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OUT OF THE WOODS ? ON ŽIŽEK'S *LESS THAN NOTHING*

Descartes once famously declared that someone who is lost in the woods should pick a direction and walk in a straight line. Even if it turns out to be the wrong direction, he reasoned, one would at least wind up somewhere better than the middle of the woods. Few contemporary thinkers have followed Descartes' advice as thoroughly as Slavoj Žižek. In his breakthrough publication, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, he laid out his basic conviction that combining Hegel and Lacan would provide a way out of contemporary political impasses:

the only way to "save Hegel" is through Lacan, and this Lacanian reading of Hegel and the Hegelian heritage opens up a new approach to ideology, allowing us to grasp contemporary ideological phenomena (cynicism, "totalitarianism," the fragile status of democracy) without falling prey to any kind of "postmodernist" traps (such as the illusion that we live in a "post-ideological" condition).¹

This combination has remained a constant throughout his work in the more than two decades that have elapsed since Žižek first became widely known in the English-speaking academy. He has expanded his purview to include thinkers necessary to understand or contextualize his two points of reference (Kant, Schelling, and Fichte for Hegel and Derrida and Deleuze for Lacan), but Hegel and Lacan remained the center of gravity.

Even his encounter with Badiou's work in the early 2000s—an encounter so decisive that many have misread Žižek as offering little more than a popularization of Badiou—ultimately only deepened his attempt to weave together Lacan and Hegel. The form this took, as I argue in my book *Žižek and Theology*, was a retelling of the story of Christian origins to counter Badiou's reading of St. Paul along the lines of a Hegelian "death of God" theology that reads Christ as a self-effacing master signifier and Paul as an apostle called to "unplug" Gentiles from the obscene superego supplement of *jouissance* that attaches them to the ideological structure (the law).²

¹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989), pg. 7.

² See Adam Kotsko, *Žižek and Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2008); Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); and Slavoj Žižek, "The Politics of Truth, or, Alain Badiou as a Reader of St. Paul," in *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Center of Political Ontology* (New York: Verso, 1999).

More fundamentally, this reworking of his synthesis of Hegel and Lacan through a reimagining of Christian origins served as a response to a deadlock that had emerged in his political thought: how to conceive of a revolution that would result in more than the inevitable reimposition of an ideological order founded in a master signifier. The temptation Žižek faced in his work leading up to *The Ticklish Subject* and his books on Christianity³ was of endorsing revolution for its own sake, as a moment of authenticity to be embraced despite its inexorable failure. What the reference to Christianity allowed him to see was the possibility of a non-ideological social order modeled on the radical egalitarian collective of the “Holy Spirit.”

Žižek rearticulates this notion of the “Holy Spirit” in more explicitly Lacanian terms in *The Parallax View*, where he raises the possibility of thinking about a new collectivity in terms of Lacan’s “discourse of the analyst.” While the discourse of the analyst is often conceived as a purely transitional one that is basically limited to the literal analytic session, Žižek makes broader claims for it: “Lacan’s aim is to establish the possibility of a collective of analysts, of discerning the contours of a possible social link between analysts (which is why, in his schema of four discourses, he talks about the discourse of the Analyst as the ‘obverse’ of the Master’s discourse).”⁴ For Žižek, this notion of a “collective of analysts” – which he explicitly links to the Pauline collectives – opens up the possibility of a social order that would not be structured by a master signifier.⁵ If successful, a revolution based on the discourse of the analyst would represent “a sociopolitical transformation that would entail the restructuring of the entire field of the relations between the public Law and its obscene supplement.”⁶ In other words, with the collective of the “Holy Spirit” or the collective of analysts, Žižek claims to have found a way out of the deadlock of revolution as the moment between the old boss and the new boss – a radically new way of structuring human subjects’ relationship to language and *jouissance*.

For the reader of *Less Than Nothing*, however, it can often appear that *The Parallax View* – once put forward as his *magnum opus* – has more or less disappeared down the memory hole. While he responds to Jameson’s review of *The Parallax View*⁷ and makes scattered references to the concept of parallax, one gets the sense that *Less Than Nothing* is being offered up as a replacement for *The Parallax View*, as the real *magnum opus* that makes up for the failure of his first attempt. The most salient difference between the two books from this perspective is that *The Parallax View* was an attempt for Žižek to put forward his system in his own voice. The governing ambition is not the synthesis of Hegel and Lacan but the development of an authentic “dialectical materialism” that can reinvigorate

³ See Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (New York: Verso, 2000); *On Belief* (New York: Routledge, 2001); and *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003).

⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), pg. 305.

⁵ Žižek, *Parallax View*, pp. 305-306.

⁶ Žižek, *Parallax View*, pg. 308 (italics in original).

⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (New York: Verso, 2012), pg. 268.

Marxist politics.⁸ The guiding concept of “parallax” is drawn not from Hegel or Lacan but from the Japanese philosopher Kojin Karatani, whose book *Transcritique* argues for a Kantian rather than Hegelian reading of Marx.⁹ While Hegel and (especially) Lacan feature prominently in *The Parallax View*, the presentation and structure of the book combine to give the sense that Žižek has finally found his way out of the woods – by following the path of the synthesis of Lacan and Hegel, he has finally arrived somewhere, namely at a new philosophy of dialectical materialism.

By contrast, *Less Than Nothing* implicitly walks back this claim. In a passage outlining his intellectual trajectory in the book’s introduction, he claims that all along,

the theoretical work of the Party Troika to which I belong (along with Mladen Dolar and Alenka Zupančič) had the axis of Hegel-Lacan as its “undeconstructible” point of reference: whatever we were doing, the underlying axiom was that reading Hegel through Lacan (and vice versa) was our unsurpassable horizon.¹⁰

He then opens the possibility that they are now on the brink of surpassing that horizon:

Recently, however, limitations of this horizon have appeared: with Hegel, his inability to think pure repetition and to render thematic the singularity of what Lacan called the *objet a*; with Lacan, the fact that his work ended in an inconsistent opening: *Seminar XX (Encore)* stands for his ultimate achievement and deadlock – in the years after, he desperately concocted different ways out (the *sinthome*, knots...), all of which failed.¹¹

The answer, however, is not to give up on “the axis of Hegel-Lacan,” but to insist on it all the more: “My wager was (and is) that, through their interaction (reading Hegel through Lacan and vice versa), psychoanalysis and Hegelian dialectics mutually redeem themselves, shedding their accustomed skin and emerging in a new unexpected shape.”¹²

Whatever happened in *The Parallax View*, then, Žižek has returned to the trajectory he so resolutely adopted as early as *Sublime Object*. And on a certain level, the results speak for themselves, because *Less Than Nothing* is surely a better-written book than *The Parallax View*. It is much more convincingly organized, much more tightly argued, much more rigorously supported (including unexpectedly deep excavations of Hegel and Lacan’s texts). It brings together all of Žižek’s primary concerns in a single unit that finally makes clear

⁸ Žižek, *Parallax View*, pg. 4.

⁹ Kojin Karatani, *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx*, trans. Sabu Kohso (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005).

¹⁰ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, pg. 18.

¹¹ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, pg. 18.

¹² Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, pg. 18.

how they are all supposed to connect with one another. Even the writing style strikes me as more enjoyable and readable, indicating that his sometimes ill-considered interventions in public political debates have perhaps had positive side-effects on his authorial craft.

My concern as I read *Less Than Nothing*, however, was my growing suspicion that the cost of this increased focus and discipline may have been the loss of the most radical insights and ambitions Žižek was cultivating in the period of his work that culminated with *The Parallax View*—namely, the notion of a non-ideological social bond structured along the lines of the “Holy Spirit” or discourse of the analyst.¹³ Concepts closely akin to the discourse of the analyst—such as the so-called “feminine,” non-all, or (as I would prefer to translate the Lacanian *pas-tout*) non-whole structure of reality, which implies that the “masculine” structure of the master signifier is always a secondary and fundamentally false imposition—are very frequently placed in a subordinate or purely transitional role. This is clearest in his discussion of quantum physics, where he makes the radical claim that contemporary science is empirically verifying that the universe as such is non-whole, but at the same time argues that the intervention of some kind of master signifier is necessary to create a livable or intelligible reality.

Now it is possible that things would be different at different ontological levels. More specifically, what is necessary to kick-start some kind of concrete reality out of the primal quantum void may not be necessary to structure a livable or intelligible social order. Indeed, one could even conceive of humanity’s surpassing of the ideological structure from which human society emerged as the ultimate example of overcoming “natural” limitations that Žižek has always associated with both Hegelian dialectics and Lacanian psychoanalysis. There are passages of *Less Than Nothing* that could be open to that type of interpretation, most notably in his discussions of the Holy Spirit,¹⁴ but a clear emphasis on the non-ideological order as a genuinely *livable* option is absent.

More ambiguous is his discussion of the Occupy movement at the end of the book, where he discusses the relationship between the intellectual and the protestor:

Faced with the demands of the [Occupy Wall Street] protestors, intellectuals are definitely not in the position of the subjects supposed to know: they cannot operationalize these demands, or translate them into proposals for precise and realistic measures. With the fall of twentieth-century communism, they forever forfeited the role of the vanguard which knows the laws of history and can guide the innocents along its path. The people, however, also do not have access to the requisite

¹³ The latter term, in fact, appears nowhere in *Less Than Nothing* (as verified by an electronic search), and to the best of my knowledge it has also been absent in all his intervening works.

¹⁴ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, pp. 112, 202, 230-231. In the first passage in particular, Žižek identifies Jesus with *objet a* as opposed to the master signifier, which can be read in terms of the difference between the analyst’s and master’s discourse.

knowledge—the “people” as a new figure of the subject supposed to know is a myth of the Party which claims to act on its behalf... There is no Subject who knows, and neither intellectuals nor ordinary people are that subject.¹⁵

Having laid out the dilemma, he then argues for a relationship structurally similar to that between the hysteric and the analyst:

Is this a deadlock then: a blind man leading the blind, or, more precisely, each of them assuming that the other is not blind? No, because their respective ignorance is not symmetrical: it is the people who have the answers, they just do not know the questions to which they have (or, rather, are) the answer.... intellectuals should not primarily take [the protestors’ demands] as demands, questions, for which they should produce clear answers, programs about what to do. They are answers, and intellectuals should propose the questions to which they are answers.¹⁶

Again, though, there is no clear statement on whether this is merely a transitional phase that will culminate in the imposition of a new master signifier—perhaps a “better,” more humane, less destructive one, but a master signifier nonetheless—or if this movement can *itself* “directly” become a new order and *a new kind of order*. In this respect, his reflections on Third World slums in *The Parallax View* seem much more radical and hopeful.

It may be that Žižek got off the path prematurely in *The Parallax View*. Indeed, I assume that many readers of Žižek would be willing to dismiss the work on Christianity that led up to *The Parallax View* as an unnecessary detour and would be relieved to see his theological reflections taking on a more subordinate role in *Less Than Nothing*. It could even turn out to be the case that Žižek now includes the notion of a “collective of analysts” among those failed solutions put forward in Lacan’s final seminars. In my view, though, his forceful return to the narrow path in *Less Than Nothing* risks backtracking on all that he had achieved since the apparent detour. If he is picking up more or less where he left off, then that means that he has implicitly returned to the same deadlock of revolution as a flash of authenticity mediating the transition between the old boss and the new boss. It would represent a moment of transition that is true, desirable, and yet unlivable—just as his furtive attempts to grasp the possibility of a more radical and fundamental change turned out to be unsustainable, at least for him. The question that remains is whether the “detour” can serve as a functional path forward for the rest of us who are still very much stuck in the woods.

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¹⁵ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, pp. 1007-08.

¹⁶ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, pg. 1008.

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