* the power of war.” (TP 466, emphasis added) But the more important question concerns the higher power invoked in the first sentence. Deleuze and Guattari are making reference here to a famous problem in the history of axiomatic set theory, discovered by Thoralf Skolem and first presented in 1922. In brief, what is known as Skolem’s ‘paradox’ (it is not strictly speaking paradoxical) turns on the potential for a disparity in size between the sets constituting a model of an axiomatic system and the set of the axioms themselves.²⁴ Consider, for example, the fact that ZF has a denumerable number of models (ie., it is of the same size as \mathbb{N}), but that these model sets, such as $P(\mathbb{N})$ that are non-denumerable. This kind of situation led Skolem to conclude that “set-theoretic notions are relative,”²⁵ meaning that the conclusions about the nature of any set under consideration will differ depending on the axiomatic system brought to bear—in particular, as Blanché notes, “the power [*puissance*] of a set is relative to the axiomatic deployed.” (A 89) While this might seem a detour from Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis, in fact it cuts to the heart of not just their use of the notion of *puissance*, but the claims that come after it which concern, precisely, denumerability, a notion around which they hope to make turn an account of revolutionary politics.

If we return to the first moment of the text on *puissance*, we see immediately that Skolem’s paradox is being invoked, and Deleuze and Guattari are clearly referencing Blanché’s analysis.²⁶ However, the second sentence gives pause (for more than its use of analogy): “Let us suppose that the axiomatic necessarily marshals a power higher than the one it treats, in other words, than that of the sets serving as its models. This is like a power of the continuum, tied to the axiomatic but exceeding it.” This seems to confuse the two senses of ‘continuum’ noted above. On the one hand, it is the continuum hypothesis that exceeds at least ZF in its basic form.²⁷ On the other, the upshot of Skolem’s paradox is not that there are sets whose powers exceed the reach of the axioms, but rather that the axioms can always assert the existence of sets of greater power than the power of the model itself.

Perhaps the reason for Deleuze and Guattari’s confusion on this point is the manner in which Blanché presents Skolem’s observation. Rather than starting with the axiomatic and playing a denumerable model and a licensed non-denumerable set off of one another, he starts with the non-denumerable set and its inability to be axiomatised absolutely (ie., in a way that is not relative) due to the existence of a denumerable model. Thus, “[t]he continuum [...] cannot be axiomatically

conceived in its structural specificity, since every axiomatic that can be given of it will entail a denumerable model.” (A 88) If we start with the continuum in this way, as what exceeds axiomatisation, it is a small step to conceive—however incorrectly—of Blanché’s point as pertaining to the continuum hypothesis, which does indeed exceed the axiomatisation of ZF, at least as it stands (that is, without the supplementation of a further axiom or axioms).²⁸

If we turn from this first confusion to the question of the sense of *puissance*, a further problem presents itself. The text begins, let’s recall, with these words:

Let us suppose that the axiomatic necessarily marshals a power higher than the one it treats, in other words, than that of the sets serving as its models. This is like a power of the continuum, tied to the axiomatic but exceeding it. We immediately recognize this power as a power of destruction, of war, a power incarnated in financial, industrial, and military technological complexes that are in continuity with one another. (TP 466)

As we have already noted, though, the literal sense of power in set theory is *size*. Deleuze and Guattari clearly though have capacity in mind here, and thus it is difficult to see how it is possible to “immediately recognize” in this static and quantitative determination anything resembling destruction and war, no matter the radicality with which the latter is defined.

THE INCLUDED MIDDLE

The drift from the literal logico-mathematical sense of the axiomatic framework becomes even more pronounced when Deleuze and Guattari turn their attention to the figure of the included middle or included third [*le tiers inclu*]. While the logico-mathematical provenance of this reference is not made clear in their discussion, there are some obvious touchpoints, the first being the classical logical notion of the excluded middle. Blanché’s presentation in passing of the law of the excluded middle follows the classical form, invoking two other fundamental logical laws first expounded (if not quite in this form, and not with unqualified approval) by Aristotle:

Of two contradictory propositions *p* and *not-p*, the principle of contradiction teaches that they cannot both be true: at least one is false. For a long time, this principle has been associated with that of the excluded middle, which

states that such propositions cannot both be false: at least one is true. The conjunction of these two principles gives what is called the principle of bivalence [*le principe de l'alternative*]: of two such propositions, one is true and the other false. (A 50)²⁹

This classical framework was rejected in the work of intuitionist logicians, first and foremost LEJ Brouwer. Deleuze and Guattari introduce this point in the following note, appended to an earlier discussion of the heteromorphy of States:

The ‘intuitionist’ school (Brouwer, Heyting, Griss, Bouligand, etc.) is of great importance in mathematics, not because it asserted the irreducible rights of intuition, or even because it elaborated a very novel constructivism, but because it developed a conception of *problems*, and of a *calculus of problems* that intrinsically rivals axiomatics and proceeds by other rules (notably with regard to the excluded middle). (TP 570n61)

Two points need to be made here. The first is that nothing about either intuitionism itself, nor the absence of the law of the excluded middle from intuitionist logic is necessarily at odds with axiomatisation.³⁰ In fact, there have been many axiomatisations of intuitionist thought in a variety of areas, most notably (given the current context) an intuitionist formulation of ZF set theory known as IZF.³¹ However, it is certainly the case that the law of the excluded middle (LEM) was one of Brouwer’s first targets. He famously argues that certain basic proofs in classical analysis quickly come to ruin when the role of LEM in their justification is examined.³² More generally, Brouwer’s problem with LEM is that it makes possible assertions that can under no circumstances be subject to “any empirical corroboration,”³³ meaning that, whatever its intuitive appeal, it constitutes what Errett Bishop called a “principle of omniscience.”³⁴

The second point is that the rejection of LEM does not necessitate the truth of a law of the included middle (which would be a truly perverse use of the law of bivalence), nor do any intuitionist mathematicians make such a claim. The trespass of LEM, whether in the direction of a third option between true and false (trivalent logic),³⁵ or by insisting that there is an irreducible vagueness attached to determinations of the truth of propositions—an idea Deleuze and Guattari gesture towards at various points in “Apparatus of Capture” under the title of fuzzy logic—is nonetheless an open possibility.

So far, we have seen two problems with Deleuze and Guattari's account on this point: it wrongly suggests that intuitionism is hostile to axiomatisation, and it assumes that the rejection of LEM necessarily entails something like a law of the included middle. If we turn to the substance of the argument in *A Thousand Plateaus*, however, a third and even more serious problem emerges: the mathematical or logical material we have just invoked plays no role at all in their formulation. In fact, the passage in question begins with the following words: "No one has demonstrated more convincingly than Braudel that the capitalist axiomatic requires a center and that this center was constituted in the North, at the outcome of a long historical process." (TP 468) The rest of the text rests on this—geo-political—notion of the center, and alongside Braudel, we find no mathematicians, but rather Samir Amin and Antonio Negri. Consequently, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the use of the notion of the included middle is nothing but metaphorical in nature.

NON-DENUMERABILITY

A similar fate appears to befall the final two topics that make up the survey of the capitalist axiomatic, those appended to the concepts of minority and undecidable propositions respectively.

Deleuze and Guattari's basic definition of a minority in this context is as a non-denumerable set. According to set theory, as we have seen, a non-denumerable set is any infinite set whose cardinality, power or size is larger than that of \mathbb{N} , such as $P(\mathbb{N})$. However, when they come to specify what this means in the context of the political analysis, they will make a number of claims that are strictly incompatible with the set-theoretic framework they are drawing upon, two of which are particularly problematic.

The first is as follows: "A minority can be small in number; but it can also be the largest in number, constitute an absolute, indefinite majority [...] A minority can be numerous, or even infinite." (TP 469) If we read here minority as non-denumerable set (as Deleuze and Guattari wish), it is clear that very little of this is based in set theory. We are presented here with a scale that runs *small in number—numerous, even infinite—largest in number, absolute*.

However, a non-denumerable set cannot be small, or even numerous, since all such determinations concern denumerable sets. Nor can it be simply infinite, since

the first rank of infinite sets like \aleph are denumerable. Moreover, a fundamental claim in set theory generally conceived is there is no absolute, no 'largest' set. This is the upshot of the axiom of the power set, for starters, since it asserts the existence of a set larger in size than any given set—a basic insight that is known as Cantor's theorem. Consequently, it is strictly untrue (for both cases) that "What distinguishes them is that in the case of a majority the relation internal to the number constitutes a set that may be finite or infinite, but is always denumerable, whereas the minority is defined as a non-denumerable set, however many elements it may have." (TP 470)

Second, they will assert that what distinguishes minority (non-denumerable) from majority (denumerable) is not a difference in degree but a difference in kind:

What characterizes the non-denumerable is neither the set nor its elements; rather, it is the *connection*, the 'and' produced between elements, between sets, and which belongs to neither, which eludes them and constitutes a line of flight. The axiomatic manipulates only denumerable sets, even infinite ones, whereas the minority constitute 'fuzzy', non-denumerable, non-axiomatisable sets, in short, 'masses', multiplicities of escape and flux. (TP 470)

Let's put aside the basic point that a set is nothing other than its members, a thesis that Deleuze and Guattari clearly overlook here. The crucial problem is that there is no possible distinction in kind, in set theory, between different ways of belonging, between (for example) connection and conjunction. For set theory, it is strictly size that matters and nothing else. It is concerned strictly with what, from *Bergsonism* onwards, Deleuze will define as extensive multiplicities; there is no room at all for intensive multiplicity in set theory. As a result, one must either proceed without reference to set theory if the notion of intensive multiple is to be retained (the decision Deleuze explicitly makes in his work elsewhere), or dispense with the category of intensive multiplicity. In this text, though, it appears that some mixture of the two is being advanced.

All of this also pertains to the notion, invoked earlier in the discussion of minority, that "what defines a minority is, then, not the number but the relations internal to the number." (TP 469) Set theory though only insists on one such kind of relation, the relation of belonging, and this relation holds both for finite, infinite denumerable and infinite non-denumerable sets. The moment a *second* relation is

introduced, at least one that would not be reducible to belonging as the primitive form (as is the case with the relation of equality, or the set-theoretic relation of inclusion), we are no longer dealing with set theory, regardless of the degree to which it is reoriented by concerns that arise on the basis of intuitionist and constructivist concerns.³⁶

THE UNDECIDABLE

Given the necessary disjunction between the notions of power as size and power as capacity that lead to our concern with the analysis of war, one might feel warranted in thinking that the very final section of the plateau, which begins with the following words, might already be left aside on the grounds that it departs from the mathematical framework: “It will be objected that the axiomatic itself marshals the power of a non-denumerable infinite set: precisely that of the war machine.” (TP 471) It is surely difficult to see in the concept of the war machine anything to which we might give the name ‘non-denumerable set’. However, the analysis proceeds under the heading of the undecidable, a famous and fundamental *topos* in modern logic, and as such is worth considering.

Deleuze and Guattari invoke the undecidable in order to address the incapacity, at the level of capitalist bureaucracy, of coming to grips with the possibilities of revolution that insist at the fringes of the axiomatic. These possibilities, on their view, are at once produced by the dynamic movement of capitalism itself (always expanding its limits), while lying beyond the reach of the axiomatic and belonging strictly speaking to a group-subject of which they do not hesitate to say that it “finds its figure or its universal consciousness in the proletariat.” (TP 472) Undecidable propositions are, on this terrain, problems produced by the movement of capital that, insofar as they are unable to be resolved by it, provide opportunities for alternative modes of relation that Deleuze and Guattari will unite under the heading of revolutionary *connection*, as opposed to the capitalist *conjunction* of decoded flows effected by the axioms.

Here again, Deleuze and Guattari invoke here Blanché, and his treatment of the undecidable, which he introduces under the heading ‘The Limits of Demonstrations of Non-Contradiction’, and in the context of an account of the extent to which the axiomatic method can succeed in grounding a system of propositions (axioms, in our case) in its entirety. He notes that this ambition came to ground against an entirely unexpected and striking pair of results, presented

by Gödel in 1931. Blanché's lucid little summary text is emblematic of the clarity of his writing:

In two famous theorems of metamathematics, he established, first, that a non-contradictory arithmetic cannot constitute a complete system, and necessarily includes undecidable statements; and, second, that the affirmation of the non-contradiction of the system itself figures among these undecidable statements. (A 68)

In other words, the first result is that, in a formal system of complexity sufficient to include arithmetic (for example ZFC), there will always be propositions that cannot be proven or disproven within the system. The second result is that no formal system is capable of proving its own consistency, due to the fact that such a proof has no means of accounting for these undecidable propositions themselves. An apparent resolution of this second limit would be to formalize the first-order system within a higher-order system—for example, in the way that PA can be formalized within ZFC. Clearly, though, this latter system is prey to the same results, and the response ultimately becomes either to give way to an infinite regress, or accept this irreducible fact about such formal systems.

If this latter point is worth mentioning in this context, it is because the structure of the point recapitulates at the level of mathematical logic the basic structure of the dynamism of capitalism on Deleuze and Guattari's view—that is, the ever-displaced limit of what is decoded on the one hand and axiomatised on the other—and this is what appears to be at work in their deployment of the idea. But, as we have noted a number of times already, the static world of mathematical logic and the dynamic movement of capitalism are uneasy bedfellows.

The two Gödel results have been among the most generally deployed insights from within formal science, but we would do well to note the specificity of the conditions in which they arise—formal systems in which one can formulate recursive arithmetic. For this reason, the many popular extrapolations of these results (of which Hofstadter's *Gödel, Escher, Bach* is perhaps the most famous case) which tend to emphasise some kind of vague but fundamental incompleteness at the level of discourse, knowledge or human cognition, make too little of Gödel's work by making too much of it. It is notable, in this context, that when Derrida invokes Gödel's notion of undecidability, he is careful to insist that it is *analogical* to his notion of *différance*, and not “literally the same.”³⁷ Unfortunately,

it is this latter claim that once more troubles our assent to Deleuze and Guattari's analysis, which has nothing at all to do with formalized arithmetic—here, neither literally nor 'metaphorically', even though it is difficult to see what this latter would amount to.

CONCLUSION. BEYOND THE LITERAL

In sum, Deleuze and Guattari's use of set theory involves certain erroneous presentations of the axiomatic method and threatens others. Moreover, the two accounts are not the same "in a literal sense." (TP 461) One of the problems here is certainly the insistence on the category of the literal. Deleuze's antipathy to metaphor is well-known, but a deposition of the category of the literal would seem to necessarily follow, since the two both rely upon the same semiotic arrangement. Elsewhere, it is clear that they understand this point—hence the invocation of the fundamental role of variation in the "Postulates of Linguistics" plateau.

The point of this analysis was not to show that Deleuze and Guattari are simply wrong, or to engage in Sokal-style crypto-moralising, but rather to simply outline the dramatic gap between the account they say they are offering and the one they in fact deploy. Consequently, it would be simplicity itself to put to one side this analysis on the grounds that what really matters is not the initial inspiration for the concepts in question, nor the means, regulated or otherwise, of extrapolating these concepts from the (mathematico-logical) axiomatic, but rather the concepts themselves, the framework they provide us with to engage with contemporary reality.

This could arguably be achieved by dropping the more detailed parallels established with set theory. After all, the concept of the axiom itself does not belong solely to that domain, nor even in the final analysis to mathematics itself. One could instead begin with the minimal definition that Deleuze and Guattari themselves provide: that the axiom is a rule that deals "directly with purely functional elements and relations whose nature is not specified, and which are immediately realized in highly varied domains simultaneously." (TP 454) From here, it would be a matter of investigating the nature and variety of axioms in this sense, their conjoint and disjunct functioning, the specific logic of their combinations. This would be, not a literal mathematical account, but a *philosophical* theory of the capitalist axiomatic would result. Such an account would have to rely upon the authority of the concept alone—but it is in Deleuze's work that we find one of the

best arguments for the capacity of the concept to meet the challenges of our time. And indeed, this is the kind of argument that Deleuze and Guattari will go on to offer in *What is Philosophy?*, even if they retain there a certain false image of set theoretic mathematics.

NOTES

1. The recent work of Knox Peden has turns around aspects of this tradition. See, on the one hand, the first three chapters of his *Spinoza Contra Phenomenology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), which deal with Jean Cavailles, Ferdinand Alquié and the more recent work of Jean-Toussaint Desanti. Along with Peter Hallward, Peden is also the editor of the two volume work on the important journal *Cahier pour l'analyse, Concept and Form* (New York: Verso, 2012) in which a particularly stringent form of this philosophical attention unfolded.
2. The work of Simon Duffy has been decisive in unfolding these mathematical resources of Deleuze's thought. See in particular *Deleuze and the History of Mathematics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) and *The Logic of Expression: Quality, Quantity and Intensity in Spinoza, Hegel and Deleuze* (Durham: Ashgate, 2006).
3. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 120. Hereafter referred to in text as WP.
4. This definition of the size of power sets also holds for finite power sets: for example, the power set of a set $A = \{a, b, c\}$ will have eight members, such that $P(A) = \{a, b, c, \{a, b\}, \{a, c\}, \{b, c\}, \{a, b, c\}, \emptyset\}$. The latter two members are known as the maximal subset and the null-set, the set without members.
5. Gottfried Frege, "Letter to Russell," in *From Frege to Gödel: A Sourcebook in Mathematical Logic, 1879-1931*, ed. Jean van Heijenoort (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 127.
6. In fact, all of these paradoxes, which emerged after Russell's initial engagement with Cantor, and then Peano after that, were authored by Russell himself. Even the famed Burali-Forti paradox was concocted by Russell after reading "A question on transfinite numbers" by the former logician, who in this piece explicitly claims to have overcome the problem that he had uncovered through a *reductio ad absurdum*. More recent versions of this form of paradox, which essentially involve (like its ancient predecessor, the liar's paradox) self-referentiality, have been developed, notably Curry's paradox (which is significantly more consequential than any of the above). What is interesting to note is the fact that very few paradoxes produced thus far in any field of mathematical logic are provably other than paradoxes of self-reference. Yablo's paradox, perhaps the most famous example of an apparently non-self-referential paradox, has recently been formulated in such a way to indicate the contrary. For some discussion of Yablo and more generally self-reference in paradox, see T.B. Jongeling, T. Koetsier and E. Wattel, "Self-Reference in Finite and Infinite Paradoxes," *Logique & Analyse* 177-178 (2002), 29-46.
7. I pass over here the fact that two of these (viz., Separation and Replacement) are axiom schemata rather than axioms *per se*, that is, they govern the deployment of an infinite number of primary axioms. I also pass over the fact that the axiom of Choice is still considered in some quarters to be controversial, and is thus either left out or indicated by describing the axiom set as ZFC, Zermelo-Frankel axiomatic set theory with the axiom of Choice.
8. This note, beyond its peculiar rendering of Badiou's project has its own problems, including but not limited to the following: the state of a situation is not a subset, nor is the state itself represented (it is itself the order of representation), nor is it itself indiscernible; the elements of the evental site do not depend on the generic procedures of art, science, politics and love; the event is not made, nor is there any conceivable power that might be able to do this in Badiou's system.
Nevertheless, the note on Badiou in *What is Philosophy?* is not without merit. For a discussion of the forceful critique of Badiou's account of conditioning in thought that it implies, see Jon Roffe, "Deleuze's Badiou," in *Badiou and his Interlocutors: Lectures, Interviews and Responses*, ed. AJ

Bartlett (forthcoming 2017, Bloomsbury).

9. See for example Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 172.

10. Here, they are close (at least in a certain respect) to Badiou, whose recourse to mathematics in accounting for contemporary reality is well known—see not only the (troubling, in my view, or at least unjustified) linking of the axiom of the power set with the figure of the State in a political sense in *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005), 95, but also the critique of the role of number in capitalism with which he opens *Number and Numbers*, trans. Robin Mackay (Cambridge, MA.: Polity Press, 2008), 1-4.

11. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Athlone, 1988), 461. Hereafter referred to in text as TP.

12. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (London: Athlone, 1984), 139.

13. The generalization of this analysis, pursued in chapter six of Jon Roffe, *Abstract Market Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015), allows for a partial correction of some of the problems that emerge in Deleuze and Guattari's use of set theory treated here.

14. Roberte Blanché, *L'axiomatique* (Paris: PUF, 1955). Hereafter referred to in text as A.

15. See for example TP 554n21 and 570n61. In a fine piece, Daniel Smith has analysed the respective roles of (axiomatic) state mathematics and (problematic) nomad science. See Daniel W. Smith, "Badiou and Deleuze on the ontology of mathematics," in *Think Again*, ed. Peter Hallward (London: Continuum, 2004), 77-93.

16. For Blanché's discussion of PA, see A 41-2.

17. The other four are derivative on these five, and turn around the use of the second, third and fifth axioms to define relative size.

18. This text, drawn from the third volume of Marx's *Capital*, is cited at Deleuze and Guattari 1984, p. 231.

19. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 246.

20. Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 102.

21. See TP 435 for the logic of this point. Deleuze and Guattari insist on a further logically prior displacement also, when they write that "It is not the State that presupposes a mode of production; quite the opposite, it is the State that makes production a 'mode.'" (TP 429)

22. It is worth noting in passing that, in French, this axiom does not include the word *puissance*, but is rather called *l'axiome de l'ensemble des parties*, the subset axiom.

23. The original reads: "Supposons que l'axiomatique dégage nécessairement une puissance supérieure à celle qu'elle traite, c'est-à-dire à celle des ensembles qui lui servent de modèles." (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980, *Mille Plateaux*, Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1980, 582). Somewhat inexplicably, given Deleuze and Guattari's insistence on the literal character of their use of set theory, Brian Massumi renders *ensemble* in different ways, often obscuring (as when he renders it, as he does in this passage, as 'aggregate') the technical use of the term.

24. The first presentation of this result is in Thoraf Skolem, "Some remarks on axiomatised set theory," in *From Frege to Gödel*, 290-301. See also von Neumann's famous engagement with this issue, one that Blanché also invokes as we will see, in John Von Neumann, "An axiomatisation of set theory," in *From Frege to Gödel*, esp. 412-3 (§4). More recently, in his "Models and Reality. *The Journal of Symbolic Logic* 45:3 (1980), 464-82, Hilary Putnam has finessed the problem from the side of the philosophy of language, drawing out its consequences for what he calls moderate realism. His (deflationary) conclusion turns on a concomitant relativisation of the notion of model to its

- concrete uses (the key paragraph is found at the bottom of 481). For a more substantial, indeed thorough-going, critique of the problematic equivocation that gives this ‘paradox’ its force, see Timothy Bays’ excellent “Reflections on Skolem’s paradox,” <http://www3.nd.edu/~tbays/papers/pthesis.pdf>, accessed 19 February 2014. Bays effectively shows that the apparently paradoxical nature of the problem arises when we confuse the set-theoretic and propositional levels of the analysis—the kind of point that is perfectly coherent with what Deleuze will say about the relationship between problem and proposition in *Difference and Repetition* and *The Logic of Sense*.
25. Skolem, “Some Remarks,” 300.
 26. One need only compare the text cited above, the main note referring to Blanché’s book (TP 570n54), and the passage at A 88–9.
 27. Note that one (positive) resolution of the continuum hypothesis, proposed by Kurt Gödel though not particularly well-regarded by mathematicians (nor by Gödel himself in the end), involves the addition of the axiom of constructibility. Badiou, following Gödel, affiliates with Leibnizian metaphysics, see Badiou, *Being and Event*, 295–23.
 28. For an excellent and philosophically rich investigation into what the assertion of new axioms might mean in the context of ZFC and in light of Gödel’s results, see Solomon Feferman, “Does mathematics need new axioms?,” *American Mathematical Monthly* 106 (1999), 99–111. More generally on this issue, see the discussion in Penelope Maddy *Realism in Mathematics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 107–42.
 29. This latter is what Brouwer calls “the principle of the reciprocity of the complementary species, that is, the principle that for every system the correctness of a property follows from the impossibility of the impossibility of this property.” (L.E.J. Brouwer, “On the significance of the principle of the excluded middle in mathematics, especially in function theory,” in *From Frege to Gödel*, 335.
 30. Brouwer here constitutes a partial exception, since he rejects the project of axiomatisation itself.
 31. While first presented in the 1970s, a common contemporary point of reference is the work of Peter Aczel and Michael Rathjen (see for example Aczel and Rathjen. *Notes on Constructive Set Theory*. <http://www.maths.manchester.ac.uk/logic/mathlogaps/workshop/CST-book-June-08.pdf>. Accessed 10 September 2014, §3.2.
 32. His two main examples are the claims “The points of the continuum form an ordered point species,” and “Every mathematical species is either finite or infinite.” Brouwer’s arguments on these matters have been challenged from a number of points of view; the value in bringing them up here is only to illuminate the point that Deleuze and Guattari are engaging with.
 33. Brouwer, “The principle of the excluded middle,” 336.
 34. Errol Bishop, *Foundations of Constructive Analysis* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1967), 19. Conversely, it is often asserted that the intuitionist and constructivist approaches have as their goal the rejection of any non-computational method of proof.
 35. Or indeed any number of truth-values. On this, see Emil Post, “Introduction to a general theory of elementary propositions,” in J. van Heijenoort (Ed.), *From Frege to Gödel: A Sourcebook in Mathematical Logic, 1879–1931*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), especially §11 (279–81).
 36. All of these points also hold for the following subsequent programmatic assertion: “At the same time as capitalism is effectuated in the denumerable sets serving as its models, it necessarily constitutes non-denumerable sets that cut across and disrupt these models.” (TP 472)
 37. “Allusion, or ‘suggestion’ as Mallarmé says elsewhere, is indeed that operation we are here by analogy calling undecidable. An undecidable proposition, as Gödel demonstrated in 1931, is a proposition which, given a system of axioms governing a multiplicity, is neither an analytical nor

deductive consequence of those axioms, nor in contradiction with them, neither true nor false with respect to those axioms. *Tertium datur*, without synthesis.” (Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 219, emphasis added.

**avoiding communism: a
critique of nick srnicek and
alex williams' *inventing the
future* (verso, 2015)**

nathan brown

Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams' *Inventing the Future* advances a two part agenda. The first half of the book attempts a critique of what the authors call “folk politics”: “a constellation of ideas and intuitions within the contemporary left that informs the common sense ways of organising, acting and thinking politics.”¹ They see “the left” of today as embroiled in “attempts at prefiguration, direct action, and relentless horizontalism” (69)—hallmarks of “folk political” thinking which render political movements incapable of overcoming state repression or of “scaling up” to a global level (37). Claiming that “numerous protests and marches and occupations typically operate without any sense of strategy, simply acting as dispersed and independent blips of resistance” while “there is far too little thought given to how to combine these various actions, and how they might function together to collectively build a better world” (49), Srnicek and Williams claim that “leftist movements under the sway of folk politics” (10) are “content to remain” at the level “of the transient, the small-scale, the unmediated and the particular” (12) and thus “incapable of turning the tide against global capitalism” (85).

Following this critique, the second half of the book proposes a “political project for the twenty-first century left” (104). Here, Srnicek and Williams “advance some broad demands to start building a platform for a post-work society” (107). These include “full automation,” a reduction of the work week, and the universal provision of a basic income attended by “a diminishment of the work ethic” (127).

Toward these goals, they urge a “counter-hegemonic project” (174) to “compete against the neoliberal and social democratic options” (127), featuring “an ecology of organisations” (169) that would include networks of think tanks, political parties, media organisations, and a mass movement supported by “broad populist unity” (163), capable of carrying out disruptive actions at “points of leverage” (169). They argue that their key demands—reduction of working hours and a universal basic income—could be financed through “some combination of reducing duplicate programs, raising taxes on the rich, inheritance taxes, consumption taxes, carbon taxes, cutting spending on the military, cutting industry and agricultural subsidies, and cracking down on tax evasion” (123). Viewing these proposals as “non-reformist reforms” (108), Srnicek and Williams see their fulfillment as a “project that must be carried out over the long term: decades rather than years, cultural shifts rather than electoral cycles” (108). With this long-term programme of non-reformist reform in mind, they state preferences—“our preference is for a three-day weekend, rather than a reduction of the working day” (116)—and offer suggestions for realizing them: “this demand can be achieved in a number of ways—through trade union struggles, pressure from social movements, and legislative change by political parties” (116). Finally, looking beyond their preference for a three-day weekend, they argue that the “twenty-first century left” should “mobilise dreams of decarbonising the economy, space travel, robot economies—all the traditional touchstones of science fiction—in order to prepare for a day beyond capitalism” (183).

Perhaps my lack of enthusiasm for *Inventing the Future’s* attempt to “reignite a utopian imagination” (150), its “vision for a better world” (174), is already implicit in the detachment of the summary above. But why not be enthused? Who doesn’t prefer a three-day weekend? Surely a Universal Basic Income that would “transform the political relationship between labour and capital” (120) would be good thing? It would be soothing to “slow down and reflect, safely protected from the constant pressures of neoliberalism” (121). Who wouldn’t welcome the prospect of a world with “machines humming along and handling the difficult labour that humans would otherwise be forced to do” (151)? Why not just nod one’s head, like a relic of the cybernetically tuned-in Bucky Fuller counterculture of yesterday, to “an attempt to reorganise technological development away from marginal weapon improvements and towards socially useful goods” (148)? After all, while insisting that “the left can neither remain in the present nor return to the past” (181), what Srnicek and Williams have to say is not much different than what Fuller urged back in the day:

It is a matter of converting the high technology from weaponry to livingry. The essence of livingry is human-life advantaging and environment controlling. With the highest aeronautical and engineering facilities of the world redirected from weaponry to livingry production, all humanity would have the option of becoming enduringly successful.²

Sounds pretty basic. So what's the problem?

In what follows I offer a critique of *Inventing the Future's* guiding premises across the critical and prescriptive sections of the book. My argument is, first, that the book's criticisms of what authors call "folk politics" apply better to their own mode of political thought than to the would-be objects of their critique; second, that by articulating a program for a new phase of capitalist accumulation, Srnicek and Williams merely evade, rather than confront, the problem of how forces of production will be reproduced beyond the reproduction of the class relation. It is not only the superficial, uninformed tendentiousness of the critique leveled in the first half of the book, or the incoherence of the utopian prescriptions offered in the second half, but also the unwillingness of the authors, throughout, to openly address simple conceptual difficulties that makes this book so dull. At minimum, one expects from the authors of a book a genuine interest in the problems it poses, an effort to confront those problems openly and to reckon with their difficulties. While turning the pages of *Inventing the Future*, one hopes that an honest attempt to grapple with the contradictions its prescriptions present will eventually be forthcoming. It does not happen.



In order to distinguish their political programme from innumerable well-worn utopian socialist fantasies, Srnicek and Williams must offer the veneer of a conjunctural analysis. Thus, the book opens with a diagnosis of a contemporary disease, which the authors call "folk politics." The disease is serious, because "leftist movements under the sway of folk politics are not only unlikely to be successful — they are in fact incapable of transforming capitalism" (10). For Srnicek and Williams, "folk politics names a constellation of ideas and intuitions within the contemporary left that informs the common sense ways of organising, acting and thinking politics" (9). At its core is "the guiding intuition that immediacy is always better and often more authentic, with the corollary being a deep suspicion of abstraction and mediation" (6). They "detect traces of folk politics" in the Occupy movement, Spain's 15M, student occupations, Tiqqun and the Invisible

Committee, the Zapatistas, “contemporary anarchist tinged politics,” political localism, the slow food movement, ethical consumerism, the 100-miles diet, local currencies, “veneration of small-scale communities or local businesses,” and “general assemblies and direct democracy” (11-12). The problem with what they call “folk politics” is that it “remains reactive,” “ignores long-term strategic goals in favour of tactics,” “prefers practices that are inherently fleeting,” and “chooses the familiarities of the past over the unknowns of the future” (11). Finally, it is characterized by

a preference for the everyday over the structural, valorising personal experience over systemic thinking; for feeling over thinking, emphasising individual suffering, or sensations of enthusiasm and anger experienced during political actions; for the particular over the universal, seeing the latter as intrinsically totalitarian; and of the ethical over the political, as in ethical consumerism, or moralising critiques of greedy bankers (11).

Already one notices, several pages into the first chapter, that Srnicek and Williams are more interested in caricature than credible analysis of recent social movements. How much do student occupations really have to do with the slow food movement or the 100-miles diet? In exactly what sense does the wave of student movements that swept across Europe and the United States following the 2008 economic crisis prefer “the everyday over the structural” or “feeling over thinking”? Is it really feasible to say that those movements generally valorised the personal over the systematic? Is it true that they tended to view the universal as totalitarian?

Consider, for example, the prevalence of the general assembly as an organisational form in those movements. In many cases, the strongest proponents of those assemblies and their particular form of direct democracy were also the strongest proponents of long-term strategy over “adventurist” actions, and they often relied upon universalist principles to support the procedural formalism of the assembly. Indeed, partisans of the general assembly were likely to espouse many of the same principles and critical perspectives as Srnicek and Williams. This was the case, for example, in the 2009 student occupation in Zagreb, Croatia, where collective deliberation by a democratic plenum was aligned with a particularly strong universalist orientation, a rhetoric of political rationalism, an emphasis on systematic analysis and long-term strategy over emotional spontaneity, and an insistence on the necessity of unified goals rather than particularist fragmentation.³

This was surely the case throughout many student occupations in Europe and the U.S., which were not oriented by political localism but rather by the sense of a shared global struggle that united different locations around the widespread goal of free education. Indeed, the sort of populist inclusivity and emphasis upon unified goals that Srnicek and Williams endorse was precisely the political rationale behind the organisational formalism of the GA within those movements, while Marxists and anarchists, seeking to orient these movements toward revolutionary horizons rather than reformist consensus, often argued against the proceduralism of the GA or organised direct actions outside of direct democratic channels. Yet it was also the case that such efforts to bypass democratic proceduralism often appealed to systematic and structural analysis (rather than “feeling over thinking”) in order to criticize reformism.

As soon as one considers the alignment of forces and organisational forms internal to the movements Srnicek and Williams merely caricature, the critique of folk politics leveled in *Inventing the Future* is exposed as a tissue of false oppositions that becomes a misleading hindrance rather than an effective analytical or even polemical tool. Srnicek and Williams gesture critically toward recent struggles, but their own perspectives were already represented within them. It is simply false that international student movements or the Occupy movement, in general, “preferred” tactics over strategy, the particular over the universal, or the everyday over the structural. Rather, ongoing debates about such questions were the very substance of those movements. What the discrepant groups participating in those movements had in common was not at all a collective tendency toward what Srnicek and Williams characterize as “folk politics,” but rather the fact that they *actually participated in political struggles*. If Srnicek and Williams deigned to do so, they would just be two more wonks bleating about unity and rallying for a medley of desiderata: engagement with political parties, propagation of think tanks, funding for space travel, three day weekends bolstered by Universal Basic Income. There were plenty of such people around the squares during Occupy; they would have fit right in.

Srnicek and Williams probably anticipate that their critique will miss the mark for those more familiar with the struggles they criticize, so they choose not to aim very carefully in the first place. “Folk politics does not name an explicit position, but only an implicit tendency” (12), they tell us, and they claim that “existing tendencies in the mainstream and radical left are moving towards the folk political pole” (22-23). Meanwhile, the collective subject of this critique—“the left”—is

acknowledged to be “an ultimately artificial if useful term, used to describe an incredibly diverse and potentially contradictory set of political and social forces” (187). Since they grant that “any consistency these forces might have is a matter of construction and articulation” they offer the following “point of clarification”:

we consider ‘the left’ today in the broadest sense to consist of the following movements, positions, and organisations: democratic socialism, communism, anarchism, left-libertarianism, anti-imperialism, anti-fascism, anti-capitalism, feminism, autonomism, trade unionism, queer politics, and large sections of the green movement, among many groups allied or hybridised with the above (188).

The 100-miles diet must fall into that last category.

Let us try out this particular construction and articulation of the collective noun, “the left,” as it functions in the rhetoric of Srnicek and Williams. If we test its extension by substituting their litany for its collective noun we find them proposing that: “[democratic socialism, communism, anarchism, left-libertarianism, anti-imperialism, anti-fascism, anti-capitalism, feminism, autonomism, trade unionism, queer politics, and large sections of the green movement, among many groups allied or hybridised with the above]” have “rejected the project of hegemony and expansion” (23). Is this a useful or intelligible claim? Has left-libertarianism itself rejected the project of hegemony and expansion, or has it just failed to form a hegemonic bloc with democratic socialism? Have trade unions really rejected the project of expansion? — or are they just...not expanding? Have queer politics or feminism really “rejected the project of hegemony and expansion” because they have not yet abolished patriarchy or the heterosexual matrix? Does the achievement of hegemony on certain reformist fronts (e.g. gay marriage) really mean that queer politics, in general, has given up on more radical goals? What about the many groups that urge and enact commitment to more radical measures? What about democratic socialists? Have they rejected hegemony and expansion? Didn’t we just find them rejoicing at the electoral victory of Syriza, along with many people who consider themselves communists, precisely on the grounds that Syriza’s victory seemed (to them) a harbinger of hegemony and expansion to come? I am not sure if it makes sense to think that anti-imperialism, or anarchism, ever really accepted “the project of hegemony and expansion,” in which case it would be hard for them to reject it. But perhaps none of these groups in particular have done so; rather, maybe it is the “many groups allied or hybridised with the above”

that have tipped the balance on “the left” against hegemony and expansion?

Maybe Srnicek and Williams think such claims will be granted without much scrutiny (“the left has abandoned the project of hegemony and expansion”) because they are clichés. After all, this is the sort of thing people say all the time. If there is one thing “the left” has never rejected, it is complaining that its own ranks have supposedly rejected the project of hegemony and expansion. Srnicek and Williams wallow in such clichés, which are the substance of their putative analysis. They really seem to think that “the left” is not hegemonic because it doesn’t sufficiently *want* to be hegemonic. In their opinion, the problem is ideological, or just psychological. It results from “a defeatist attitude” and a “series of judgments that are widely accepted” by “a broad range of the contemporary left”: “small is beautiful, the local is ethical, simpler is better, permanence is oppressive, progress is over” (46).⁴ In the case of the Occupy movement, they recognize that “the proximate cause for the movement’s failure was state repression, in the form of police clad in riot gear ruthlessly clearing the occupied spaces across the United States” (36), “but,” they judge, “the structural causes were built into the assumptions and practices of the movement,” since “the organisational form of these movements could not overcome the problems of scalability and construct a form of persistent power capable of effectively resisting the inevitable reaction from the state” (36). Srnicek and Williams will eventually argue that the solution to these problems of scalability is “a healthy ecosystem of organisations” (155), including parties and governments. So, what about Syriza’s collapse into the status quo last year? Syriza evaded “the inevitable reaction from the state” by becoming the state, and by mobilizing the sort of populist support Srnicek and Williams envision. This did not, however, protect their political programme from being crushed by the Troika. Several months after being elected they were not being attacked by police clad in riot gear—because they were the ones sending riot police into the streets to disperse anyone who rejected their swift conversion into lackeys of the capitalist powers they promised to oppose.

Inventing the Future ignores such examples in order to characterize whatever struggles it deems “folk political” as failures while touting the history of its own tired proposals as a story of near-success. Srnicek and Williams lament that “nothing changed, and long-term victories were traded for a simple registration of discontent” after the “spectacular political confrontations” they criticize (6). But later, they will tell us that Universal Basic Income “very nearly became a reality in the 1970s” because “Nixon and Carter attempted to pass legislation to achieve

it” (118). Nixon’s failure to pass a piece of legislation, which they support, is an encouraging story of virtual success, while the history of the political movements they caricature is a story of discouraging futility. If Syriza is no longer tenable as a source of inspiration, they can always fall back on Podemos, “which has aimed to build mechanisms for popular governance while also seeking a way into established institutions” (169). Srnicek and Williams do not have time to worry about the ugly precedent just set in Greece by exactly that strategy, committed as they are to spending half their book shadow boxing with the bogey of “folk politics.”

What is ironic about predicating a critique of “folk politics” upon the supposed *beliefs* of a collective agent called “the left” is the degree to which this maneuver relies upon “folk psychology.” For Srnicek and Williams, the term folk politics “evokes critiques of folk psychology which argue that our intuitive conceptions of the world are both historically constructed and often mistaken” (10). In a footnote, they stipulate that “while we want to draw a somewhat loose analogy with the neurophilosophical tradition here, we do not mean to argue that folk politics is in any sense *grounded* in folk psychology” (186). What they do not recognize is that their own critique of folk politics *is* grounded in folk psychology. This is what makes their “somewhat loose analogy” with the neurophilosophical tradition a very bad analogy. The two neurophilosophical sources they cite are books by Stephen Stich and Patricia Churchland, both of which characterize the attribution of belief-desire states to intentional agents as folk psychological, arguing that these should be eliminated from a rigorous understanding of mental events and processes. Indeed, the rejection of belief-desire attribution is the central argument of the critique of folk psychology in neurophilosophy. Yet the attribution of belief-desire states as a framework of causal explanation for the “failure” of a collective agent called “the contemporary left” is the primary strategy of the critique of “folk politics” in *Inventing the Future*. An appeal to belief-desire models of agency is also central to the book’s counter-hegemonic political programme, which depends upon the effort to “revive a utopian social imagination” (153). Srnicek and Williams think of political mobilization in terms of “enticing and expansive visions of a better future” (83), and their “counter-hegemonic project,” they write, “can only be achieved by imagining better worlds” (175). Just as they attribute the impasses of “the left” to erroneous beliefs and modest desires, they project its future success as a matter of better beliefs and more ambitious desires. In order to criticize folk politics and propose a way beyond it, they evidently have to rely on folk psychology.

Unlike Srnicek and Williams, I have no interest in applying, or misapplying, “a somewhat loose analogy” with folk psychology to a critique of “the left.” But I do have an interest in the Marxist critique of political economy. Srnicek and Williams call for a politics “comfortable with complexity and abstraction,” but when it comes time to practice what they preach in the second half of their book, they prove unequal to the task. It was Marx who initially introduced the critical tools to debunk utopian socialism through superior powers of abstraction enabling him to understand the contradictions of capital rather than merely appealing to voluntarist desires for a better world. But rather than taking up these tools, Srnicek and Williams resort to the immediacy of proposals for social democratic legislation.



Our first indication that things will not go well for *Inventing the Future* as it turns from critique to utopian prescription arrives in the transition between chapters titled “Why Aren’t We Winning” and “Why Are They Winning” — as if history were a football match in which the sides are equal, but in which “their” coach happens to have a better strategy. In the latter chapter, Srnicek and Williams “call for a Mont Pelerin of the left” (67), taking the Mont Pelerin Society (MPS), founded in 1947, as an exemplar of counter-hegemonic construction. For them, the capacity of Mont Pelerin’s neoliberal position to eventually displace the mid-century Keynesian consensus exemplifies the import of “full-spectrum infrastructure” to develop and promulgate ideas, as MPS’s “think tanks and utopian proclamations organised long-term thinking” (60). The key aspect of their argument is an insistence that neoliberalism did not just become a hegemonic ideology through the inevitability of capitalist logic; rather, its victory over Keynesianism and subsequent global hegemony were won by long term planning and arduous organisational labour. Thus, the organisational foundations of neoliberalism serve as a key example of why “they are winning,” while the failure of the left to construct such an organisational foundation is why it is not “winning.”

It is surprising that, in the course of this argument, Srnicek and Williams do not pause to consider the consequences of the fact that Keynesianism and neoliberalism have something important in common: they are *both* capitalist ideological frameworks. Srnicek and Williams portray the rise of neoliberalism in the 1970s as a great victory of voluntarist hegemonic construction, pointing out that following the economic crisis of 1973, “multiple interpretations of the economic problem were possible” and “neoliberalism was not the only possible solution” (61). “That the neoliberal story won out,” they argue, “is in no small measure because

of the ideological infrastructure that adherents to its ideas had constructed over decades” (61). In thinking about the construction of rival political possibilities during this period, they don’t mention the fact that, over those same decades, the CIA and FBI systematically crushed any sign of communist thinking or organising that might eventually pose a threat—just as federal authorities crushed the Occupy movement in coordinated sweeps as organisational expansion, strikes, and port blockades became serious problem. The Occupy movement—to cite just one recent example—was crushed by coordinated state repression because it *did* have broad populist support, and because it *was* expanding, not because it had rejected hegemony and expansion. Indeed, it had expanded to every major city in the United States and to hundreds of smaller locales. Likewise, in the late 1960s, waves of assassinations undermined the increasing radicalism of civil rights leaders and the developing infrastructural network of the Black Panther Party, while widespread infiltration of leftist groups encouraged fragmentation and dispersal. This history does not seem worth considering alongside the paean to organisational integration offered by Srnicek and Williams, who portray the rise of neoliberalism in the 1970s as the triumph of an improbable underdog that was just one among many possibilities. “Capitalists,” they say, “did not initially see neoliberalism as being in their interests” (55). Yet they do not even pose the simplest question: if the success of the Mont Pelerin Society was predicated upon its ability to propagate think tanks and gain positions of government power, why was it possible for MPS to do this in the first place, while the merest flicker of communist organising was snuffed out? Perhaps MPS was able to expand its networks of influence so fluently because, although their ideas were different than those of Keynesians, and although those ideas were not yet hegemonic in the late 1940s, they were nevertheless capitalist ideas that offered capitalist solutions to capitalist problems. The spread and political integration of *anti-capitalist* or *communist* ideas and organisational structures in the West faced rather different challenges—like bullets in the head—than MPS. They still do. Meanwhile, networks and structures of ideological dissemination were quite well established in the U.S.S.R. in the 1950s and 1960s. Why didn’t their ideas win over the U.S. or the U.K. in the wake of the 1973 crisis, or eventually establish global hegemony? Was it because the neoliberals of the Mont Pelerin Society were just better organised?

Srnicek and Williams do not even try to grapple with the first difficulty of the problem of organisation: that within capitalist social relations, it is easy for capitalist organisations to “scale up,” while the difficulty of doing so for communist or anti-capitalist organisations is not just a matter of misplaced priorities. The

real contradiction involved in communist organising is that as anti-capitalist organisations grow larger and more integrated within established political structures, they tend to become increasingly capitalist. That contradiction does not result from a defeatist attitude, and addressing it is not just a matter of having the bright idea that bigger is better and that “full spectrum infrastructure” would be desirable. One does not need to think that “small is better” in order to recognize that the contradiction between capitalist social relations and communist organisation radically affects the prospect of integrating organisational structures into capitalist political and economic frameworks while remaining anti-capitalist. For one thing, such organisational integration requires volumes of funding that is forthcoming for capitalist think tanks like the Manhattan Institute, but, given the class relation, is rather less forthcoming for anti-capitalist organisations. Srnicek and Williams can’t even be bothered to mention or consider such factors.

The blindspots of the Mont Pelerin chapter suggest that Srnicek and Williams cannot really see history from the side they say they’re on, and this continues to be a problem as they proceed to lay out a series of proposals for the extension of capitalism beyond neoliberalism. Chapter 5 covers deindustrialization and the growth of surplus populations—a topic familiar to readers of communist theory from the treatment it received in Volumes 2 and 3 of the journal *Endnotes*.⁵ Srnicek and Williams dutifully conclude that “there is a growing population of people that are situated outside formal, waged work, making do with minimal welfare benefits, informal subsistence work, or by illegal means” (103-104) and that further automation is likely to exacerbate the growth of surplus populations. They argue that “these trends portend a crisis of work, and a crisis of any society based upon the institution of wage labour” (104). On this basis, they reject the feasibility of campaigns for full employment and propose instead a post-work politics predicated upon “full automation” and the provision of a Universal Basic Income that would give “the proletariat a means of subsistence without dependency on a job” (120). Surplus populations displaced from employment by automation would thus be saved from immiseration by UBI, thanks to which “the amount of time spent working for a wage can be modified to one’s desire” (121).

How do Srnicek and Williams imagine this coming about? They argue that “the classic Leninist strategy of building dual power with a revolutionary party and overthrowing the state is obsolete,” while “the recent history of revolutions—from the Iranian Revolution to the Arab Spring—has simply led to some combination of theocratic authoritarianism, military dictatorship and civil war.” They

note that “the electoral reformist approach is equally a failure” (131). Yet the electoral reformist approach is what they have in mind when it comes to instituting UBI and full automation. Capitalist barriers to full automation, they argue, could be overcome “through measures as simple as raising the minimum wage, supporting labour movements and using state subsidies to incentivise the replacement of human labour” (113). Meanwhile, they urge that Universal Basic Income “would be relatively easy to finance through some combination of reducing duplicate programmes, raising taxes on the rich, inheritance taxes, consumption taxes, carbon taxes, cutting spending on the military, cutting industry and agricultural subsidies, and cracking down on tax evasions” (123). Elsewhere they point out the obvious: that nostalgic appeal to social democratic measures is not a viable politics today, given the erosion of the economic conditions upon which social democratic consensus was predicated during the postwar period. But here, they ground the possibility of a “post-work consensus” upon social democratic legislation, without giving any account of why the latter would be “relatively easy” to achieve given the real links between austerity measures and declining capitalist profitability. While avowedly rejecting both social democracy and democratic socialism, the path from “neoliberalism into something else” (12) Srnicek and Williams describe is in fact a social democratic transition toward democratic socialism. They merely replace an emphasis on full employment with an emphasis on liberation from work, which is hardly an original contribution to the history of democratic socialist thought.⁶

Srnicek and Williams emphasize the long-term nature of this transition: “decades rather than years, cultural shifts rather than electoral cycles” (108). Despite their critique of prefigurative politics, they argue that:

if full transformational change is not immediately possible, our efforts must be directed towards cracking open those spaces of possibility that do exist and fostering better political conditions over time. We must first reach a space within which more radical demands can be meaningfully articulated, and must therefore prepare for the long term if we wish to alter the terrain of politics substantially. (130)

What (or where) is this “space”? The proposals that Srnicek and Williams actually make—raising taxes on the rich or cutting military spending to fund UBI—are indeed dependent upon electoral cycles. But since even these modest proposals have proved difficult, not easy, to implement, they need to imagine some “space”

from which “more radical demands” could be articulated. This is apparently the space of the think-tank, where a “counter-hegemonic strategy” can be brewed to “overturn the dominant neoliberal common sense and rejuvenate the collective imagination” (131). So, the non-reformist reforms that will inaugurate a post-neoliberal transition to postcapitalism will require, as a precondition of their initial feasibility, preparatory work that “builds up support and a common language for a new world” (132). Again, this is a very common and familiar perspective: reformists always say the horizon of *their* reforms is non-reformist, and that we need organizational cohesion and long-term planning to bring them about. Indeed, reformists hardly ever say anything else.

Since this is not exactly an “inventive” line, what makes this iteration of it so special? Should we have confidence in the capacity of this not-so-particular non-reformist reformism to foment a new hegemony and “a common language for a new world?” One indication this may not go well for Srnicek and Williams is their rapid abandonment of the term for which they previously wrote a manifesto: “accelerationism.” In *Inventing the Future*, they “largely avoid using the term ‘accelerationism’...due to the miasma of competing understandings that has arisen around the concept, rather than from any abdication of its tenets as we understand them” (189). In theory, the authors do not abdicate the tenets of “accelerationism.” But, in practice, they have abandoned the term that named their political programme because it breeds disagreement. In theory, it is easy to call for organizational cohesion, for a new language, for broad cultural shifts; in practice, Srnicek and Williams can’t even transmit the coherence of a word. But as long as “accelerationism” holds a place in their hearts—regardless of its evident unsuitability for communicative transmission—they can always blame the “miasma of competing understandings” to which it gave rise on folk political thinking, and thus redouble their folk psychological struggle against the latter.

This early instance of terminological collapse notwithstanding, Srnicek and Williams imagine the emergence of “a mass unified movement” (170) constructed around their demands that would draw together feminist, anti-racist, postcolonial and indigenous struggles (161). Is their critique of “folk politics” rhetorically well-positioned for building a unified movement appealing to postcolonial and indigenous movements? I find that unlikely, but I suppose time will tell. Shortly after gesturing toward feminist, anti-racist, postcolonial, and indigenous struggles, they note that “in the end, while a post-work project demands that centrality be given to class, it is not sufficient to mobilise only on the basis of class interests”

(161). I wonder if this gets us very far with respect to antagonisms so often arising within the integral relation of class struggle to feminist, anti-racist, postcolonial, indigenous struggles: class comes first, is central, but—don't worry—patriarchy and white supremacy also matter. This approach tends not to work so well in practice, but, again, only time will tell whether the brand of magical thinking in which Srnicek and Williams specialize will draw together a unified global mass movement around their set of demands.

As *Inventing the Future* draws to a close, it finally turns for six pages toward the “points of leverage” that would have to be attacked to bring about postcapitalism. Srnicek and Williams acknowledge that “if a populist movement successfully built a counter-hegemonic ecosystem of organisations, in order to become effective it would still require the capacity to disrupt” (169-170). Here we come full circle, as the tactics advocated are precisely those elaborated by the struggles criticized in the first half of the book: primarily, blockades of logistical choke-points and distribution channels, like ports and freeways. Since folk politics is “necessary but not sufficient,” Srnicek and Williams merely add that such tactics must be linked to long term strategy, and that “on-the-ground knowledge must be linked up with more abstract knowledge of changing economic conditions” (174), as if these were fresh insights rather than the perennial content of discussions concerning the relation between strategy and tactics within social movements—as if Marxists involved in concrete struggles have not previously made it a habit to emphasise the importance of “abstract knowledge of changing economic conditions” as well.



The central issue with which *Inventing the Future* pretends to be concerned—the problem of what is to be done with the technical infrastructure of modernity—is among the most serious and difficult questions with which communist theory has to grapple. What is frustrating about the book is its authors' refusal to face the real difficulties this question involves—most importantly, the problem of how technological capacities (forces of production) can be *reproduced* without reproducing the class relation (relations of production). This is indeed among the basic problems of how social reproduction is possible after the end of capitalism. The opponent Srnicek and Williams pick out for themselves—one whom supposedly thinks that technology is bad, small is good, and immediacy is authentic—is just a cartoonish profile stamped on the other side of their idealist coin. I find their book unsatisfying not because I think we already have good answers to the ques-

tion concerning capitalist technology but because I think we don't, and *Inventing the Future* does nothing more effectively than obscure the very ground on which that question could be properly posed.

Srnicek and Williams note that contemporary technologies have the potential to reduce labour time and increase abundance, yet are “encased within social relations that obscure these potentials and render them impotent” (150). Yes, we have known for a long time that there is a contradiction between forces and relations of production, and that technological use values are bound up with that contradiction. But it does not suffice to say that we should have “democratic control over technology development” (146) or to “establish broad parameters to adjudicate on the potentials of a technology” (152). It isn't *use value* that poses a problem where technology is concerned. They acknowledge that “power relationships are embedded within technologies, which cannot therefore be infinitely bent towards purposes that oppose their very functioning” (151), and they stipulate that “if a technology's only role is that of exploiting workers, or if such a role is absolutely necessary to its deployment, then it can have no place in a postcapitalist future” (152). But these formulations miss the essential problem. Just as, earlier, they relied upon psychologism in their evaluation of “the left,” here they address the relation between technology and social relations in terms of individual machines and their individual uses.

It is not *individual* technologies that will have to be evaluated according to their use values because “power relations” are inscribed in them one by one. Considered case by case, the question of whether “a technology's only role is that of exploiting workers” (152) is incoherent. Nor is the physical obduracy of capitalist infrastructure—what Srnicek and Williams call the “materialised aspects of hegemony” (136) at the heart of the problem. Rather, it is the immaterial process of valorisation requisite for the *reproduction* of the technological process of production that is inextricable from the way we make things. Advocating social democratic legislation predicated upon the valorisation process (taxes on the rich) or automation subsidies for individual firms merely dodges the real conceptual and historical problem to be grappled with. Srnicek and Williams confine their engagement with the relation between “full automation” and the valorisation process to a dismissive footnote (218-219), directing their attention instead to criticising folk politics and to a reformist program for the extension of capitalism beyond neoliberalism. Indeed, despite the book's vague references to “postcapitalism,” it proves disinclined to press its invention of the future beyond the persistence of the class

relation, trading instead upon proposed measures that require it.

It is telling that Srnicek and Williams do not use the term “communism” to designate the postcapitalist future: perhaps *avoiding communism*, rather than “inventing the future” should be viewed as their real theoretical commitment. By framing their political project as a movement to “escape neoliberalism” (3), they open a theoretical space of possibility within which they can keep on imagining a reinvigorated capitalism prior to postcapitalism, and that is exactly what they spend their time doing. This makes sense, I suppose: attempting to think through the disarticulation of capitalist social relations as the very process of communist revolution is a stringent task that doesn’t offer up the sort of voluntarist vistas and bullet-point prescriptions that make for good jacket copy. That process will not be “relatively easy to finance” because it will have to break through the very structure of the class relation that would enable measures like “taxes on the rich.” It is easier to respond to the limits of particular struggles by caricaturing them from afar than by participating in their collective articulation, just as it is easier to project the extension of capitalism beyond neoliberalism than to confront the problem of the end of the class relation posed by communist theory. This evasion, rather than a supposed taste for the complexity and abstraction, is the real “preference” at issue in *Inventing the Future*. Attempting to project another epoch of capitalist valorisation beyond neoliberalism is an understandably weak response to the impasses of the present, but it merely evades, rather than addresses, the difficult task of thinking through the end of capitalism.

NOTES

1. Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*. London: Verso, 2015, 9. All subsequent parenthetical references are to this text.
2. Buckminster Fuller, *Critical Path*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981, xxv. Like Srnicek and Williams, Fuller was a utopian proponent of Universal Basic Income, automation, reduced labor time, etc. On the common ideological ground of both mid-twentieth century technocratic and counter-cultural formations which appealed to automation and cybernetic models of social redesign, see Reinhold Martin's excellent book, *The Organizational Complex: Media, Architecture, and Corporate Space*. Cambridge, MIT Press, 2003.
3. See *The Occupation Cookbook, or the Model of the Occupation of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb*. London: Minor Compositions, 2009. <http://marcbousquet.net/pubs/The-Occupation-Cookbook.pdf>
4. One could just as easily write the opposite: it is "widely accepted" by "a broad range of the contemporary left" that "large scale action is necessary, we must think globally, history is complex, organizational permanence is important, we must struggle for progressive values." Neither of these two lists is more, or less, correct than the other, because such generalizations about "a broad range of the left" are basically meaningless.
5. See Aaron Benanav and Endnotes, "Misery and Debt," *Endnotes II* (April 2010): 20-51 and "The Holding Pattern," *Endnotes III* (September 2013): 12-54.
6. They cite, for example, Andre Gorz, *Paths to Paradise: On the Liberation from Work*. London: Pluto Press, 1985. Although Srnicek and Williams insist that the Left cannot look back, their claim to be "inventing the future" is belied by their recycling of decades or centuries old democratic socialist proposals. The nostalgia for utopian futurism that determines the book's political horizon is immediately legible in its first two sentences: "Where did the future go? For much of the twentieth century, the future held sway over our dreams" (1).

**enduring philosophy's
perpetual *kampfplatz*:
frank ruda's *for badiou*:
idealism without idealism
(northwestern, 2015)**

dave mesing

In a note inserted at the beginning of the English translation of *For Marx*, Althusser remarks that if the emphasis throughout his text falls on the question of Marxist philosophy, then this is in order to assess its reality and right to exist, as well as the problem of its lateness, insofar as its theoretical form had not been fully elaborated.¹ This note bears the date October 1967, which places it just prior to the beginning of the “Philosophy Course for Scientists” at the École Normale Supérieure Rue d’Ulm, which was to run from November 1967 to May 1968. Although the full program for the course was never to be completed—other, decidedly non-theoretical distractions took over around that time—the concluding lectures were delivered by Alain Badiou.²

The lectures were later published as *The Concept of Model* in 1969, and were themselves appended with a note, signed “Théorie, December 1968,” *Théorie* being the name of the imprint of Éditions Maspero under Althusser’s direction. This note, which indicates an overlapping between Althusser and Badiou that perhaps dissipates over time, cautions that the work’s focus on questions of science is a very limited one, providing an early warning against what Althusser would label theoreticism in his self-critiques.

The two notes are useful complements to one another, and provide a helpful heuristic for a consideration of Badiou’s project as a specifically post-Althusserian

philosophy. While Badiou's work has become increasingly well-known to Anglophone readers after the translation of *Being and Event* was first published in 2006, an often practically necessary split between situational, interventionist texts (almost always political in some sense) and abstract philosophical tomes persists in obstructing access to Badiou's theoretical work in general. It is certainly true that many commentators, as well as Badiou himself, mobilize aspects of more imposing works in order to render them more succinct, subtracting them from a dense edifice involving idiosyncratic readings of the history of philosophy, Zermelo-Fraenkel set theory, and category theory. Among several examples, we can name Badiou's own *Manifesto for Philosophy* (1 and 2), of which the decision to write "for" philosophy again hearkens us back to Badiou's post-Althusserian context.

Frank Ruda signals and forcefully claims this context in his recent *For Badiou: Idealism Without Idealism*. Althusser's decision to write "for" Marx in *For Marx* is predicated upon a wager of developing theoretical resources that are not simply derived from Marx's thought (which would make them "of" Marx), but rather form a crucial extension, supplementing his works by means of concepts and arguments which may in some opaque sense already be contained within them.³ Ruda picks up on this legacy in his introduction, making clear from the outset that his book "for Badiou" is one that attempts to pick up on what he characterizes as Badiou's gesture of the self-affirmation of philosophy; pushing this Badiouian phrase a step further, Ruda states that his aim is to delineate how the self-affirmation of philosophy which thereby affirms the conditions of philosophy in art, science, politics, and love (Badiou's four domains of truth), works and is defensible as a synthetic characterization of Badiou's overall project. (8-9)

Ruda admirably carries out his explanation of this phrase with concision. Although *For Badiou* is not written with beginners to Badiou's philosophy in mind, one of Ruda's chief accomplishments is the way in which he draws from a vast array of Badiou's texts and manages to provide a succinct interpretation of Badiou's contribution to philosophy in just over one hundred and fifty pages. Ruda accomplishes this with the help of two different tripartite structures. First, he adopts as a series of watchwords the terms introduced by Freud to describe psychoanalytic technique in a 1914 text: remembering, repeating, and working through. He then uses this structure to interrogate Badiou's recourse to three proper names in the history of philosophy: Plato, Descartes, and Hegel. Ruda does not claim that Badiou's references to these figures simply need to be consulted for hermeneutical details, but instead that they can be productively mined by means

of the tripartite structure he adopts from Freud in order to identify *the meaning of philosophy* in Badiou as a particular way of remembering Plato, repeating Descartes, and in the last instance, working through Hegel.

Before turning to some of these details, two further remarks on the conjunction of the two prefatory notes with which we began are helpful. First, one way of reformulating the warning against theoreticism in an affirmative way, already present in Althusser's own note before the English translation of *For Marx*, is to understand philosophical work as an intervention in a definite conjuncture. Ruda picks up on this idea, emphasizing its importance for Badiou's philosophical practice and using it to identify the concrete point of departure for Badiou's philosophy in the difference between Badiou's well-known denouncement of "democratic materialism" (there are only bodies and languages) in favor of his version of materialist dialectics (there are only bodies and languages, except that there are truths) from the opening pages of *Logics of Worlds*. Ruda's most fundamental claim is that these polemical axioms go to the heart of Badiou's philosophical production, and that the distinction between these two different forms of materialism should be defended. It is this differentiation that gives the book its subtitle: democratic materialism is a materialism without the idea, whereas materialist dialectics is a materialism with a renewed understanding of the idea, which Ruda formulates as the most crucial concept necessary to understand Badiou's philosophy, namely an "idealism without idealism." (12-13)

A second and less immediately apparent echo of these notes lies in Ruda's helpful cognitive map of different readings of Marx's 11th thesis on Feuerbach. We might agree with the idea that an interventionist current is present throughout Badiou's work, even at its most speculative (the general idea of philosophy as conditioned by truths which are outside of it, meaning that philosophy is not self-sufficient, requires claims about specific historical conjunctures in order to be sensible, as in the most obvious case of the certain developments within mathematics that lead to Badiou's meta-ontology in *Being and Event*). However, it does not take a very close reader of Badiou to point out, as many have done, the relative paucity of engagements with Marx throughout his writings. It is in this sense that we can understand Ruda's cognitive map regarding how philosophy conceives change as a particular way to inhabit the question of Marxist philosophy, which is otherwise not clearly articulated in Badiou's own work. This cognitive map provides at least some minimalist criteria for understanding Badiou's project even further as a certain deviant Althusserian one (both an interventionist and Marxist philosophy), and since Ruda lends the map significant importance in establishing

the groundwork on which he is “for” Badiou, it is worth tarrying with it at some length.

Ruda argues for at least three paradigmatic ways of reading Marx’s 11th thesis, which he qualifies are not always sharply distinguishable from one another yet represent historically influential aspects of how the thesis has been read. (15) He labels these three paradigms the transformative reading, the reversing reading, and the exaggerating reading. The transformative reading first and foremost holds that interpretation itself is simply a form of contemplation *ante rem*, which must be replaced by both practice as well as a new philosophy of practice *in rem* that is opposed to philosophies of interpretation. The transformative reading does not abolish philosophy, but rather argues that philosophy can be fulfilled in the future by changing what change means from abstract interpretation to practical intervention, and becoming that change. In opposition to this, Ruda labels the reversing reading one that rejects the transformative reading’s insistence on the absence of change in order to claim that there is an “already present actuality of ongoing change.” (16) Since the world is constantly changing, adequate interpretations that can keep pace with this change are needed. Like the transformative reading, the reversing reading suggests that philosophy itself must change, but it disagrees with the form it should take. Instead of becoming practice, philosophy should change in relation to its proper mode of interpretation—it should change interpretations in order to keep up with the truth of change.

Finally, Ruda adds to these first two an exaggerating reading of the 11th thesis, which he claims agrees once more that philosophy must change. Unlike the transformative but in agreement with the reversing reading, however, the exaggerating reading continues to locate philosophy’s proper mode in interpretation. Where it differs from both is through its focus on what the world itself means wherein both philosophy and change take place. Through exaggeration, this reading claims to shift the perspective on the world so much that in carrying out its interpretation, the world is changed because the exaggerating reading breaks with the hegemonic ideological coordinates of the present. In short, “the present world is changed by overemphasizing a forgotten past that lies at its ground.” (18)

While Ruda is cautious in attaching proper names to these readings because they are formal reconstructions at some remove from careful textual analysis, he does list in passing Bloch, Adorno, and Žižek as at times representative of the transformative, reversing, and exaggerating readings, respectively. He further claims that passages within Badiou’s work can be attributed to each of these three

readings, which is why he supplements them with a fourth, materialist dialectical reading that he claims characterizes Badiou's conception of philosophy. First, Badiou's position agrees with the others that philosophy does need to change, but claims that it does so by becoming an active gesture, irreducible to the terms of interpretation. Second, the act of this philosophy relates to the world (or, as we will come to find out, its absence). Third, this act is neither critical nor determined by the change already taking place in the world, and relatedly, fourth, the exaggerating reading can be taken up in a very specific way by returning to idealism, "a seemingly obsolete moment from the past," in order to avoid the hegemonic ideological coordinates at work in democratic materialism. (19)

Ruda impressively reconstructs these aspects of a Badiouian materialist dialectical reading of the 11th thesis from a number of different texts, and supplements them at length with the two tripartite structures mentioned above. Although this hypothetical reconstruction is unlikely to assuage anyone skeptical of Badiou's (relative) non-engagement with Marx, especially the critique of political economy,⁴ it does serve as a very useful summation of Ruda's account of Badiou's specific practice of philosophy. Ruda reiterates these four aspects a bit later in terms that will allow us to analyze his overall proposal of understanding Badiou's philosophy as one that offers both a *true and contemporary materialist position* (12-13). These four aspects are:

- (1) a *philosophical act*, that is, an inscription of a hierarchical distinction;
- (2) an element of *concrete analysis of the concrete contemporary situations* and hegemonic ideological coordinates that relate philosophy to the present world;
- (3) a *determinate affirmation* that cannot be deduced from the given ideological coordinates; and
- (4) an *active form of doing nothing*, a historically specific way of doing no-thing. (25)

I will not dwell at length on the details of how Ruda develops each of these claims from within Badiou's work, but it is worth noting that the italicized terms form perhaps the essential vocabulary Ruda constructs in order to explain what he means by *idealism without idealism*, a term that, in some sense, sums up these aspects.

In order to briefly recapitulate, the first feature assimilates what we outlined above as the interventionist capacity of philosophy: it proceeds by drawing lines of demarcation. I will return to this point and the second one about concrete analysis in my concluding remarks, as the third and fourth characteristics strike

at the heart of the novelty in Ruda's proposal of an idealism without idealism.⁵ We might approach the fourth aspect as Ruda's precise description of the *idealism* without idealism he seeks to delineate. Ruda also characterizes this fourth aspect as a counter-affirmation, which dovetails well with his development of the possibility for a determinate affirmation.

The wager involved in inscribing this counter-affirmation into any contemporary materialist position is that there is something necessary within idealism in order for the other three features of Badiou's philosophy to work. Ruda identifies what is necessary within previous idealism, unsurprisingly, with its "materialist kernel," and provides two answers, the dialectic and an idea. (35) Affirming both parts of the materialist kernel is what makes up the "counter-affirmation" against democratic materialism, which denies this kernel according to Ruda (and Badiou). This is most fundamentally why Ruda goes to some length to examine three traditionally idealist thinkers who are important to Badiou's work.

To the counter-affirmation of beginning with the materialist kernel of idealism, Ruda adds what he calls a determinate affirmation. This affirmation also fleshes out the *idealism* without idealism, to continue parsing this concept in the way we have above. It is most clearly articulated in terms of how it reclaims a certain primacy of dualism, or "the Two" in Badiouian parlance, from a reading of Descartes. For our purposes, what is essential here is that according this primacy helps to demonstrate the way all presentation relies upon something unrepresentable within it. In other words, what initially makes up "the Two" is on the one hand, something presented—a "there is"—and on the other hand, an exception to this "there is." As Ruda summarizes, "Materialist dialectics is thus a dialectics of the exception which introduces a split into the materialist 'there is.' ... Only this split 'there is' is truly materialist. There need to be two 'there is's.'" (102) With this somewhat awkward formulation, we are able to move back into a more proper or true materialism, according to Ruda.

Yet it is with this type of transition that some of the limitations of this argument make themselves clear. First, although it should be reiterated that Ruda displays a mastery of different arguments in various contexts which span across Badiou's writings, it is sometimes difficult to grasp how different components in the book hang together overall. Some of this is due to an occasional Žižekian-style rhetoric where distinctions are recalled or presented as counterfactuals or hypothetical questions in such a way that the uncharitable reader would simply find a premise that is repeated rather than an argument being developed. To be sure, this rhetoric

only occasionally appears, and it is perhaps a certain side-effect to Ruda's critical treatment of Žižek as a sparring partner, consistently demarcating the Badiouian position from a Žižekian one.

One example of how this gestural rhetoric affects the overall argument in the book is in its treatment of Hegel. Certain gestures and ruptures here are perhaps unavoidable, because Badiou himself is much more ambivalent towards Hegel than he is towards Plato and Descartes. Ruda deserves credit for taking on the challenge of pushing a confrontation between variegated speculative arguments internal to Hegel and Badiou's systems in addition to the synthetic recapitulation of Badiou's (materialist) contribution to philosophy that marks the overall argument of *For Badiou*. Moreover, he adds in a footnote to the final chapter that his remarks on Badiou and Hegel are preliminary first-passes at a research agenda for a book on Hegel's *Science of Logic* he is currently co-writing with Rebecca Comay. Yet the final section begins with a lengthy series of counterfactuals which allude to an element within Hegel's *Science of Logic* that is absent from Badiou's few brief, but technical (and clearly set forth by Ruda) comments on it. Then the section (and book) ends abruptly with the suggestion that to read Hegel after Badiou means that "everything changes—this will bring about a yet completely unknown Hegel." (150)

While it would be unfair to press too much on these concluding remarks, which do not detract from this excellent book's status as a decisive contribution to contemporary debates in materialist philosophy, this equivocal resolution to the status of Hegel within *For Badiou* helps to signal two further lines of critical inquiry which might be taken up in response to it. After all, *For Badiou* does not stake its claim as a comprehensive exposition of Badiou's thought, even though it does provide a rigorous and thorough entry-point. Instead, I read Ruda's most fundamental contribution to be the twin task of a speculative reconstruction of the specificity of Badiou's philosophy coupled with the marshaling of Badiou's thought as what enables one to conceive of a contemporary and true materialist position in philosophy. I have tried to explain the strengths of both of these aspects throughout the review, necessarily skipping over some substantial aspects of a book that for its concision does not sacrifice any acumen in dealing with a litany of complex problems in Badiou and materialist philosophy more generally.

At the risk, then, of parroting some critiques of a "stereotypic cliché-picture of Hegel," (133) which Ruda suggests that Badiou avoids, I will conclude here with two brief remarks, occasioned by the somewhat equivocal conclusion regarding

Hegel. I do not want to raise any problems of a totalizing, Hegelian boogeyman, especially as the constructive, post-Badiouian work on Hegel has yet to be done. Instead, I wish to point to Badiou's own critique of Hegel in order to raise two points about Ruda's global presentation of Badiou's contribution to contemporary materialist philosophy, one directly related to it and another tangentially so. First, recalling our characterization of the third and fourth aspects in Ruda's reconstructed, Badiouian materialist dialectical reading of Marx's 11th thesis (determinate affirmation and counter-affirmation), we noted that these twin-affirmations represented the core to Ruda's *idealism without idealism*. Yet, the overall contribution of these aspects to Ruda's project are only legible insofar as they are absorbed into his account of contemporary materialism. In this sense, they must be contextualized alongside the first two aspects: a philosophical act and a concrete analysis of concrete situations. With the third and fourth aspects, Ruda explains Badiou's recourse to certain idealist tropes as what enables him to think through the exception to democratic materialism. To perhaps remember, repeat, and work through something we introduced at the outset of the review, we can recall how Ruda follows Badiou in distinguishing between two forms of contemporary materialism: democratic materialism (there are only bodies and languages) and materialist dialectics (there are only bodies and languages, except that there are truths). In one sense, as Ruda himself notes at the outset of the book, being able to identify and differentiate between two different forms of materialism is "the main idea" driving the book. (12) Here a further point of clarification regarding Ruda's argument is necessary, which both refines the scope of the materialist field to which the book finally contributes and raises a significant methodological point that is left unanswered. Following Badiou's appropriation of Cantor's proof for the inexistence of a set of all sets, Ruda claims that "the old ideological battle, to echo Louis Althusser, between idealism and materialism that will always have determined and always will determine philosophy reaches a new phase." (12)

According to Ruda, the new phase of this battle means that it now takes place within materialism; previous idealist positions are not considered as viable. The decision to restrict the scope in this sense is not surprising for a book dedicated to both the work of Badiou and setting an agenda for contemporary materialism. Ruda clarifies that in differentiating between democratic materialism and materialist dialectics, he does not want to suggest that there is a "bad" idealist materialism in comparison to a "good" materialist materialism. Instead, and in continuity with his technique elsewhere in the book, he aims to understand the inscription of the battle between idealism and materialism within these two distinct materialisms

in a different and more dialectical way. He does this by inserting a reversal at the point of this battle's inscription into materialism: whether it is "good" vs. "bad," it is materialist dialectics which is able to reclaim the materialist kernel of previous idealism and not democratic materialism, which remains idly repeating a materialist "there is" composed only of bodies and languages. Hence it is this premise which completes the picture we outlined earlier, showing the way in which Ruda attempts to think through an idealism *without idealism*.

However, what remains unclear in this re-inscription of Althusser's distinction and Ruda's reversal of it within democratic materialism and materialist dialectics is in what precise sense these appellations should be understood. More pointedly: in Althusser, the distinction between idealism and materialism is one of tendencies that traverse different philosophies, rather than positions or sets of positions which definitively cast a philosopher into one camp or the other. To be sure, in his treatment of specific idealist thinkers, Ruda is careful to emphasize the partisan readings that he and Badiou provide to them. Yet the repeated emphasis on stipulating a *true* materialism runs the risk of substantializing and homogenizing various positions under proper names. This applies as much, if not more, to the names of democratic materialism and materialist dialectics as it does to Plato, Descartes, and Hegel. While both Badiou and Ruda regard democratic materialism as a contemporary spontaneous philosophy, its exact status remains somewhat unclear, as it occasionally serves to mark the philosophical positions of those whose own words are otherwise absent.⁶ If we are to understand the positions taken within materialism today as more tendential, following Althusser, then we would remain at a certain distance from a narrative able to assimilate and continually reconstitute a "true" lineage; in other words, we would remain at a distance from a narrative that, while claiming to occupy a materialist position, bears a similarity to Hegel's own story about the history of philosophy. I do not think that Ruda ends up with quite this narrative, but some more details regarding the exact status of the explanatory function of democratic materialism and materialist dialectics would have been helpful. To rephrase the point in the form of a question inspired by the conceptual moves of *For Badiou*: would we be allowed to identify an exception or exceptions to the contemporary "there is" of democratic materialism and materialist dialectics as the two forms of contemporary materialism?

A second point follows directly from one of Badiou's critiques of Hegel that Ruda identifies in the final chapter of *For Badiou*. Simply put, it regards the necessity for materialism to claim its status as *contemporary* in addition to its authentic

or true character I have tried to gesture towards above. Ruda calls attention to Badiou's critique of Hegel's concept of history, recapitulated in the formula "time is the being-there of the concept." (143) He rightly points out that Badiou finds this position to entail the claim that history does not exist in any way except for the "unfolding of the one concept whose history is history." (143) In other words, there is only one true history of the unfolding of the concept as delineated by Hegel. Both Badiou, and Ruda following him, instead hold that history is made up of multiplicity (and since there is no One-All, in Badiouian parlance, there is no one true history). Yet Ruda does not draw out all of the consequences of this position. Contemporaneity does play a specific technical role in one of Ruda's central arguments regarding a Badiouian reading of the 11th thesis on Feuerbach, which we alluded to above. Namely, in situating the twin affirmations from the materialist core of idealism within the materialist act of a concrete analysis of concrete situations, Ruda seeks to lay claim a historically specific situation that is distanced from the ideological coordinates of the present. It is not clear to me that this historically specific and occasional contemporaneity maps onto a claim about the necessity for materialist philosophy to lay claim to contemporaneity as such.

Ruda approaches this point elsewhere in the book when he distances himself from what he labels "expressive dialectics," following a short recent lecture of Badiou's entitled "Politics: A Non-Expressive Dialectic" as well as Althusser in *Reading Capital*. And yet one crucial consequence in rejecting expressive dialectics is that the problem of contradiction can no longer be posed at one level to which it is possible to achieve contemporaneity in relation. Contemporaneity is at best a local and occasional operator, and not the watchword for materialism to try and capture. To switch registers somewhat abruptly, however, I do not mean for these critical reflections to call into question the status of Ruda's *For Badiou* as an exciting and worthwhile contribution to contemporary questions of materialism, here of course understood in a more mundane sense. While these few ambling remarks are intended as ways of deepening the sense in which Badiou is a post-Althusserian philosopher, in addition to the complications of his post-Platonic, post-Cartesian, and post-Hegelian attributes that Ruda remembers, repeats, and works through here, they may serve primarily as gestures to contemporary materialist philosophy in order to be "for" Althusser. For it is not only in consciously drawing lines of demarcation that lines of demarcation are in fact drawn, nor is it only in drawing out the consequences of such lines of demarcation that philosophy contains the contradictions of the conjuncture.

NOTES

1. Louis Althusser, “To My English Readers” *For Marx*. Trans. Ben Brewster. London: Verso, 2005, 14. Althusser’s slightly later comment serves as a useful rejoinder in terms of the ongoing tasks of such elaboration: “Marxist theory can fall behind history, and even behind itself, if it ever thinks it has arrived.” See Louis Althusser, “Is it simple to be a Marxist in philosophy” *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists and Other Essays*. Trans. Grahame Locke. London: Verso, 1990, 230.
2. In fact, Badiou’s lectures were interrupted by the events of May. For a detailed and fascinating account of this lecture course and its significance, see Pierre Macherey, “Althusser and the Concept of the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists.” Trans. Robin Mackay. *Parrhesia: A Journal of Critical Philosophy* 6 (2009, 14-27).
3. Jason Read provides a useful discussion of the sometimes equivocal difference between “concepts of” and “concepts for” in the introduction to his recent book, to which I am indebted. See Jason Read, *The Politics of Transindividuality*. Leiden: Brill, 2016, 1-16.
4. Ruda does briefly note in passing that Badiou’s materialism is an addition to “simply continu[ing]” with Marxian political economy,” thereby leaving room for further work on this connection. (29) Admittedly, this problem is well beyond the specific focus of Ruda’s book, and would be impossible for him to do justice to in this context, but insofar as the book both lays claim to *any* contemporary materialist position and foregrounds Marxian motivations inherent to some of Badiou’s positions, it perhaps opens up this most tricky question regarding Badiou for a future treatment. For an excellent and recent examination of Badiou along these lines, see Gavin Walker, “On Marxism’s Field of Operation: Badiou and the Critique of Political Economy.” *Historical Materialism* 20:2 (2012, 39-74).
5. An additional concept which Ruda uses to summarize Badiou’s philosophy is what he labels “meta-critical anamnesis.” This concept operates within each of the aspects I have sketched here, recalling a critical, distinguishing operation within philosophy and addressing it to a historically specific situation and its ideology. (44-45) Crucially, the operation is meta-critical as opposed to critical because clarifies situations but “does not itself directly or immediately” intervene within them. (131) This helps distinguish the act of the materialist dialectical reading that Ruda sketches from the transformative reading, which posits a more direct intervention for philosophy.
6. While this problem remains only at an equivocal and unresolved level in the text of *For Badiou*, one very clear example of it can be seen in a footnote where Ruda wants to be cautious of his use of a politics “in distance from the state” to describe Badiou. He notes that a line of demarcation is necessary because such a slogan could seem to be just another version of “what Toni Negri (and others) refer to as ‘exodus.’” (184) Perhaps the fellow-traveler of Negri’s who has done the most to develop the concept of political exodus is Paolo Virno—here not even named in passing—who nonetheless has been a strong critic of so-called postmodernist positions for many years, the same types of positions which tend to be assimilated under the banner of democratic materialism. In bringing this up, my point is not merely to decry the oversight of Virno’s work on this point, but rather to use it as an example which calls for more specification regarding both the status and explanatory scope of a position such as democratic materialism.