

The Trait of Oneness: Foundations of Slavoj Žižek's Lacanian Hegel

Payam Masarrat 

PhD Candidate Philosophy, Södertörn University, Sweden. E-mail: payam.masarrat@sh.se

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ABSTRACT

The article treats some underlying motifs of Slavoj Žižek's reading of Hegel, according to which Hegelian dialectic and the Lacanian "logic of the signifier" are homologous. After a brief conceptual-historical contextualisation of Žižek's Hegel against the backdrop of early twentieth century Hegelianism (Lukács, Kojève), the article attends to some programmatic remarks in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), Žižek's first English-language book. There, he for the first time presents a Hegel of constitutive antagonism, contrary to prevalent readings of Hegel as a thinker of final resolution. Žižek nevertheless provides his most systematic account of Hegel, including the 2012 tome *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, in the *Sublime Object's* sequel, for they know not what they do: *Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (1991). The majority of the article therefore deals with the initial chapter of *for they know not*, where we encounter the foundations of Žižek's specifically Lacanian Hegel. The latter holds accountable theoretical currents such as negative dialectic and deconstruction for insufficiently rigorous readings of key Hegelian categories, not least that of identity. Instead of entailing a conceptual imperialism that swallows difference within itself, Hegelian identity is by Žižek read against the background of Lacan's account of structuralist differentiality. What comes to the fore here is the question of the self-identical One, whose qualitative manifestation in *The Science of Logic's* "Doctrine of Being" Žižek casts in terms of the Lacanian trait unaire (unary trait), that is, the nascent form of the signifier.

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. . . a reading of Hegel through the lens of Lacan gives us a picture of Hegel that is radically different from the common accepted view of him as a “panlogistic.” It will bring out a Hegel of the logic of the “signifier,” of a self-referential process articulated as the repeated positivation of a central Void (Žižek, 2011, 3).

Dialectic in the Age of Extremes

There is an often-cited anecdote, first recorded by Heinrich Heine, that captures well what we could refer to as the “hermeneutic fate” of Hegel: when on his deathbed (having been prematurely put there as victim to one of nineteenth century Europe’s not-too-infrequent cholera epidemics), Hegel bemoaned what he took to be the fact that ‘Only one person understood me – and even he didn’t understand me.’ (*Nur einer hat mich verstanden – und auch der hat mich nicht verstanden.*) (Heine, 2007, 90) Aside from the fact that the anecdote most likely lacks historical accuracy (but *se non è vero, è ben trovato*), its import can actually be attested by shedding light on the factionalisation of Hegel’s immediate disciples. I refer, of course, to the famous fissure between Left and Right Hegelians – the primal scene (*Urzene*) of all subsequent Hegelianism.¹

In a word, this split institutionalised the propagated antagonism between what its respective spokesmen took to be the mutually exclusive progressive Hegelian *method*, on the one hand, and the conservative Hegelian *system*, on the other. And although the star of Hegelianism as a hegemonic philosophical enterprise was faded in the latter half of the nineteenth century by the rise of neo-Kantianism, its re-emergence in “The Age of Extremes”² seemed to definitively mark the victory of the Left Hegelians. This was mediated by the advent of Marxism, whose specifically philosophical import was crystallised in the appearance of György Lukács’ 1923 *History and Class Consciousness*. As a Left Hegelian indeed, it was Hegel’s method that constituted the core of Lukács’ preoccupation. This is the method, as those even minimally acquainted with Hegel know, whose name is *dialectic*.³

¹ Todd McGowan panoramically summarises the battlefield: ‘The leading Left Hegelians were David Friedrich Strauss (author of the *Life of Jesus*), Bruno Bauer, Ludwig Feuerbach (who wrote *The Essence of Christianity*), and Max Stirner. The most prominent Right Hegelians were Johann Eduard Erdmann (primarily known for his history of philosophy), Eduard Gans, Heinrich Hotho (editor of Hegel’s *Aesthetics*), and Johann Karl Friedrich Rosenkranz (who wrote *Hegel als deutscher Nationalphilosoph*).’ See his *Emancipation After Hegel: Achieving a Contradictory Revolution* (Columbia University Press: New York, 2019), 221n1.

² I have in mind here Eric Hobsbawm’s *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1921* (Michael Joseph: London, 1994).

³ See Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (The MIT Press: Cambridge, 1971). Many decades later, reflecting on *History and Class Consciousness*’ reception, Lukács emphasised (with reference to the positivist tendencies of Second International Marxism and its protagonists) that the revival of Hegel’s dialectics struck a hard blow at the revisionist tradition. Already [Eduard] Bernstein wished to eliminate everything reminiscent of Hegel’s Dialectics in the name of ‘science’. And nothing was further from the mind of his philosophical opponents, and above all [Karl] Kautsky, than the wish to undertake the defence of this tradition. For anyone wishing to return to the revolutionary traditions of Marxism the revival of the Hegelians traditions was obligatory.

Around the same time when Lukács was relentlessly dedicating his efforts to anchoring dialectic in the conceptual category of *Totalität* (recall Hegel's dictum from *The Phenomenology of Spirit* that 'the true is the Whole'¹) (Hegel, 2018, 13), the Russian émigré Alexandre Kojève – also a Marxist – delivered between 1933 and 1939 a series of lectures on the *Phenomenology* in Paris. Kojève's lectures fleshed out dialectic as the historical dynamism of the existential-anthropological category of *désir*.² (And here witnesses the *Phenomenology*'s declaration that 'self-consciousness is *desire*, full stop') (Hegel, 1977, 103). Contrary to Lukács, Kojève stresses not so much the need to comprehend the expression of the Absolute as he does the domain of intersubjective strife and its historical resolution. Lukács and Kojève thus travel down radically different Hegelian paths. Even though there are without a doubt theoretical (and, even more indubitably, politico-practical) overlaps to be established between them,³ they together constitute the two pillars of twentieth century dialectical thinking as a heterogeneous, if not *antinomic*, pair.⁴

I provide this very schematic historical point of departure of what might be called "Dialectic in the Age of Extremes" in order to make for present purposes the following claim: the intricacies of Slavoj Žižek's laboured relation to Hegel, specific aspects of which I treat in the present essay, is first and foremost a response to the parallel paradigms of which Lukács and Kojève are the respective paternal figures of.⁵ Deprived of Lukács, and in particular his theory of reification, how would we be able to account for the dialectical innovations of the Frankfurt

History and Class Consciousness represent what was perhaps the most radical attempt to restore the revolutionary nature of Marx's theories by renovating and extending Hegel's dialectics and method.' (Ibid, xxi.)

¹ The whole passage, the second part of which is regrettably left out in popular accounts, reads: 'The true is the whole. *However, the whole is only the essence completing itself through its own development.*' (Emphasis mine.)

² Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. Allan Bloom, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr. (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1980).

³ It has been rightly stressed, for example, that Kojève and Lukács were jointly the first to really draw 'the connection between phenomenology and social being, and the necessity for social struggle to achieve the development and completion of humanity' which in turn 'radically altered the status of Hegel.' (Stuart Barnett, "Introduction: Hegel Before Derrida", in *Hegel After Derrida*, ed. Stuart Barnett [London and New York: Routledge, 1998], 19.)

⁴ Still, we should not shy away from synthetically bringing them together as a pair, however antinomic. Another pedagogical note by McGowan emphasises their intertwined fates: 'One could make the argument that either Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* or Alexandre Kojève's *Introduction to the Reading of the Phenomenology of Spirit* was the most influential philosophical work of the twentieth century.' (McGowan, *Emancipation After Hegel*, 221n3.)

⁵ To be sure, however, Žižek also addresses the two directly. This is the case with Lukács in particular. Indeed, *History and Class Consciousness* is lauded as 'one of the few authentic events of in the history of Marxism.' Elsewhere, however, he is unambiguously denounced as a 'pre-Hegelian idealist'. ("Georg Lukács as the philosopher of Leninism, in *The Universal Exception: Selected Writings, Volume 2*, ed. Rex Butler and Scott Stevens [London and New York: Continuum, 2006], 94; *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* [London: Verso, 2012], 220.) The somewhat banal conclusion to draw from this is that Lukács is, for Žižek, a "bad" Hegelian but a "good" Marxist – a contradiction in terms depending on whom you ask.

School?¹ Or more narrowly, the trail would not have been blazed for ‘a perspicacious critical intellect as Adorno’ (Žižek, 1991, 245) to have arrived on the scene.

As for Kojève, aside from his sweeping influence on an entire generation of towering French proper names (Sartre, Weil, Merleau-Ponty, Bataille . . .), does it not suffice for our “Žižekian” purposes to shed light on his singular impact on the trajectory of Lacan? It is hardly insignificant that the inscription of the issue of *La Psychanalyse* that Lacan gifted Kojève expresses uncompromising reverence: ‘Pour Kojève qui fut mon maître (vraiment le seul)’.² Can the same thing be said, *mutatis mutandis*, about Žižek’s relation to Kojève’s disciple? Not quite. Because while Lacan is the “general illumination which bathes all the other (Žižekian) colours and modifies their particularity”,³ Hegel is the figure who acquires a unique specificity in Žižek’s thought. Alain Badiou, Žižek’s most significant contemporary interlocutor, thus hits a true note in saying that Slavoj Žižek is probably the only thinker today who can simultaneously hew as closely as possible to Lacan’s contributions and argue steadfastly and vigorously for the return of the Idea of communism. This is because his real master is Hegel, of whom he offers an interpretation that is completely novel, inasmuch as he has given up subordinating it to the theme of Totality. There are two ways of rescuing the Idea of communism in philosophy today:

¹ It should be noted here that in the 1970’s – the decade of Žižek’s initial intellectual formation at the University of Ljubljana – the official academic-philosophical state ideology in Slovenia, then a Yugoslav republic, was not Stalinist *Diamat* but rather the orientation of the Marxist-humanist Praxis School, which was, as he describes it himself, ‘linked to the Frankfurt School.’ Žižek was thus thrown into an intellectual life-world in which the Frankfurt School reigned as the hegemonic intellectual power. Which makes it all the more interesting that, as a dissident, he was at very minimum on speaking terms with Heidegger: ‘. . . in Slovenia, the main opposition was Heideggerian: this is why my first book was on Heidegger and language.’ (Slavoj Žižek, “Psychoanalysis and the Post-Political: An Interview with Slavoj Žižek”, interview by Christopher Hanlon, *New Literary History* 32, no. 1 [2001], 4.) For this book, whose title in English would read *The Pain of Difference*, see, if not, like myself, linguistically inhibited, Slavoj Žižek, *Bolečina razlike* (Maribor: Obzorja, 1972).

Heideggerian dissidence, however, ultimately belonged to a bygone era: ‘In Slovenia since the beginning of the 1970s the big conflict, the big philosophical struggle, was between some kind of Western Marxism, which was more or less official philosophy, and Heideggerianism and phenomenology as the main form of philosophical dissidence. And then we, the younger generation, precisely as a third option – to be a dissident but not a Heideggerian – we were a reaction to both of these.’ (Peter Dews and Peter Osborne, “Lacan in Slovenia: An Interview with Slavoj Žižek and Renata Salcel”, *Radical Philosophy* 58 (Summer 1991), 25.

² In English: ‘For Kojève, who was my master (truly the only)’. See Juan Pablo Lucchelli, “The Early Lacan: Five Unpublished Letters from Jacques Lacan to Alexandre Kojève,” trans. Todd McGowan, *American Imago* 73, no. 3 (Fall 2016), 340n1.

³ Cf. Žižek, *For they know not what they do*, 2, where the agenda of *for they know not* is described in the following terms: ‘As with *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, the theoretical space of the present book is moulded by three centres of gravity: Hegelian dialectics, Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, and contemporary criticism of ideology. These three circles form a Borromean knot: each of the connects the other two . . . The three theoretical circles are not, however, of the same weight: it is their middle term, the theory of Jacques Lacan, which is – as Marx would say – “the general illumination which bathes all the other colours and modifies their particularity”, “the particular ether which determines the specific gravity of every being which has materialized within it”. For Marx’s original formulation, see Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1973), 167.

either by abandoning Hegel, not without regret, incidentally, and only after repeated considerations of his writings (which is what I do), or by putting forward a different Hegel, an unknown Hegel, and that is what Žižek does, based on Lacan (who was a magnificent Hegelian—or so Žižek would claim—at first explicitly and later secretly, all along the way).¹

The political stakes are clear.² But they are not, for better or worse, what I will be explicitly concerned with in what follows. The point for present purposes is rather that we should take seriously the way Žižek himself understands his own division of labour: in the name of dialectical thought, Lacan is ultimately reduced to an instrument through which Hegel is to be read. What kind of reading of Hegel does this give us?

Aufhebung as Reduction

If one can only provide a single contextualising gloss on *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), Žižek's international debut, it would be that it was written thoroughly under the influence of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985).³ By introducing the notion of *discourse*, Laclau and Mouffe took themselves to transcend the traditional playing field of Marxist orthodoxy. Despite receiving significant push-back,⁴ *Hegemony* rapidly gained traction in the mainstream of leftist political theory by arguing for a disentanglement of the organisational focus of grass root movements from the centrality of class struggle. Class is on this account instead subordinated to one struggle among others (feminist, environmental, ethnic, sexual, etc.), and any of these are said to have the potential to *hegemonise* the discursive field. That is, any local struggle can in principle emerge as the global focal point which Marxists otherwise supposedly render exclusive to the notion of class.⁵

¹ Alain Badiou, "The Idea of Communism", in Costas Douzinas & Slavoj Žižek (eds.), *The Idea of Communism* (London & New York: Verso, 2010), 4. Quoted in Anders Burman, "A Lacanian Hegelianism: Slavoj Žižek's (Mis-)Reading of Hegel", in Anders Bartonek and Anders Burman (eds.), *Hegelian Marxism: The Uses of Hegel's Philosophy in Marxist Theory from Georg Lukács to Slavoj Žižek*, 195-96.

² Indeed, it is on almost purely political grounds that I think that Žižek should be placed within the tradition of Left (read: *Marxist*) Hegelianism. Philosophically, Žižek denies the dichotomy between Left and Right Hegelianism; he repudiates any notion of a supposed tension between system and method in Hegel's thought. To frame Žižek as a politically Left Hegelian may, however, come across as an obvious point. But criticisms have been made that 'Žižek is ultimately a 'Right Hegelian' masquerading – albeit unwittingly – as a 'Left Hegelian'.' (Peter Dews, "The Tremor of Reflection: Slavoj Žižek's Lacanian Dialectics", in *The Limits of Disenchantment: Essays on Contemporary European Philosophy* [London and New York: Verso, 1995], 252.)

³ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 2001 [1985]).

⁴ See, for example, the initial back-and-forth between Laclau and Mouffe and Norman Geras in the pages of *New Left Review*: Norman Geras. "Post-Marxism?" *New Left Review*, no. 163 (May–June 1987): 40–82; Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. "Post-Marxism Without Apologies." *New Left Review*, no. 166 (November–December 1987): 79–106.

⁵ While the early Žižek of the *Sublime Object* seems to endorse Laclau and Mouffe's project of post-Marxism, his subsequent theoretical development is marked by a political shift which leads him to abandon the notion of class as merely one struggle among many. Cf. Robert Adam Crich. *Slavoj Žižek's Dialectical Materialist Marxism*. Doctoral dissertation (Cardiff University, 2015). Crich identifies an "epistemological break" (my phrasing) in

However, it is not the aspect of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* that develops the theory of the “battle for hegemony” that primarily influences Žižek. Its true breakthrough, he thinks, lies elsewhere. In “Beyond Discourse Analysis”, Žižek’s now-classic response to Laclau and Mouffe, instead of affirming *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* as ‘an essay in post-structuralist politics’, which ‘misses its fundamental dimension’, Žižek outlines what he understands as the book’s subversive core in the following terms:

The real achievement of *Hegemony* is crystallized in the concept of ‘social antagonism’: far from reducing all reality to a kind of language-game, the socio-symbolic field is conceived as structured around a certain traumatic impossibility, around a certain fissure that *cannot* be symbolized. In short Laclau and Mouffe have, so to speak, reinvented the Lacanian notion of the Real as impossible, they have made it useful as a tool for social and ideological analysis. Simple as it may sound, this breakthrough is of such a novelty that it was usually not even perceived in most responses to *Hegemony* (Žižek, 2005, 249).

Such a reinvention of “the Lacanian notion of the Real as impossible” is further extended by curiously being labelled *Hegelian*, toward a direction of a reading of Hegel which promotes him as a thinker of ‘pure antagonism’ (Žižek, 2005, 252). Indeed, it is in the exact same vein which Žižek, just a year earlier, puzzlingly describes Hegel in the introduction to the *Sublime Object* as ‘the first post-Marxist’ (Žižek, 2008, xxix.). It is *here* that he for the first time showcases the principal feature of his reading of Hegelian dialectic, which coincides precisely with an insistent emphasis on the idea of constitutive antagonism.

The introduction of *Sublime Object* provides a condensed formulation of the particular accent of the contours of this reading:

far from being a story of its [antagonism’s] progressive overcoming, dialectics is for Hegel a systematic notation of the failure of all such attempts – ‘absolute knowledge’ denotes a subjective position which finally accepts ‘contradiction’ as an internal condition of every identity (Žižek, 2008, xxix).

When the reader of the *Sublime Object* subsequently reaches the end of its introduction and encounters the declaration that the ‘only way to ‘save Hegel’ is through Lacan’ (Žižek, 2008, xxxi.). they might instinctively retort: “*Save Hegel from what?*” This question is not at all misplaced, and there is a very precise answer for it. Hegel needs to be saved from being buried once and for all on account of a conception of a final sublation (*Aufheben*) of antagonism. That

Žižek’s *Metastases of Enjoyment* (1994), a break which productively serves as the underlying axiom of his whole study. Žižek announces in *The Metastases* for the first time his philosophical project to be understood in terms of “dialectical materialism”. To be sure, this was not under the influence of Laclau and Mouffe.

is, he needs to be saved from the caricature as ‘a monster of conceptual totality devouring every contingency’ (Žižek, 2008, p. xxix). But if *Aufhebung*, sublation, does not signify the resolution of contradiction (*Widerspruch*) – the more precise Hegelian term for “antagonism” – what is it?

As Hegel introduces the notion of *Aufhebung* in his *Science of Logic*, he unequivocally refers to it as ‘one of the most important concepts in philosophy’ (Hegel, 2010a, 81), and it is not an exaggeration to describe sublation as the underlying mechanism of Hegelian dialectic as such, its fundamental condition of possibility.¹ As it contains at the very least the dual meaning of simultaneous cancellation and preservation (and to the latter we should add the third connotation of “raising”), it is usually, and not without good reason, understood in terms of what we can refer to as a mechanism of expansive complexification. That is, logical categories are understood to be dialectical by virtue of an inherent dynamism that drives them to transform into higher and more sophisticated forms, which in turn leads to these forms discovering new territory.

Žižek attends to the question of *Aufhebung* in more than one place. But it receives a particularly lucid treatment in the preface to the second edition of the *Sublime Object*.² Rather than affirming it as an operation of expansion, he characterises the underlying logic of sublation as one of *reduction*:

the sublated thing survives but in an ‘abridged’ edition, as it were, torn out of its life-world context, stripped down to its essential features, all the movement and wealth of its life reduced to a *fixed mark* (Žižek, 2008, xi).³

This consequently pushes back against the Lukácsian notion according to dialectic is not about the isolation of a “fixed mark” but its place in the Totality of relations. Instead of seeking

¹ “Condition of possibility” is here employed in a strict Kantian-transcendental sense. The phrase is often used loosely, having peculiarly migrated to a variety of disciplinary domains. Say, for example, that the rise of Napoleon is described as *possible* against the backdrop of the French revolution as a (historical) condition of possibility. While true, the philosophical import of the notion of condition of possibility (*Bedingung der Möglichkeit*) is grossly diluted. Its philosophically accurate usage signifies the possibility of a systematic experience of scientific (for Kant, Newtonian) objects. Conditions of possibility – conditions which are transcendental – are *invariants* of epistemological comprehension. (I owe this observation entirely to Nicholas Lawrence.)

² This preface is written some twenty years after the *Sublime Object*’s original publication. Here, moreover, he extends the particular language of “saving” Hegel through Lacan to the vocabulary of “redemption”: ‘... my wager was (and is) that, through their interaction (reading Hegel through Lacan and vice versa), psychoanalysis and Hegelian dialectics may simultaneously redeem themselves, shedding their old skins and emerging in a new unexpected shape.’ (Ibid, viii.)

³ My emphasis. Cf. Gérard Lebrun, *La Patience du Concept: Essai sur le discours hégélien* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 301: ‘There is always meaning, of course, and richer than we imagined, – but on condition of adding that we did not know until then what meaning was and that dialectic is therefore not an expansion, but a radical critique of the thought of Understanding. It does not extirpate the fixing stipulations of the latter to substitute others, more learned ones, but to lead us to recognize that meaning is not on the scale of a set of stipulations. In short, it is a mutation of the very nature of the Logos.’ (Translation and second emphasis mine.)

to grasp the concrete whole of relational multiplicity, sublation rather connotes for Žižek to abstract from such a whole and posit a singular unit – a One – that enables the very possibility of the representation of the Whole.

Žižek gestures that Hegel approaches this One, the product of sublation *qua* reduction, at a particular juncture in the preface to the *Phenomenology*, where Hegel explains the role of science (*Wissenschaft*) across Spirit's experiential path. Since scientific consciousness has already traversed this path when its natural, not-yet-scientific counterpart is only at the start, natural consciousness' self-comprehension has already been *implicitly* accomplished; the content is already the actuality reduced to a possibility, its immediacy overcome, and the embodied shape reduced to abbreviated, simple determinations of thought (Hegel, 1977, 17).

What Hegel describes here as the reduction of actuality to possibility articulates the point of the abstraction from Many to One. The complex "shapes of consciousness" have been, as Hegel indicates, condensed into simple determinations. Žižek adds to this that it is ultimately language's act of *naming* that performs this labour and thus enables scientific comprehension:

... the signifying reduction accentuates (profiles) the thing's inner potential. When I call someone 'my teacher', I thereby outline the horizon of what I expect from him; when I refer to a thing as 'chair', I profile the way I intend to use it in future. When I observe the world around me through the lenses of a language, I perceive its actuality through the lenses of the potentialities hidden, latently present, in it. What this means is that potentiality appears 'as such', becomes actual *as potentiality*, only through language; it is the appellation of a thing that brings to light ('posits') its potentials (Žižek, 2008, xi).

The reductive mechanism of *Aufhebung* thus transforms what *is* into what *can be*. Additionally, the latter must be accounted for from an anchored rather than free-floating place. In the *Science of Logic*, for example, the first proper place like this is determinate being (*bestimmtes Sein*), which is the sublated outcome of the vanishing moments of Being and Nothing *qua* Becoming. Existence (*Das Dasein*), determinate being, is the name which puts its foot down against the ceaselessness of becoming.¹

The thrust of the specifically Lacanian point of all this consists in Žižek's assertion that the emblem of *Aufhebung* – the aforementioned *fixed mark* – corresponds to (or rather can only be accounted for by) what Lacan calls "the unary trait" (*le trait unaire*). This trait constitutes the

¹ 'The equilibrium in which coming-to-be and ceasing-to-be are poised is in the first place becoming itself. But this becoming equally collects itself in *quiescent unity*. Being and nothing are in it only as vanishing; becoming itself, however, is only by virtue of their being distinguished. Their vanishing is therefore the vanishing of becoming, or the vanishing of the vanishing itself. Becoming is a ceaseless unrest that collapses into a quiescent result.' (Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 81.)

root of Lacan's theory of the signifier.¹ We are here at the ground-zero of the homology between Hegelian dialectic and the "logic of the signifier". Now, if we are to understand *Aufhebung* by underscoring it as an essentially transformative mechanism that formally *enables* dialectic, and if such enabling rests on a logic of reduction, the claim is that the unary trait is an indispensable notion for coming to terms with the specific nature of the mark at issue. This is the question to be pursued: what kind of *One* is this mark?

"The principle of identity"

At the outset of the second chapter of *for they know not what they do*, "The Wanton Identity", Žižek makes the following programmatic announcement:

The doxa on Hegel against which the whole of our interpretation is directed – a doxa which is today [in 1991] a commonplace on all sides of the philosophical spectrum, from Adorno to "post-structuralism" – reads as follows: it is true that Hegel asserts the right of the Particular – that he, so to speak, opens the door to its wealth and conceives the network of differences as something inherent to the universal Notion, as resulting from the self-articulation of its immanent content; yet is precisely through this operation that the phenomenal exterior is reduced to the self-mediation of the inner Notion, all differences are "sublated" in advance in so far as they are posited as ideal moments of the Notion's mediated identity with itself.²

¹ *Le trait unaire* is Lacan's translation of Freud's notion of *einzigster Zug* from *Group Psychology and Analysis of the Ego*. Freud develops this notion on the basis of his insight that, in Lacanian parlance, the subject's identification with the Other are occasionally incomplete: in such cases the 'identification is a partial and extremely limited one and only borrows a *single trait* from the person who is its object.' Indeed, the *einzigster Zug* specifically concerns the psychoanalytic question of identification, and it is with respect to identification that Lacan first remarks on it in his seminar on the *Formations of the Unconscious*, noting that 'Freud speaks of a trait, a single trait, *einzigster Zug*, it doesn't matter what, of someone else, someone with whom she can sense that there is the same problem of desire.' A couple of years later, however, in the seminar on identification itself, the *einzigster Zug*, now *le trait unaire* or the unary trait, is rendered into a general function. 'The exemplary function', says Lacan, 'is linked to the *extreme reduction*, precisely with regard to it, of all the opportunities for qualitative difference.' The unary trait is the transcendental condition of difference – it is 'the support as such of difference'. – For these quotes, see, in order, Sigmund Freud, "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego", in the *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Work of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XVIII [London: The Hogarth Press, 1955], 107; Jacques Lacan, *Formations of the Unconscious: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book V*, trans. Russell Grigg, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller [Cambridge: Polity, 2017], 411; Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book IX: Identification*, trans. Cormac Gallagher (unpublished manuscript), 33, 38, emphasis mine. Cf. also Lorenzo Chiesa, "Count-as-One, Forming-into-One, Unary Trait, S1, *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, Vol 2, no 1-2 (2006), 68-93.

² Žižek, *for they know not*, 61. In his relatively recent book on the *Logic*, Robert Pippin, the foremost representative of the deflationary reading of Hegel, similarly addresses this *doxa* aptly in terms of 'the "critical theory" reaction and appropriation of Hegel.' On Pippin's account, the problem with Hegel is, again, his supposed tyrannical universalism, 'and [according to critical theory] what we must do is find some way of affirming, acknowledging, letting be – and here the list is endless – difference, otherness, the existential individual, Dasein, the subaltern, the

The passage surely has polemical intent (insensitively collapsing Adorno – and presumably the rest of the Frankfurt School¹ – and so-called post-structuralism into one another). But beyond mere polemics there is more than a grain of truth to its claim. While we should pay careful attention to the intricate differences between theoretical enterprises such as negative dialectic and deconstruction (the latter, as we will see, is the framework that Žižek singles out as the worthiest representative of so-called post-structuralism), it is difficult to get around that they are united by a shared view of Hegel as ultimately a thinker of self-absorbed narcissism (Jameson, 2017, 130–131). Hegelian Spirit, according to them, only encounters the world in its mirror image.

Neither Adorno's nor Derrida's admiration for Hegelian-dialectical thinking should be underestimated. The first of Adorno's *Hegel: Three Studies*, for example, written on the occasion of 125th anniversary of Hegel's death, takes as its point of departure Benedetto Croce's question concerning what is dead and what remains alive in Hegel from our historically privileged perspective of the Now. Dismissively responding to this, Adorno insists that the very form of Croce's question fundamentally misses the point. The question must instead be reversed into asking about the extent to which, *if any*, we are alive from Hegel's perspective. That is, if we have a hard look at ourselves from where Hegel is standing, can we genuinely say that we are worthy philosophical and politico-historical successors? We should not be arrogant and indulge in debating what we think of Hegel – the real question asks what Hegel would think of us.²

Derrida's deconstruction articulates a similar ambivalence in its relationship to Hegelian dialectic. In fact, the very first use of the term “deconstruction” takes place in one of Derrida's critical negotiations between Hegel and Heidegger.³ (Indeed, Heidegger's dominant influence on Derrida in general asserts itself against Hegel's looming shadow.) This negotiation is *critical*

absolute indeterminacy of sense, and so forth.’ What Pippin lucidly adds to this is that the problem of reading Hegel in such a way ultimately resides in an insufficient understanding of Hegel's notion of the *concrete* universal. (Robert Pippin, *Hegel's Realm of Shadows: Logic as Metaphysics in The Science of Logic* [Chicago and London: The University Chicago Press, 2018], 26.) Indeed, the latter is one of the Hegelian tropes that Žižek repeatedly invokes throughout his thinking, but curiously not – at least not explicitly – in *for they know not*. For one of these invocations, see *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London and New York: Verso, 1999), 98-103.

¹ For example, any consideration of Frankfurt School Hegelianism must include the early Herbert Marcuse's *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (London: Routledge: 1955 [1941]).

² Theodor W. Adorno, “Aspects of Hegel's Philosophy” in *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Sherry Weber Niholsen (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1993 [1963]), 1. On the same note, Adorno continues on the following page: ‘If one does not want to miss Hegel with one's very first words, one must confront, however inadequately, the claim his philosophy makes to truth, rather than merely discussing his philosophy from above, and thereby from below.’

³ See Peter Gratton, “The Spirit of the Time: Derrida's Reading of Hegel in the 1964–65 Lecture Course,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 15, no. 1 (Spring 2015), 50, 55. Gratton demonstrates how the inception of “*déconstruction*” specifically took place at the interstices of Heideggerian *Destruktion* and Hegelian *Aufhebung*.

insofar as it actively resists an unquestioning embrace of Heidegger's critique of dialectical speculation. Derrida is clear on the point that Heidegger positively opposes dialectical thinking, reifies it, and so falls himself into the very representational logic of dialectic that he opposes. For Derrida himself, however, as he later articulates in *Of Grammatology*, while he is indeed the ultimate philosopher of identity, 'Hegel is *also* the thinker of irreducible difference' (Derrida, 1974, 26).

It is precisely on this question of "the principle of identity" that Žižek's extensive engagement with Derrida (or rather deconstruction in general) in *for they know not* begins.¹ At first sight, the confrontation appears soft: there is nothing at fault with Derrida's position *per se*. The problem is rather that Derrida does not recognise the extent to which the deconstructive and dialectical approaches are actually aligned:

The problem with the Derridean approach is that it systematically overlooks the Hegelian character of its own basic operation and reduces Hegelian dialectics to the teleological circle of the notion's self-mediation . . . (Žižek, nd, 32).

¹ Adorno subsequently falls by the wayside. The reader of *for they know not* might wonder why this is. Even though he is explicitly mentioned in the passage quoted above, his position is not extensively interrogated in *for they know not*, but rather only mentioned (often affirmatively) in passing. Most notably, as I have already cited above, he is referred to as 'a perspicacious critical intellect', which is telling of the fact that Žižek holds him in high esteem. I would tentatively speculate that in the grand scheme of things Žižek, as a fellow dialectician, stands closer to Adorno; but he nevertheless deems Derrida's reading of Hegel to be more refined, and that is why he will dedicate a more elaborate confrontation with the latter. (There is also an element of the fact that deconstruction had been an intellectual vogue through the '80s, which Žižek is implicitly addressing.) But cf. the following passage (which is worth citing in full despite its length) from some twenty years on, in *Less Than Nothing*, where Žižek explicitly addresses Adorno's negative dialectic with regard to the same question we are concerned with here:

We can now see why Adorno's project of "negative dialectics," which sees itself as the overcoming of Hegel's "positive" dialectics, misses the point. "Negative dialectics" wants to break out of the confines of the "principle of identity" which enslaves or subordinates every otherness through conceptual mediation. In Hegel's idealism, negativity, alterity, and differenced are asserted, but only as subordinate secondary moments serving their opposite – the absolute Subject re-appropriates all otherness, "sublating" it into a moment of its own self-mediation. Adorno counters this with his "primacy of the objective": instead of appropriating or internalizing all otherness, dialectics should remain open towards it, granting ultimate primacy to the objective over the subjective, to difference over identity. What if, however, the image of Hegel's dialectic this critique presupposes is wrong? What if, in its innermost core, Hegel's dialectic is not a machine for appropriating or mediating all otherness, for sublating all contingency into a subordinated ideal moment of the notional necessity? What if Hegelian "reconciliation" already is the acceptance of an irreducible contingency at the very heart of notional necessity? What if it involves, as its culminating moment, the setting-free of objectivity in its otherness? In this case, it is Adorno's "negative dialectics" which, paradoxically, remains within the confines of "identitarian" thought: the endless critical "work of the negative" which is never done, since it presupposes Identity as its starting point and foundation. In other words, Adorno, does not see how what he is looking for (a break-out from the confines of Identity) is already at work at the very heart of the Hegelian dialectic, so that it is Adorno's very critique which obliterates the subversive core of Hegel's thought, retroactively cementing the figure of his dialectic as the pan-logicist monster of the all-consuming Absolute notion. (*Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* [London: Verso, 2012], 262. Emphasis mine.)

Insofar as he is guilty of such a reduction, Derrida follows the ‘traditional’ (Žižek, nd, 32). reading of Hegelian dialectic, according to which the force of negativity, the terrain of the proliferation of difference, is a means to an end of the realisation of an identical positivity, of the self-subsistent Same.¹ We could claim, then, that Derrida views Hegel as a thinker of “irreducible difference” implicitly in line with the old Left-Hegelian exclusive insistence on dialectic *qua* method, as free-floating negativity. But he nevertheless maintains, unlike orthodox Left Hegelians, that the method cannot be isolated from the system; and this system cannot, in Derrida’s estimation, be vindicated. Succinctly, ‘Derrida applauds Hegel’s negative but not the economy it serves in his system.’²

The traditional reading understands dialectical negativity in relation to the self-identical regime to which it is subordinated. This is the space within which *différance* would intervene as ‘precisely the limit, the interruption, the destruction of the Hegelian *rèlevé wherever it operates*’ (Derrida, 1981, 40). Žižek, however, stresses the immanence of negativity and the regime into which it intervenes. He does this to the extent that it does not suffice to say that they are two sides of the same coin, but that they are one and the same side. “Identity” is thus for Žižek nothing but the name for the dynamism of the negative. Identity is nothing but its inherent self-sundering.

What, precisely, does this mean? The example invoked over and over again in *for they know not* is that of the dialectic of – significantly, not “between” – law and crime. Law does not simply constitute self-identical frame whose tautological self-assertion (*the Law is the Law!*) appropriates the negativity of crime as an external disturbance. It is rather law itself which constitutes negativity as such, because law is fundamentally split from within:

One can say that law divides itself necessarily into an “appeasing” law and a “mad” law: the opposition between the law and its transgressions repeats itself inside (in Hegelese: is “reflected into”) the law itself (Žižek, nd, 30).

What follows from this is that it is law, not crime, that amounts to the highest transgression, because the positive identity of law is nothing else than the universalisation of the negativity of crime. Indeed: ‘The external opposition of particular crimes and universal law has to be dissolved in the “inner antagonism of crime: what we call “law” is nothing but universalised crime – that is, law results from the negative self-relationship of crime.’³

¹ Other prominent Hegelians have recently criticised Derrida on the same line. See, for example, Stephen Houlgate, *Hegel on Being: Quality and the Birth of Quantity in Hegel’s Science of Logic, Volume 1* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 153: ‘Derrida acknowledges that Hegel has a keen understanding for the importance of the negative in philosophy and in life. Yet he asserts that Hegel always thinks the negative *within* a certain pre-established order.’

² Simon Lumsden, “Dialectic and *différance*: The place of singularity in Hegel and Derrida,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 33, no. 6 (2007), 668.

³ Ibid, 32. For an artistic exploration of this precise example which illustrates perfectly what Žižek is getting at here, see José Padilha’s controversial *Tropa de Elite*. Set in Rio de Janeiro, the film revolves around the (non-

On the same note, Žižek further clarifies that this logic, which renders identity in terms of nothing but the positivisation of difference, captures the meaning of the infamous Hegelian motif of “negation of negation”. If an initial glance at the notion law from the perspective of Understanding (*Verstand*), every-day common sense, sees a self-contained abstraction that stands in external opposition to the multitude of crimes as its *negation*, the shift of perspective to Reason (*Vernunft*), which alone constitutes a philosophical gaze proper, is able to grasp how law already negates itself.

“Negation of negation” is thus the designation for ‘the moment when external negative relationship turns into law’s internal self-negation’ (Žižek, 2012, 269-280).

. In other words, negation of negation stands for the “immanentisation” of difference within identity itself. Crucially, however, this is *not* to be understood as a collapse of difference into identity. Instead, the point is that negation of negation implies the obstruction of identity from being identical with itself. The weight of this shift of interpretive emphasis cannot be overstated.

The Empty Place of Inscription (. . .)

Let me summarise the story of dialectical Identity so far, and also to further stress where Žižek gives it an additional twist. In the traditional reading, identity is said to progress from an abstract to a concrete mode – from excluding difference to including it within itself. We initially have law as opposed to crime (abstract identity), and in a second moment law as inclusive of crime (concrete identity). The identity of law comes to mediate the negativity of crime within itself. Law thus coincides with crime, and we arrive neatly at the famous Hegelian formula of the “identity of identity and non-identity”. Identity is thus rendered dynamic by its mediation of non-identity.

For Žižek, however, this misses the coincidence of the mediation-of-difference and the self-sameness of the identical as the prescription of contradiction, the category of dialectic *par excellence* (Žižek, 2012, 33). The point is not that identity is smoothly dynamised by its inclusion of difference, but that the manner in which identity coincides with difference, its opposite, points toward its underlying structure as one of fundamental *discord*.

The notion of law as the universalisation of crime, to stick with this example for just another moment, ‘reveals . . . the obscene violence, the absolute, universalized crime as its hidden reverse’ (Žižek, 2012, 34). So, identity mediates negativity by universalising it, and in the same breath that same identity thus contradicts itself without compromise. The issue at hand in this logic of identity concerns how a qualitative *One* (law) comes to terms with an opposing *Many* (crime). From the other side of the dialectical circle, however, we can also explore how the One

fictional) BOPE (*Batalhão de Operações Policiais Especiais*), a proto-fascist offshoot of the every-day Military Police that intervenes and takes over cases that are beyond the latter’s capacities. BOPE is thus quite literally the “mad” law that has divided itself from the “appeasing” law of the Military Police, a division that takes place *within law itself*.

is produced in the first place. Instead of asking to *account* for the Many, the question would read: how does the One *emerge* from the Many?¹

Here, Žižek turns to Marx's *The Class Struggles in France*, the series of articles the latter wrote for *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* on the French 1848 revolutionary upheavals. But what catches Žižek's attention is not the political analysis of the February Revolution as such, but a specific passage in which Marx accounts for 'the chemical combination'² of two opposed factions of royalism (Orleanism and Legitimism). This combination of opposed royalism led to, somehow, republicanism. That is, Marx attends to the question of how the Two of royalism "merge" into the One of republicanism. Or more accurately, how royalism realises itself in republicanism. Žižek reads this in the following way:

Republicanism is thus, in this logic, a species of the genus royalism; within the level of species, it holds the place of the genus itself – in it, the universal genus is represented, acquires particular existence, in the form of its opposite. In other words, the genus of royalism is divided into three species: Orleanists, Legitimists and republicans.

The *real opposition* between the royalist Two of Orleanists and Legitimists, as the immediate species of the genus of royalism, is not resolved by synthesising them into a higher pseudo-dialectical royalist unit. Rather, what takes place is a negation of their respective specificity 'by choosing royalism in general'. This paradoxically amounts to the choice of republicanism. Thus, and I take this to be Žižek's crucial point, 'the universal genus *encounters itself* within its own particular species' (Žižek, 1991, 34).

The particulars with specific content (again, Orleanism and Legitimism) are rejected so that the generality of the universal can be affirmed as a particular form (Republicanism). And so we arrive at the contradiction which affirms the identity of royalism and republicanism, or indeed the realisation of royalism *as* republicanism. In this way, we move from real opposition to contradiction. The Two is not resolved but mediated at their very extremes in order for the One to arrive upon the scene.

But this One, Žižek continues, is the realisation of a tautological contradiction. The proposition "royalism is republicanism" is the outcome of royalism's attempt to assert itself *as* royalism. That is, from "royalism is royalism" we arrive at "royalism is republicanism".³ It is

¹ This in fact evokes the title of the first part of *for they know not* as a whole – "E Pluribus Unum", which of course references the Great Seal of the United States. *E pluribus unum* was still until the mid 1950's the official motto of the States, until it was replaced with the more familiar religious slogan "In God We Trust".

² Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, Volume 10 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1978), 95. Cited in Žižek, *for they know not*, 34.

³ It should be noted that we are told that tautology, the basic form of which recalls the law of identity, can only play out in terms of contradiction 'within the framework of dialogical economy.' There is a structure in place

precisely this form of tautological contradiction which is emphasised as the kernel of Hegel's notion of identity. The first part of the proposition – “royalism is . . .” – anticipates ‘a *determination* of the abstract universality, a *mark* inscribed into the place, an *element* of the set’, which “. . . royalism” does not provide. So ‘instead of encountering itself, the initial moment comes across *its own absence*, the set comes across itself as *empty set*’ (Žižek, 1991, 35).

The universal One which arises thus arises precisely by failing to assert itself positively.

The key to the propositional form of the self-identical One can thereby be said to reside in unfulfilled predicative anticipation: “the One is . . .”. We thus finally arrive at one of the clearest formulations of why the dialectical notion of identity is homologous with the Lacanian logic of the signifier. The relevant passage deserves to be quoted in full:

Identity of an entity with itself equals the coincidence of this entity with the empty place of its “inscription”. We come across identity when predicates fail. Identity is the surplus which cannot be captured by predicates – more precisely (and this precision is crucial if we want to avoid a misconception about Hegel), identity-with-itself is *nothing but* this impossibility of predicates, *nothing but* this confrontation of an entity with the void at the point where we expect a predicate, a determination of its positive content (“law is . . .”). Identity-with-itself is thus another name for absolute (self-referential) negativity, for the negative relationship toward all predicates that define one's – what? – *identity* (Žižek, 1991, 36-37).

Any opposition to the dialectical notion of identity on grounds of criticising its exhaustive fullness thus misses its mark. The structural space of identity is this “empty place of its

which accounts for the anticipation of the party (the interlocutor) for whom the tautological is grasped as contradictory. In turn, this ‘implies a pure logical *temporality*: a temporal scansion between the moment of expectation and the moment of its disappointment, a minimal *delay* of the second part of the tautology.’ Tautology *qua* contradiction thus rests on this temporality of delay (the effects of which are discussed in the paragraphs below).

This brings to mind a passage from Lacan's seminar on *The Logic of Fantasy*, never commented on by Žižek as far as I am aware, where he comments on Russell's paradox. Insofar as the source of the paradox is pure mathematical writing, there is actually no paradox. Paradox only arises when the pure non-sensical writing of mathematics is put under the scrutiny by the “impure” sense-making of language. (This point belongs to Paris Lavidis.) In the same way, then, what Žižek is saying here about the dialogical economy of contradiction, the form of tautology is only contradictory insofar as it is an attempt at making *sense*. And if one claims (which, I think, Žižek would) that there is no “pure writing” of tautology, tautology is in fact inherently contradictory. Indeed, as a dialectical notion, tautology signifies impurity *par excellence*. Consider the following, from *Less Than Nothing*, as Žižek's definitive words on the issue: ‘Far from clarifying things, tautology gives birth to the spectre of some ponderable depth which escapes words; far from being an index of perfection, it hints at an obscene contingent underside.’ (370) – For Lacan's remark on Russell, see Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XIV: The logic of fantasy, 1966-67*, trans. Cormac Gallagher [unpublished manuscript], 12

inscription”, which, as I will attend to shortly, approaches the Lacanian definition of the signifier as pure non-coincidence with itself.

As an empty place, identity is strictly formal. What critics of dialectic point to is the subsequent contingent content which “fills it out” as if that content is a disavowed first principle. This applies not least to Derrida and deconstruction, whose appeal to an Outside that will forever resist the supposed illusion of dialectical closure, on Žižek’s view, fails to recognise that such resistance is thoroughly immanent to the dialectical process itself. The key here is ‘the Hegelian inversion of *identity qua impossible* into *identity itself as a name for a certain radical impossibility*’ (Žižek, 1991, 37).

Deconstruction seeks to subvert the identical One, but this One already is its own subversion.

What is a signifier?

Up until now, Žižek’s reading of Hegel has been cast in mostly Hegelian terms themselves: identity, negativity, mediation and so on. I want to now change the gear of the vocabulary and explore how this reading is transcoded into the paradigm of the signifier. We were already implicitly within the latter when the definition of identity was posited as self-relating negativity, which indeed ‘furnishes the elementary matrix of the dialectical process’ (Žižek, 1991, 42).

And we are no less moving in the same space when Žižek refers to the notion that “the universal encounters itself within its particular species”: royalism is realised in republicanism; law is realised in absolute crime. Can this movement be systematically specified?

An initial point *en route* to such a specification would be to stress that it demonstrates a proximity between dialectic and post-Cantorian set theory. This may come as a surprise – is the spokesman of set theory in contemporary philosophy not Badiou (whose deployment of it is, moreover, explicitly anti-dialectical¹) rather than Žižek? Yes, but we must not forget that Lacan, their shared master,² preceded Badiou in accentuating the theoretical implications of the

¹ In a representative essay, Badiou writes: ‘Dialectics is a programme, or initiation, while mathematics is an existing, available procedure. Dialectical conversion is the eventual point at which the Platonic [and we might here say ‘Hegelian’] text touches the real. But the only point of external support for the break with doxa – in the form of something that already exists – is constituted by mathematics and mathematics alone.’ In even more general terms, the drive forcing of dialectic, according to Badiou, coincides with the impulse of *defining* what he calls the “pure (inconsistent) multiple”, indeed ‘to the extent that it establishes the normative power of the one within language itself.’ Badiou admits that dialectic proceeds by way of necessary differentiation, by way of the exposition of the multiple, but its definitional procedure, again, inevitably ties it to ‘the ambit of the metaphysical power of the one.’ Conversely, the mathematical presentation of the multiple is strictly non-definitional, which is what decisively distinguishes it from dialectic. – See, in order, Alain Badiou, “Philosophy and Mathematics”, *Theoretical Writings*, trans. and ed. Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano [London and New York: Continuum, 2004], 29; “The Question of Being Today”, in *Ibid*, 43; *ibid*.

² As we already know, Žižek’s two fundamental points of reference are Hegel and Lacan. Badiou keeps Hegel at safe – but definitely not hostile – distance, and in addition to Lacan he names Sartre and Althusser as his other two *maîtres*. He describes his intellectual formation as such in several places. For example: ‘I was in my youth, at the

Cantorian break.¹ There are thus aspects of the “logic of the signifier” *qua* Hegelian-Žižekian dialectic that can be said to be set-theoretical. Consider again the structure of the self-encounter of the universal genus in the midst of its particular species. Just as in set theory, the universal does not amount to a “neutral” background against which we observe the interplay of particulars. The universal and the particular are positioned on the same level. In the same way, in set theory, there is no real distinction between a set and its elements: a set fully coincides with and can only be grasped through its elements.²

It does not follow from this, however, that we are dealing with a kind of flat conceptual field. A set nevertheless coincides with at least one element that is a ‘paradoxical element’ which is only positively presented in its ‘element-lack’, that is, in its absence. We arrive here at how these elementary principles of set-theory directly pertain to the *structure* of the Lacanian notion of the signifier:

This paradox is founded in the differential character of the signifier’s set: as soon as one is dealing with a differential set, one has to comprise in the network of differences the difference between an element and its own absence. In other words, *one has to consider as a part of the signifier its own absence* – one has to posit the existence of a signifier which positivizes . . . the very lack of the signifier – that it to say, coincides with the place of inscription of the signifier. This difference is in a way “self-reflective”: the paradoxical, “impossible” yet necessary point at which the signifier differs not only from another (positive) signifier but *from itself as signifier* (Žižek, 1991, 43).

This is the theoretical backdrop against which Žižek describes dialectical identity as coincident

end of the Fifties, very close to Sartre; later, from the beginning of the Sixties, I was close to Lacan and, finally, between 1966 and 1968, to Althusser.’ (Alain Badiou, “Homage to Jacques Derrida”, in *Adieu Derrida*, ed. Costas Douzinas [Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1988], 35-36.)

¹ In his reading of Plato’s *Parmenides*, Lacan turns to Cantor and set theory in direct relation to the question of the One. For Lacan, as he makes clear in the same seminar as that reading, . . . *or Worse*, Plato’s insight consists in the discovery that the outcome of the tautology “One is One” results in fact in the non-coincidence of the One with itself. The notion of this non-coincident One is subsequently not accounted for until the formulation of the set-theoretical axiom of the *void set* – the empty set containing no elements but which nevertheless counts as a set. With *Parmenides* as a necessary backdrop, what set theory clarifies is precisely that the void set opens ‘the gate that has to be gone through in order to constitute the birth of the One.’ (Jacques Lacan, . . . *or Worse: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XIX* [London: Polity, 2022], 126.) The proximity between dialectic and set theory that I am emphasising here, however, is pre-empting that what Žižek makes of Hegel’s “logic of being” (the first subdivision of the *Science of Logic*) constitutes *either* an even more precise such backdrop, or actually provides an account of a proto-version of the notion of the void set itself. See the next section for the relation between the One and the Void.

² For a productively ‘shameless simplification’ of the fundamentals of set theory, see the appendix (“On the Development of Transfinite Set Theory”) to Peter Hallward’s *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 323-348.

with its place of inscription. In exactly the same way that identity constitutes itself by its distance from itself, the signifier is *homologously* split. It is not only that the signifier is defined by its difference from other signifiers (which merely amounts to the conventional structuralist insight) but, as Žižek stresses in the last sentence in the quoted passage above, (the Lacanian) signifier is already different from itself.

The underlying structure of the signifier is thus constituted by its immanent non-coincidence with itself. It is on this ground that we find ourselves at ‘the very heart of Hegelian dialectics. The universal genus encounters itself among its particular species and so discovers its inherent distance from itself; it discovers its *failure* to “find itself”, finding itself only in its absence. A straight-forward Aristotelian encounter between universal and particular (where they keep a healthy distance from one another) is what Hegelian dialectic problematises, as ‘the impetus of the dialectical process is precisely this “contradiction” between the Universal and Particular.’ Furthermore, once the self-identical universal’s “empty place of inscription” is grasped as structurally constitutive, every illusion of dialectical *wholeness* has to be set aside (where the particular has find its distinct place within the universal Whole – for example, the particularity of the individual in the universality of the rational State), ‘given that the disjunction/division of a signifier’s set is never exhaustive, there always remains an empty place occupied by the surplus element which is the set itself in the form of its opposite – that is, as empty set (Žižek, 1991, 43).

But so much for what we may call the set-theoretical structure of the signifier. The take-home message is that it clarifies especially what is stake in the dialectical relation between universal and particular, and furthermore the particular’s (non-) identity with itself (or rather particularity as the source of non-identity). More pressingly, what is it exactly that *defines* the signifier? Beyond structuralist platitudes, (from which we know that signifier is “sound-image”, etc (Saussure, 2011, 65-70).) what is a signifier? Lacan’s famous circular definition in “Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire”¹ asserts that “a signifier is that which represents the subject for another signifier.” Here is the whole passage in which it appears:

My definition of the signifier (there is no other) is as follows: a signifier is what represents the subject to another signifier. This latter signifier is therefore the signifier to which all the other signifiers represent the subject – which means that if this signifier is missing, all the other signifier represents nothing. For something is only represented to (Lacan, 2002, 304).

Commenting on this in detail, Žižek delineates a number of significant Lacano-logical distinctions. I will not indulge in regurgitating them simply for the sake of doing so, but only

¹ Žižek comments in passing that “Subversion of the Subject” is ‘probably the crucial text of *Écrits*’ (ibid, 21), which tells us something about his reading of Lacan. But a full account of the latter would more or less reverse the present problematic, as we are here concerned in the first instance with his reading of Hegel.

to the extent that they relate to the question of dialectic which we have been attending to so far. The fundamental distinction of these is that between the “master signifier” (symbolised by the Lacanian “matheme” S1, which indeed pertains directly to the notion of the One) and the “chain of signifiers” (S2, the Many). S1 and S2 may be the concepts of the signifier’s two terms (the *dyad* of the signifier), but the differential nature of the signifier does not consist in the duality they seem to imply:

Differentiality” designates a more precise relationship: in it, the opposite of one term, of its *presence*, is not immediately the other term but the *absence* of the first term, the *void* at the place of its inscription (the void which *coincides* with its place of inscription) and the presence of the other, opposite term *fills out* this void of the first term’s absence – this is how one has to read the well-known “structuralist” thesis according to which, in a paradigmatic opposition, the presence of a term means (equals) the absence of its opposite (Žižek, 1991, 22).

We follow here precisely the same movement which concerns the Hegelian-dialectical notion of identity *qua* coincidence with its empty place of inscription. The last sentence, which clarifies the meaning of structuralist opposition, can very well be reproduced, *mutatis mutandis*, with reference to *dialectical* opposition: the presence of an identity means the absence of its opposite. This absence just has to be taken literally – an absence that *is*. Indeed, in line with this, why should dialectic not be characterised as a metaphysics of absence?

The specificity of absence, however, must be further qualified. If the signifying dyad is that of S1 and S2, the absence in question – in line with Lacan’s definition above quoted above – is the *subject* itself. The matheme of the subject is \$, the signifier (S) with a bar running through it, which symbolises the signifier’s self-division. The signifying chain represents the subject to the master signifier, and the object of this representation is precisely absent underside of the notion signifier (the place of inscription), that which bars the signifier’s identity with itself. In other words, the subject.

Differentiality thus involves three terms: (i) master-signifier/the One/S1; (ii) signifying chain/the Many/S2; (iii) barred signifier/subject/\$. In dialectical terms, the subject *qua* impossibility enables *mediation*. Mediation, indeed, is in this light understood as a function that brings terms together by virtue of their abyssal distance from one another.¹ This tripartite structure cannot, however, be presupposed from the “beginning”. Precisely in the same way

¹ Such a notion of mediation was already developed by Fredric Jameson in *The Political Unconscious*, in his attempt to render it compatible with Althusser’s structuralist Marxism. Jameson was one of the first to see that the Hegelian notion of mediation does not exclusively follow a logic of an expression of the Same across different appearances. For him, the appearances ‘structural differentiation, the affirmation that they are not the same, and that in quite specific and determinate instances, is *also* a form of meditation.’ (Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981], 41).

that the One emerges from the Many in dialectic, the master-signifier too at some point has to emerge. We must be able to theorise the *genesis* of at the very least the master-signifier, if not the signifier itself.

In a remarkably innovative move, Žižek turns to the opening of Marx's *Capital* and the dialectical reversals of the value-form. The latter seemingly account, ultimately, for the logic of the *production* of the master-signifier. Both the commodity and the signifier are characterised by a defining contradiction – the commodity between itself (its *use*) and *exchange*; the signifier and its empty place of inscription. The exchange-value of the commodity can thus only be mediated via the use-value of another commodity, just as the absence is represented to another signifier. So goes the Marxian *simple* form of value, where there is a one-to-one correspondence between a commodity/signifier and another. Following the development of the “value-form of the signifier” through the *expanded* and *general* forms of the commodity respectively, Žižek arrives at the following formalised schema:

1. The simple form: “for *a* signifier, *another* signifier represents the subject” (i.e. *a* signifier represents the subject for *another* signifier);
2. The expanded form: “for *a* signifier, *any* of the other signifier can represent the subject”;
3. The general form; *a* (one) signifier represents the subject for *all the other* signifiers (Žižek, 1991, 24).

Of course, (2) and (3) mirror the commodity as it realises equivalence in a *series* of commodities (rather just *a*-nother commodity) and the standalone *general equivalent* respectively.

The general form of the signifier, however, should not be understood as a successful representation of the subject for the totality of signifiers. The transition from both simple to expanded and expanded to general are attempts to solve the misrepresentation of the signification's representation of the subject. But the general form, where the master signifier proper is finally identifiable, takes into account misrepresentation into its representation: ‘This signifier is, on the contrary, a “reflective” one: in it, the very failure, the very impossibility of the signifier's representation is reflected into this representation itself.’ It universalises, if you will, the intractable misrepresentation of all representation.¹ This is the meaning of “master-signifier” – the very opposite of a megalomaniac mastery of signification.

As readers of *Capital* will have already noted at this point, there is a fourth step in the commodity's value-formal dialectic: the *money-form*. In the general form, a particular commodity is rendered the universal point of reference for commodity exchange. Exchange still hinges on use. In the money form, however, the commodity's form of exchange is *naturalised*:

¹ Recall here the passage from the introduction of the *Sublime Object* that I have already quoted previously: ‘... far from being a story of its [antagonism's] progressive overcoming, dialectics is for Hegel a systematic notation of the failure of all such attempts – ‘absolute knowledge’ denotes a subjective position which finally accepts ‘contradiction’ as an internal condition of every identity.’ (*Sublime Object*, xxix.)

‘The advance [from general form to money form] consists only in that the form of direct and universal exchangeability, in other words the universal equivalent form, has now by social custom finally become entwined with the specific natural form of the commodity gold (Marx, 1976, 162). The same goes with the development of general form of the signifier. If in its general form the master-signifier represents the subjects for the rest of the signifiers, then, its money form inverts the vector of representation:

4. the money form: “a (*one*) signifier for which all the other signifiers represent the subject” (Žižek, 1991, 26).

While in the general form the One is still *any* signifier, in the money form ‘the multitude is totalized through the exceptional position of the One which embodies its moment of impossibility’ (Žižek, 1991, 26). And going back to Lacan’s definition from “Subversion of the Subject”, we clearly see how this progression from a tit-for-tat relation between signifiers which represent the subject *qua* void for *each other* leads successively to the pure signifier for *whom* (*it*) this void is represented.

The take-away for our purposes from this “genesis of the master-signifier” lies, not least, in a major clarification of the initiation of a dialectical process. Contradiction is not stumbled upon in the midst of dialectical movement. On the contrary, it constitutes the stumbling block of its very first steps. Or: ‘the identity of a signifier’s mark (S) always-already represents the subject (\$).’ The stumbling block of contradiction is resolved by assigning to one particular the exclusive role of representing \$, ‘by way of excluding from a series of signifier’s marks “at least One” which thereby re-marks the void of their very space of inscription’ (Žižek, 1991, 48) That is, for dialectical movement to begin proper, a certain pre-total structure has to be produced, one which precedes the actuality of the master-signifier. Where in Hegel do we witness this kind of “production”?

One Between Void and Zero

There is a decisive step from the signifier’s “general form” to its “money form”, in line with Žižek’s unprecedented Marxian-dialectical reading via the value-form of the commodity. It lies in the difference between, on the one hand, the One as the signifier (S1) which *represents* the subject (\$) for all other signifiers (S2), and on the other, the One as the signifier for which the subject is *represented* by them. In the Hegelian language of universality and particularity, the One is, for Žižek, an *excessive* particular which functions as a stand-in for the universal: ‘it comes in excess precisely in so far as it fills out the *lack* of the Particular with regard to the Universal.’ And further, crucially:

The surplus is thus *the form of appearance of the lack*; the One . . . is the form of appearance of Zero, and it is only at this point that the formula of the signifier can legitimately be introduced: the excess, the surplus One which fills out the lack, is the signifier which represents the subject (the void, Zero,

the empty set of the structure) (Žižek, 1991, 46).

The negative being of the subject coincides with the void or zero,¹ and the function of the One is essentially one of (metaphorical) substitution. As standing in for Zero, the One is its paradoxical representation. Why paradoxical? Because the master signifier has to be conceived as a One which *counts Zero for One*:

This would be the most elementary definition of the subject: a Nothing which is not pure nothingness but already “counted as One . . . a Nothing which appears in (is represented by) the form of its opposite, of One (Žižek, 1991, 50).²

Now, while Žižek has clarified the formula of the signifier as such by demonstrating a homology with the opening dialectical twists and turns of *Capital*, his endgame is nonetheless to “prove” that the underlying paradoxes of the signifier *One* (as just discussed above) plays out in Hegelian dialectic. For this purpose, the culminating episode of the “logic of Quality” in the *Science of Logic* is singled out.

This episode is what Hegel presents as “being-for-self” (*Das Fürsichsein*). I mentioned previously in passing that determinate being (*Das Dasein*) should be understood as the beginning proper of the *Logic*, as that which sublates Becoming or the unity of the mutual vanishing of Being and Nothing. Contrary to determinate being, being-for-self does not take its point of departure in the finite logic of *something* and *other*. Instead, we say that something is for itself inasmuch as it sublates otherness, sublates its connection and community with other, has rejected them by abstracting from them. The other is in it only *as* something sublates, as *its moment*; being-for-self consists in having thus transcended limitation, its otherness; it consists in being, as this negation, the infinite *turning back* into itself (Hegel, 2010a, 127).

¹ Void and zero are not, however, a synonymous pair. They are better described as one another’s qualitative and quantitative correlates, respectively. I will return to their distinction in the paragraphs below.

² This idea of the subject as the Zero which is counted as One was first elaborated by Jacques-Alain Miller in his *Cahier pour l’Analyse* intervention “Suture: Elements of the Logic of the Signifier”, in which he undertakes an immanent reading of Gottlob Frege’s *Foundations of Arithmetic*. Briefly, Miller’s critique of Frege focuses on the latter’s failure to acknowledge the paradoxical status of zero as a condition which enables the progression of whole numbers. While Frege is clear about his position on zero as that which is not identical with itself, he does not, according to Miller, treat it as such. Frege thus “counts zero as one” and in this way “sutures” logical discourse. The zero which is sutured and rendered invisible is, for Miller, coincident with the *subject*. See Jacques-Alain Miller, “Suture (Elements of the Logic of the Signifier)”, trans. Jacqueline Rose, in *Concept and Form: Volume 1, Selection from the Cahier pour l’Analyse* (London: Verso, 2012), 91-103.

The significance of Miller’s intervention for the trajectory of Lacanianism should not be underestimated. Even Alain Badiou, who went into fierce debate with Miller in his response (“Mark and Lack”, in *ibid*, 159-187), has called it the ‘the first great Lacanian text not to be written by Lacan himself.’ (Alain Badiou, *Number and Numbers*, trans. Robin Mackay [Cambridge: Polity, 2008], 25.) I should additionally also note that Miller was the first, including Lacan (at least to my knowledge), to invoke the specific syntagm “logic of the signifier” (*logique du signifiant*).

The nature of being-for-self is thus determined precisely by virtue of lack of determination. That is, by indeterminacy. It is in this way that the movement of its dialectic – which does not unfold in terms of a series of positive determinations which successively undermine each other – ‘reduces the thing [the form of Being] to an empty *one* (*Eins*)’ (Houlgate, 2022, 255). Quality, whose domain is that of determination, thus begins to tread the path toward Quantity, ‘being that is indifferent to determinacy’ (Hegel, 2010b, 156).

Given that being-for-self does not relate to an-*other*, then, it proceeds by “turning back into itself” as being-for-one. This “one”, however, is not a one *of something*, but as Hegel insists ‘in its other refers itself onto itself’ (Hegel, 2010a, 128).

Being-for-one is thus very much *for* one, as opposed to being for another. This is what its oneness consists in. Žižek therefore, very aptly, comments that ‘the passage of Something [which belong to determinate being] into One thus coincides with the passage of reality into ideality: ‘the One which the thing *qua* real is . . . is this thing itself in its ideality.’¹ It is precisely the idealising logic of the One of being-for-one, which marks the intervention of *signifier*. The plurality “real properties” of *Dasein* are sublated – that is, reduced – and survive only as an ‘arbitrary’ symbol. Indeed, it is this One *qua* pure symbol which Žižek identifies as Hegel’s articulation of the Lacanian *trait unaire*. We are dealing with ‘the ‘unitary feature designated by its signifying mark.’²

That we are actually on the territory of the signifier, at least in its “simple form”, is further reinforced by Hegel’s presentation of the void (*das Leere*) as the correlate of the One. As the One is not determined in relation to determinate otherness, its indifference to determinacy can also be articulated as a self-referential determination. But again, any determination implies differentiation via otherness. In the self-determination of the One, however, ‘there is no other to which it would be addressed, and the directing reverts back to itself.’ The content of the paradoxical determination of the One, then, is *nothingness*, indeed ‘the nothing as the *void*’ (Hegel, 2010a, 133).

’ The One thus acquires its determination by obstinately refusing determination.

Of course, as Hegel duly emphasises, the notion of the void was given philosophical dignity first by the atomists Democritus and Leucippus. This was a major turning point in the history of metaphysics, who’s inaugurating Parmenidean move had banished the void, or *nothingness*,

¹ Žižek, *for they know not*, 51. Hegel himself makes sure to emphasise that the One in question is a one whose function is that of idealisation: ‘An idealization is necessarily *for-one*, but it is not for another; the one, for which it is, is only itself.’ And he immediately continues on a note that, depending on how you read it, theologises the secular or secularises the theological: ‘— The “I”, therefore, spirit in general, or God, are idealizations, because they are infinite; as existents which are for themselves, however, they are not ideationally different from that which is for-one. For if they were different, they would be only immediate, or, more precisely, they would only be existence and a being-for-another . . . God is therefore *for himself*, in so far, he is himself that which is *for him*.’ (*The Science of Logic*, 128.)

² Žižek, *for they know not*, 51. See note 34 and the its correlative passage. I am explicitly returning to the question posed there.

from ontological consideration.¹ While Hegel praises atomism for taking a step beyond both Parmenidean Being and Heraclitean Becoming ‘by reducing the manifold of the world to this simple opposition’ between One and Void, its speculative insight lies for him not in this abstract reduction itself. The latter is rather to be found in its designation of the void ‘as the *source of movement*, and this entails a quite different connection of atom and void than the mere juxtaposition and mutual indifference of these two determinations.’ Hegel continues in a passage – one of the most defining in the *Logic* as a whole, I think, for the purposes of Žižek’s reading – that is worth quoting in full:

That the void is the source of movement does not have the trivial meaning that something can only move into an empty space and not into an already occupied one, for in the latter it would find no room still left open; understood in this way, the void would be only the presupposition or the condition of movement, not its *ground*, and the movement itself would be presupposed as already there while the essential point, its ground, is forgotten. The view that the void constitutes the ground of movement contains the more profound thought that the ground of becoming, of unrest and self-movement, lies in the negative in general, which in this sense, is however to be taken as the true negativity of the infinite (Hegel, 2010a, 37, 133–135).

The One and the Void, then, are not to be understood as an oppositional pair external to one another, as a superficial reading of atomism would entail. Such a view posits the void simply as the empty space that the atom does not occupy.²

The void is better conceived as “the restlessness of the negative” (Nancy, 2002). This restlessness indeed constitutes one of the linchpins of Žižek’s Hegel, but it is specifically a restlessness against an arguably still or fixed background of emptiness. Indeed, the void is for

¹ Atomism was a direct reaction against the Eleatic paradigm, provoked by question of the status of what *is not*. The atomists rejected what they viewed as an unwarranted dogmatism of Parmenides’ prohibition of non-being. What is not, indeed the void, deserves on the atomistic account the same ontological status as being itself. (See Mladen Dolar, “The Atom and the Void – from Democritus to Lacan”, *Filozofski Vestnik*, XXXIV, no 2, 2013, 11-26.

² In light of this, it is useful to keep in the back of one’s mind the elementary coordinates of Democritean atomism itself. Its underlying thesis consists in the claim that the atom is the most minimal unit of ontological composition. The Greek *atomos* denotes that which cannot be cut (abstracting from *témnō*, to cut). However, it is crucial to emphasise that ‘Democritus is not making the banal claim that there are some things that are too hard to be crushed, or too small to be cut by any edge which we can manufacture. Limitations of that kind are merely technological. Rather his argument is that if our picture of the world is not to collapse into incoherence, we must suppose that physical division has a theoretical limit.’ Such a theoretical limit is what engenders the conceptual positing of the void as the atom’s necessary correlate. The conceptual figure of void appears here for the first time in ancient Greek thought. It does so as a means to simultaneously account for both the motion and discreteness of phenomenal multiplicity. The void, however, cannot simply be accounted for in terms of the absence of the latter; the referent of the absence in question must indeed be ‘that of a gap in space’, not *empty* space. If “void” coincided with the latter, ‘it would the need to be explained why the atomists spoke of atoms and the void, rather of atoms and space.’ For a fuller account, see C.C.W. Taylor, ed., *The Atomists: Democritus and Leucippus: Fragments: A Text and Translation with a Commentary* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1999); and for the quotes above specifically, pages 165 and 185.

him a dialectical point of reference by virtue of its thorough immanence in relation to the One: The Void is not external to One, it dwells in its very heart – the One itself is “void”; the Void is its only content.

It is in this sense, too, that the One coincides with definition of the signifier: the One is the pure signifier, the signifier without a signified. Put differently its signified is the Void. And so the *Lacanian-Hegelian* – I insist: *Žižekian*-dialectical – notion of the subject implicitly presents itself: ‘This Void, the signified of the One, is the *subject* of the signifier: the One represents the Void (the subject) for the other signifiers’.¹

The One of quality is thus not yet a full-fledged master-signifier, but a signifier in its “simple form” – it represents the subject to other signifiers, rather than being the signifier for which the subject is represented. These “other signifiers”, however, are not explicitly presented until the *Logic*’s transition (*Übergang*) from Quality to Quantity. The latter accordingly marks the transition from the internal self-reference of the unary trait – which gets no further than a series of monadological Ones: “One . . . One . . . One . . .” – to the continuity of the *chain* of signifiers, where there is a *first* One, a *second* One, a *third* One, etc. Only in quantity, then, do we arrive at the “simple form” of the signifier proper. That is to say: only in quantity does signification (the dialectical process), though still in a primitive form, commence.

The correlate of the quantitative One is accordingly not the void. As Žižek notes: ‘With this passage of One of quality into One of quantity, *the Void changes into Zero*.’² The One of quantity, whose correlate is Zero, provides a notion of oneness which is able to differentiate itself and relate to *other* ones – “a signifier represents the subject for another signifier”. But this elementary form of the signifier, the skeleton of Žižek’s account of dialectical representation, is ultimately only possible against the backdrop of the One which harbour within itself the void – the One that coincides with the mark that is *le trait unaire*.

¹ Žižek, *for they know not*, 52. Mladen Dolar’s account makes a case along very similar lines. It makes clear that the void is that which introduces ‘a crack into being’, that which ‘splits it into infinity and makes it non-totalizable.’ (Dolar, “The Atom and the Void”, 13.) The void extricates the One from Being, indeed the signifier from the Real. In atomistic vocabulary, we can say that the void is that which splits the atom *qua* One from *within*. This is how Žižek’s assertion that the void dwells in the heart of the One should be read. The void is absolutely *immanent* to the One.

² Ibid, 53. My emphasis.

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