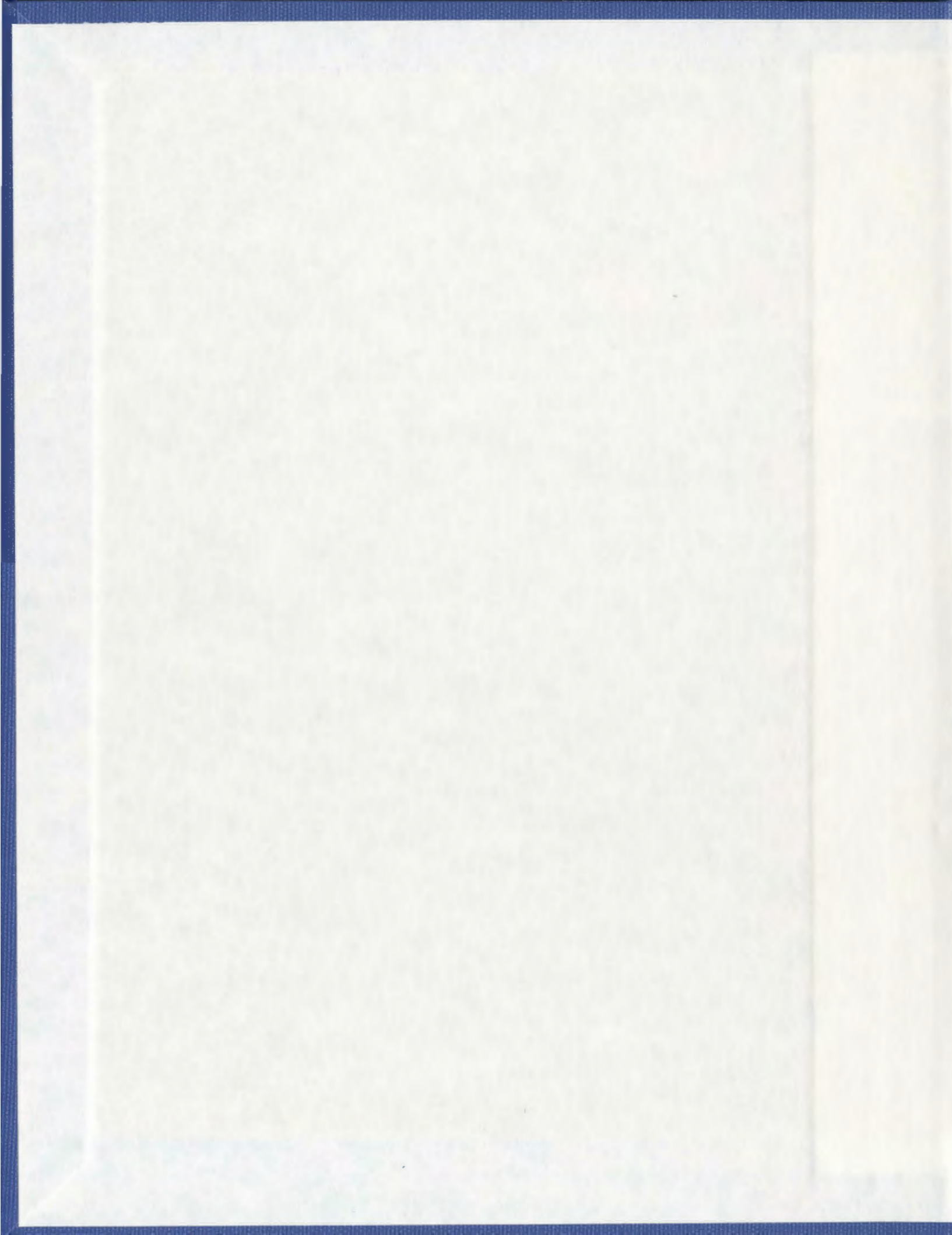


THE ROLE OF GERMAN IDEALISM IN ŽIŽEK'S
TRANSCENDENTAL MATERIALISM

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*The Role of German Idealism in
Žižek's Transcendental Materialism*

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Abstract

This thesis is an attempt to articulate the ambiguity of the Hegel-Schelling relationship in Slavoj Žižek's work and gesture towards some critical problems it raises. Characterizing his own transcendental materialism again and again as *Hegelian*, never a *Schellingian* project, Žižek belies his overt reliance on texts such as Schelling's *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* and the *Ages of the World* for the development of his own theory of the psychoanalytical subject. What I propose, therefore, is to read Žižek *against* Žižek in order to demonstrate the complex intertwining of Schellingian ontology and Hegelian logic at the core of Žižek's own thinking.

Žižek turns to German Idealist tradition in order to give a nonreductive materialist account of the emergence of the psychoanalytical subject. In the end, however, his reactualization of German Idealism intensifies the conceptual paradoxes underlying Lacanian psychoanalysis, rather than solving them. Žižek's fusion of Schelling and Hegel points to a possibly fatal ambivalence in Lacan's conception of the Real: Is it that which *precedes* and *exceeds* consciousness, or a pure *lack* that only represents itself through the breakdowns of the Symbolic? I will argue that Žižek's hybridism of Schelling and Hegel is unable to resolve this issue and thus calls us to return to German Idealism to understand what is truly at stake in the Schelling-Hegel conflict.

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Secondly, I should give thanks to the examiners of my thesis, Dr. James Bradley and Dr. Peter Trnka, for their extremely kind and useful thesis reports. While Dr. Bradley have me insight on further aspects of Žižek's philosophy that I should consider in my future work, Dr. Trnka's comments helped me greatly avoid some minor pitfalls that my argumentation ran into in terms of ambiguous language, conceptual imprecision, and general difficulties of methodology, while also supplying useful many suggestions for further improvement. Both of them have in their own ways encouraged me to continue research on the project, while shedding light on various ways in which I can improve it. Hopefully something more will come of this in the coming while.

Thirdly, although I have written essentially every word of this thesis in the solitude and monological isolation of my quaint little apartment on a quiet little residential road just off of the bustling boulevard of St. Catherine, Montréal, I would like to thank all of the faculty, staff and friends that have helped me along the way in my philosophical training at Memorial University throughout the past years. James Bradley, Robert Breen and Steve Woodworth specifically deserve to be named. Lastly and certainly not least, I would like to thank the delightful Pamela Mackenzie for putting up with me and my lunatic ravings about “ontological collapse” that have – for better or for worse – occupied my life during the past few months of reading, writing and editing. Although more than often not a distraction to the intellectual labour process, her presence has helped this project develop in many ways.

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List of Abbreviations¹

Works by Žižek

AF “The Abyss of Freedom”

CV *Conversations with Žižek*

FA *The Fragile Absolute*

ID *The Indivisible Remainder*

OB *On Belief*

PV *The Parallax View*

TN *Tarrying with the Negative*

TS *The Ticklish Subject*

Works by Adrian Johnston

ŽO *Žižek's Ontology*

Works by Schelling

FS *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*

WAI *The Ages of the World* [2nd draft]

WAII *The Ages of the World* [3rd draft]

¹ For full bibliographic information, please see the Works Cited section at the end.

Introduction

The following is an attempt to articulate the ambiguity of the Hegel-Schelling relation in Slavoj Žižek's work and gesture towards some critical problems that it raises. Because this thesis is an investigation into Žižek's ontology, it does not specifically concern itself with German Idealism qua German Idealism. By immersing itself within the concerns that drive Žižek's philosophy, it withholds evaluative judgement of the fidelity of Žižek's reading of Kant, Hegel and Schelling and does not question Žižek's definitions of key concepts involved. Recognizing the continuing difficulty that this presents throughout the entirety of thesis, the author would like to suggest that its limitation has a specific theoretical function and strength: by arguing for a possible unstable hybridism of Schelling and Hegel *within* Žižek's ontology through his reading of the tradition, one of its goals is a call for a return to German Idealism in order to solve various problems that Žižek sees haunting the contemporary account of subjectivity. Therefore, even though this thesis must often depart from a strict intra-textual analysis of key Žižekian texts in order to deal with extrinsic arguments and traditions, by being an examination of the coherence of Žižek's argument it is principally situated within the field of Žižek studies.

Characterizing his own transcendental materialism again and again as an *Hegelian* project, Žižek belies his overt reliance on texts such as the *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* (which, for short, I will refer to from now on as *Freiheitsschrift*, German for "Freedom Essay") and the *Ages of the World* (or, in German, *Weltalter*) for the development of a metapsychological account of the ontogenesis of the subject. What I propose, therefore, is to read Žižek *against* Žižek in

order to show that his philosophy is actually a hybrid of Schellingian ontology and Hegelian logic. What I aim to demonstrate is how this mixture of two radically opposed thinkers shows that Žižek reads them both mutually through one another in terms of what he takes to be the *Grundlogik* (fundamental logic) of the German Idealist tradition, while also revealing how this appropriation of the two thinkers brings to the fore an irrevocable tension in the Lacanian notion of the Real, an uncertain oscillation between an idealist structuralist metapsychology and a purely materialistic description of the subject rising out of nature.

In the preceding paragraph, I have referred to Žižek's philosophy as a form of *transcendental materialism*, but the choice of this designation deserves to be prefaced insofar as he characterizes his parallax ontology as “the necessary step in the rehabilitation of the philosophy of *dialectical materialism*” (PV 4). This characterization is, however, problematic. Not only does it consciously try to make his own form of materialism approach that of Marx's without drawing the necessary distinctions between them, it also completely fails to articulate the essentially paradoxical and radically new manner by which understands the materialism-idealism debate. Therefore, I adopt throughout the thesis Adrian Johnston's characterization of Žižek's thinking of the subject as a form of transcendental materialism, an attempt to give a materialist foundation to a transcendental idealist subject for two reasons. Firstly, this has the benefit by its mere terminology to allow the reader to have an intuition of what is at stake in Žižek's ontology. Whereas dialectical materialism views the mind-body relationship as grounded within the dialectical interpenetration and harmonious unity of the two as an identity within difference, transcendental materialism, by

focusing on the ontogenetic, metaphysical conditions of the possibility of the emergence of the transcendental subject already points to immanent genesis of an irreducible “gap” between mind and body that renders possible the reflexivity of self-standing subjectivity.¹ Secondly, it allows me to do homage to Johnston's remarkable book.

Žižek's work on German Idealism is an attempt to investigate the foundational core of the Lacanian subject and its philosophical implications. Within Lacanian psychoanalysis, there is a constitutive, conflictual relationship between mind and body, which is the condition of the possibility not only of human experience, but also freedom *and* psychopathology. The human being is defined by the *Todestrieb* (death-drive) as a kind of ontological “short circuit” that disrupts man's complete immersion in nature, separating the *Innenwelt* and *Aussenwelt* (inner world and outer world) thereby making it so they can never positively meet. In this sense, Lacan's subject is strictly speaking *abiological* insofar as it is dominated by “non-natural” influences. This has two effects. Firstly, because Lacan's self-given task is to formulate the structures which constitute human subjectivity, his philosophy appears as a *retour* to the modern transcendentalism of the *cogito*. The Lacanian subject is haunted by similar problems such as subjective idealism (no contact with the extraconscious alterity of the world) and the uncertainty of mind-body relation. Secondly, Lacan left unanswered how extrasubjective reality could cause the generation of these quasi-transcendental structures which constitute the symbolic, human universe, with the concomitant problem of how we relate to this X which precedes our emergence into the world of

¹ For Johnston's justification of the term transcendental materialism to describe Žižek's ontology in relation to philosophical paradigms see ŽO 273-274.

language. Seeing a structural identity with the theoretical concerns of the immediate philosophical reactions to Kant, Žižek reads the fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis through German Idealism.

Yet, what Žižek claims he finds in the tradition is more than theoretical material which he can use in order to develop a materialist metaphysics which is able to contain the Lacanian subject within an overarching ontology. He attempts to illustrate the uncanny identity that exists between the psychoanalytical subject, haunted by the *Todestrieb* as the constitutive basis of its existence, and the operative logic of German Idealism. By falling upon premonitions of the psychoanalytical experience in concepts such as Kantian unruliness, the Hegelian “night of the world” and the Schellingian notion of the *Grund* (ground, in the double sense of reason or foundation and that upon which one stands), Žižek interprets the post-Kantian attempts to give an ontogenetic account of the free “I” through the Lacanian subject.

As the fundamental presupposition of Žižek's philosophy, the Lacanian subject is to be radically distinguished from the philosophical subject of modernity. Although the former demonstrates many traits which link it to transcendental idealism (it grounds the symbolic structures which constitute the unity of experience through a spontaneous and free synthetic idealization), it is in direct opposition to the conscious self-determination of the Cartesian *cogito*, the self-legislation of the Kantian noumenal self, and the Hegelian account of free personality. For Lacan, the freedom of the “I,” as it is witnessed in phenomenological self-experience, is an illusion: completely determined by cultural and linguistic influences, the ego is the *object* of the *subject* of the unconscious. Although this does not prevent the existence of human freedom for

Lacan or Žižek, it means that freedom itself gets displaced from consciousness into the unconscious, in a move formally similar to Schelling but with an important twist. The subject is not a substantial self-actualizing activity but is an impersonal place-holder that guarantees the minimal consistency of self as a self-relating centre of negativity. It has no content because it is pure form.

Lacanian psychoanalysis categorizes experience in terms of three registers, the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. All three exist in dialectical simultaneity, so that they all depend upon and interpenetrate each other. Lacan uses a Borromean knot to illustrate this level of mutual co-existence.² This makes it hard to argue for the primacy of one register over the other because it is unclear if either can have logical priority insofar as the cutting off of one destroys the whole. The Imaginary is roughly equivalent to phenomenological self-experience and perception, but is also related to the *cogito* and its “narcissistic” fantasy of existential self-mastery and self-familiarity. The Symbolic is the logical fabric of language and culture which transcends and is anterior to the concretely existing subject. It therefore precedes the imaginary orbit of experience insofar as the phenomenological constitution of objects presupposes language. In its simplest form, the Real is that which does not fall under the Imaginary or the Symbolic. Its upsurge, therefore, is associated with experiences of breakdown and inconsistency not only of the transcendental unity of experience, but even of the Symbolic itself. Lacan and Žižek therefore use a plethora of adjectives to describe it, which attempt to captivate this element of irrevocable and necessary logical and existential rupture: “traumatic,” “monstrous,” “horrifying,” “impossible.”

But at the heart of Žižek's philosophy is a fundamental ambiguity in Lacan's

2 See *Le séminaire, Livre XX: Encore, 1972-1973* (Paris: Seuil, 1999), p. 107-125.

definition of the Real. It is uncertain how the Real should be interpreted. There are two possibilities. Firstly, the Real could be the excluded Other of the Imaginary and Symbolic, which only truly “comes to be” when the self constitutes itself. In this sense, the Real as lack is not only dependent upon the symbolic matrix of language and the orbit of phenomenological experience but also only shows itself negatively through their immanent breakdown and blockage. The Real as lack is distinctly Hegelian: it corresponds to concepts such as “tarrying with the negative” and the suffering that consciousness undergoes when it runs up against non-coincidence, paradox, and limitation. Secondly, there is also the possibility of understanding the Real as pre-subjective life from which the self exiles itself through becoming a linguistic subject, yet upon which the Imaginary and the Symbolic depend. Bruce Fink refers to this as Real₁ because it is the necessary posit of the Symbolic, whose “ciphering” activity reconstitutes reality by meditating it through the differential system of language and thus creates simultaneously the condition of the possibility of its breakdown.³ These “kinks” in the Symbolic correspond with Real as lack or Real₂, something which cannot be integrated because it presents itself as non-relational. Yet, insofar as this pre-subjective Real in itself is without *lack* (only with *language* can we speak of absence and presence),⁴ the “idealizing” process of human meaning makes it “impossible” to reach. As something which *overreaches* the idealizing activity of the subject, in this modality the Real as excess corresponds to the Schellingian concept of the indivisible remainder (*der nie aufgehende Reste*), that which can never be brought into light of consciousness yet upon which all consciousness rests. The problem is as follows: Is Real₁ a necessary

3 See Chapter Three, “The Creative Function of the Word: The Symbolic and the Real,” in *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) p. 24-31.

4 One of many possible quotes: “By definition, the real is full.” Lacan, *Le séminaire, Livre IV: La relation d'objet et les structures formelles* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), p. 218.

imaginary construct of the Symbolic designed to give illusory positive meaning to Real₂ (structuralist metapsychology)? Or is it the pre-symbolic, ontological basis of the Symbolic, to which we have access *despite* the impossibility of reaching the pure Real through the differential system of language (ontology, *Naturphilosophie*)? If the second is possible, what does this mean in terms of Lacan's declaration of the equivalence and interpenetration of the registers?

Even if all three registers exists in a dialectical simultaneity in terms of the constitution of personality, within the development of Lacanian psychoanalysis we see a gradual movement from an emphasis on one register over the other. Lacan's early work is largely an attempt to come to terms with the mirror stage and its implications for understanding the genesis of the ego. In the mirror stage, which happens around the age of six months, there is a recognition of an immanent blockage in nature which tears apart the organic unity of the body. The human neonate lacks motor coordination; its self-experience is fragmented and lacking internal unity. Lacan's provocative thesis is that the only way out of this biological short circuit is a *vel*, a misrecognition of the primordial helplessness of the human organism in the virtual image of its mirror self in which the child finds a mesmerizing and captivating lie of false mastery into which it libidinally invests itself. The result is a reorganization of the fragmented being of the child through a virtual, and therefore, illusionary schemata as the self becomes alienated from its real, substantial being. Yet, Lacan comes to see that the imaginary, phenomenological beginnings of the subject are themselves grounded in the Symbolic: the only reason why the child becomes tantalized by his image is because his or her parents provoke the response. "Look, it's you!" In this sense, the

entire genesis of the self is preceded by a carving out of a space for the child within the symbolic universe of familial relations even before the child was born. After this “linguistic turn,” Lacan turns all of his attention to the nature of the Symbolic.

Inspired by the work of Levi-Strauss, who argued that “[s]tructural linguistics will certainly play the same renovating role with respect to the social sciences that nuclear physics, for example, has played for the physical sciences,” Lacan began to apply the methodology of Saussure's structuralism to psychoanalysis.⁵ This was largely done by a *retour* to Freud. Lacan argues that structural linguistics gives psychoanalysis the scientific rigour that it needs by systematizing the logic of the unconscious. This is where Lacan's famous sayings such as “the unconscious is structured like a language” originate. Linked to this linguistic turn are his critiques of ego-psychology as an attempt to strengthen the *ego*, and post-Freudian attempts to biologize the unconscious. For Lacan, the unconscious is strictly speaking a linguistic phenomenon: it only emerges *after* the advent of language in the split between the subject of enunciation and the enunciating subject. It has nothing to do with deep-lying personality structures or instinctual libidinal energetics. Moreover, Lacan makes a significant modification to the Saussurean logic: he departs from the *signified/signifying* polarity at the core of the sign in order to emphasize what Saussure calls “*linguistic value*,” which shows that a sign only has value as such within a self-referential and differential system.⁶ A material correlate in objective reality is, as such, unnecessary for the creation of signs. For Lacan, insofar as symptoms are *signifiers* and the unconscious is *semiotic*, like a language, signifiers always move along chains and never reach the “Real.”

5 Lévi-Strauss. “Structural analysis in linguistics and in anthropology,” in *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1963), p. 33.

6 See Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale* (Paris: Payot, 1995), p. 155-169.

Although this suggests a kind of obvious superseding of the Imaginary by the Symbolic, commentators such as Richard Boothby and Alexander Leupin warn against this. The differential network of *signifiers* of language are themselves only possible through an original phenomenological *perception* of them.⁷ Moreover, the later Lacan's topological formalizations of the psyche, as already mentioned, proclaim a strict equivalency, so that "the symbolic order's supremacy appears as an aporia, an ethical decision that logic does not support."⁸

What most strongly distinguishes Žižek from other Lacanians is his attempt to rethink Lacanian psychoanalysis by focusing entirely on the late turn towards the Real. Because of this, he rarely if ever speaks of structural linguistics or the importance of *Gestalt* psychology. Just as the Symbolic adds a deeper, more penetrating level to understanding the Imaginary, for Žižek the Real adds irreducible conceptual structures to the Symbolic. Focusing on the other tendencies explicit in the Lacanian unconscious, therefore, risks missing the radicalness of Lacan's position in Žižek's view. Although this is not a controversial thesis as such (Bruce Fink and Lorenzo Chiesa, amongst others, hold the same view), for Žižek this shift demands something completely different than what we see in Lacanian orthodoxy. It implies that in order to grasp the essence of psychoanalysis we need to do two things: (i) metapsychologically explicate the ontogenesis of the subject in terms of a materialism of the Real; (ii) return to German Idealism instead of focusing on Lacan's relationship to nineteenth- and twentieth-century psychology, French structuralism, the Prague school of linguistics, or existentialism.

7 See Richard Boothby, *Freud as Philosopher: Metapsychology After Lacan* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 86-94.

8 See Alexander Leupin, *Lacan Today: Psychoanalysis, Science and Religion* (New York: Other Press, 2004) p. 27.

What is amazing about this “dialogue,” however, is the heterodox reading of the German Idealist tradition that it produces. To many critics, Žižek simply shows *no* concern for textual faithfulness, traditional hermeneutics or the history of ideas in his readings of Kant, Hegel and Schelling (and, for that matter, even Lacan⁹). His methodological approach appears, if anything, to function through a deliberate misunderstanding or liberal reconstruction. Although there is superficially some truth in these critiques – indeed, Žižek often focuses on marginal selections of texts and raises them a level of logical priority that they do not have in the original, or takes mere textual gestures as expressing the essential nature of a certain key concept and refuses to ground them within the overall systematicity or intention of a philosopher’s thought – one of Žižek’s own comments on the nature of his own type of philosophical interpretation is very helpful here for understanding his approach:

Hegel didn't know what he was doing. You have to interpret him. Let me give you a metaphoric formula. You know the term Deleuze uses for reading philosophers – anal interpretation, bugging them. Deleuze says that, in contrast to other interpreters, he anally penetrates the philosopher, because it's immaculate conception. You produce a monster. I'm trying to do what Deleuze forgot to do – to bugger Hegel, with Lacan [chuckles] so that you get monstrous Hegel, which is, for me, precisely the underlying radical dimension of subjectivity which then, I think, was missed by Heidegger. But again, the basic idea being this mutual reading, this mutual bugging [Chuckles] of this focal point, radical negativity and so on, of German Idealism with the very fundamental (Germans have this nice term, *grundeswig*) insight of psychoanalysis.

Even if Žižek describes his own philosophy as an act of violence, almost of *rape* (it is also worth mentioning that the word “bugger” originates the old French *bougre*,

9 Ian Parker, for instance, criticizes Žižek for strongly reconceptualizing many of Lacan’s strictly speaking clinical concepts so that they function in the sphere of socio-political theory without considering the intention of these concepts, paying close attention to his misrepresentation of the revolutionary status of Antigone. See Ian Parker’s *Slavoj Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), p. 74–81.

meaning heretic, and acquires its colloquial sense from heresy being associated with deviate, outlawed sexual practices), this quote reveals a hidden methodological presupposition which guides all of Žižek's interpretative work. The comparison of his own philosophy to that of Deleuze's is of crucial importance. It allows us to see that, even if Žižek is going against surface textual movements he, at least, does not understand his own philosophy as in any way arbitrary, a deliberate misunderstanding of the philosophers he is engaging, or even demonstrating a total lack of disregard for faithfulness to the tradition. Žižek recognizes that he is not doing traditional history of philosophy or philological, exegetical interpretation, but is, instead, attempting to do something that is productive of new concepts through his engagement with classical texts – but this generative, creative activity of concept-creation must, in some sense, be necessarily destructive, it must create a monster.

Therefore, Žižek is not interested in directly in what the texts of the German Idealist tradition have to say. What concerns him are hitherto unrealized textual potentialities within the texts, premonitions or traces of which we can see, often only in marginal comments or in various conceptual structures which often go against the flow of the totality of statements that constitute a philosophical system and therefore protrude out of its symbolic universe, negatively contorting it from the inside. Yet, it is only by means of a thorough familiarity with this totality and its surface affirmations that one can arrive at such unearthed possibilities and “reactualize” them. Žižek's own methodological approach to the history of philosophy, however, differs from that of Deleuze's insofar as it has its ground within Lacanian psychoanalysis, within its fundamental claim that we can never say what we mean because there is an irremovable

gap between the symbolic *je* (the I, the grammatical subject) and the imaginary *moi* (the me, the subject of self-conscious awareness).¹⁰ Not only is language something that exerts control over you more than you have power over it (you as ego are *spoken* rather than a *speaking* linguistic subject), but its surface content often belies a greater (consciously) disavowed (but unconsciously known) truth, a truth which is not “hidden” in some deep, elusive place, but is so obvious that we do not see it.¹¹ In the slips and mistakes of discourse, in marginal hints and gestures, we catch a glimpse of the Real as that which cannot be said directly in the discourse but around which it moves. Žižek's reading of German Idealism, therefore, is an attempt to psychoanalytically expose what the tradition in fact says by revealing what has been primordially repressed in the affirmations of a text. Although one can, of course, take issue with this methodology, one must admit that, by means of it, critiques that take issue with Žižek's selective reading or “obvious misinterpretations” often just miss the point. A more apt critique would be one that, from within the very movement Žižek's psychoanalytical reactualization of a text, from within its symbolization of its repressed, finds other spectral presences, other fragments of the Real, which haunt its own symbolic universe. This is what I in this piece hope to gesture towards in this thesis.

Starting from the psychoanalytical experience of the constitutive disharmony between mind and body as the necessary basis of human freedom, Žižek internally modifies the *Grundlogik* of the entire movement. By finding premonitions of the

10 See Lacan, “Response to Jean Hyppolite's Commentary on Freud's ‘Verneinung,’” in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), p. 318-333.

11 “The psychoanalyst is not an explorer of unknown continents or of grand depths, but a linguist: he learns to decode the writing that is already there, under his eyes, open to the look of everyone.” Lacan, “Clefs pour la psychoanalyse (entretien avec Madeleine Chapsal).” Retrieved May 16 2010 from: <http://www.ecole-lacanienne.net/documents/1957-05-31.doc>

concept of *Tödestrieb*, he takes the German Idealist attempts to think Substance as Subject to be some kind of ontological interconnecting of mind and body, and reconfigures this relation of positive organic union and logical interpenetration into a negative disjuncture of the two terms, an irreducible dialectical parallax. Here, he thinks he is radicalizing a possibility for understanding the ontogenesis of the subject that he sees negatively affirmed à la Freudian *Verneinung* (negation, denial).

It is this “slight” modification of the *Grundlogik* of German Idealism that is of utmost importance for understanding Žižek's reading of Kant, Hegel and Schelling. Firstly, it demonstrates the heterodox character of his appropriation of the tradition insofar as he proclaims that its real truth has always been the disjunctive, parallax relationship between system and freedom.¹² Secondly, it shows how Žižek tries to ground his own specific take on the tradition by founding it within and making it relatively coherent with what is at stake in post-Kantian idealism, even if the stakes themselves have been modified and reformatted drastically along the way. This makes reading Žižek a strange experience because there is an irreconcilable tension between Žižek's account of German Idealism and what German Idealism itself takes itself to be; the former is never completely in tune with the latter. Because Žižek's “reactualization” is not equivalent to an act of philological exegesis or traditional hermeneutics, one needs to take into account that Žižek understands his entire project as a way to breath life into, “to render actual for today's time, the legacy of German Idealism” through psychoanalysis.¹³ The most obvious implications of this approach, however, is that the reader cannot shake off the impression that Žižek is only reading

¹² See AF 11-14.

¹³ Žižek, “Liberation Hurts: An Interview with Slavoj Žižek (with Eric Dean Rasmussen).” Retrieved Feb 23 2010 from: <http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/endconstruction/desublimation>

the texts of the German Idealist tradition in order to find material to support his own philosophical presuppositions. To call his work on this movement a “reading” is, therefore, misleading, because it is largely removed from the concerns of the tradition.

Žižek's project is to develop and excavate a new materialist account of the subject consistent with Lacanian psychoanalysis, which he sees prefigurations of in Kant, Schelling and Hegel. Specifically in the latter's conception of the subject as seen in notions such as “spirit is a bone,” “substance as subject,” “tarrying with the negative” or the “night of the world,” Žižek not only sees a profound articulation of the unsurpassability of the negative that is remarkably Lacanian in structure and spirit, but more importantly, the possibility of a radical dialectics based on the contingency of finitude. Žižek situates himself against what he calls cliché interpretations of Hegel which see him as “deducing” reality from the self-mediation of the ideal Notion pre-existing the material flux of being.¹⁴ For Žižek such a move misses the radicalness of Hegelian dialectics, which has no need to “exit” contingency in order to account for the dialectical self-actualization of reality. What Žižek means by this is most clearly seen in his reading of the logic of essence from Hegel's *Science of Logic*, where the dialectical union of contingency and necessity acquires a new twist: it is not that essence dialectically depends upon appearance in order to actualize itself, that it is logical void without the external conditions for its manifestation and therefore cannot be spoken of “in-itself” in a Platonic sense, but that the move from contingency to necessity is merely a formal conversion, the empty gesture of giving a name (creating a master signifier, a “quilting point”) to a series of external conditions

¹⁴ See TS 55.

and in the fact changes nothing at the level of substantial reality.¹⁵ The Hegelian notion of positing of presuppositions is a retroactive performativity, a purely symbolical movement, so that "[t]he absolute is, hence, nothing but the propername of the belatedness constitutive of any logical space as such," it can "only constitute itself after the fact."¹⁶

What one will notice in reading Žižek's work, however, is that although he often emphasizes the shortcomings of standard, "conservative" ways of interpreting Hegel (his critique of Charles Taylor in the *Ticklish Subject* is a noteworthy exception), he rarely if ever mentions sources. Yet, when one looks at the history of the reception of Hegelian philosophy, both old and new, one finds a plethora of different ways in which Žižek's own reading has important historical precedents and contemporary homologues. Just to name a few: within the traditional Old Hegelians of post-idealistic Germany we have, of course, the early Marx's and Engel's attempt to inverse the Hegelian system by returning to the concrete life of individuals as the basis of historical materialism and the later Marx's attempt to describe the logical unfolding of capital, an explicit reactualization of dialectical method; Koyève's famous courses on Hegel, which not only reintroduced the intellectual scene of twentieth-century France to Hegelian philosophy, but also reworked and developed the central place of desire and negativity within Hegel's thought, albeit anthropologically, limiting these elements to human subjectivity; Jean Hyppolite's own work, which, in contradistinction to the humanistic interpretations following various Marxist and existentialist reappropriations of Hegel inspired by Koyève, goes further by locating negativity

¹⁵ See TN 148-152.

¹⁶ Markus Gabriel & Slavoj Žižek, "Introduction," in *Mythology, Madness and Laughter: Subjectivity in German Idealism* (New York: Continuum, 2009), p. 8.

within the heart of being while emphasizing the dynamic and transformative element of dialectical movement and the always deferred status of the accomplishment of the absolute¹⁷; Adorno's negative dialectics, which rethinks key Hegelian concepts such as negative determination, the materialism-idealism relation, the role and paradox of subjectivity, all in ways that are remarkably similar to Žižek's own philosophy¹⁸; and, to conclude, contemporary thinkers such as Jean-Luc Nancy, Catherine Malabou and even Markus Gabriel, with whom Žižek has recently worked on a book. In this sense, although Žižek's own attempt to distance himself from "cliché" readings does serve to highlight the fundamental difference of his own appropriation of Hegel from various "conservative," perhaps textbook academic readings, it often appears, to someone immersed within Hegelian philosophy, too drastic and fails to do justice to the complicated, interesting history of its development. To a reader lacking knowledge in the field, it could make Žižek's interpretation seem more radical, original and breakthrough than it is (although this is by no means to deny that there is much nuance within it) and a reader of Žižek must keep all of this in mind. Žižek appears, therefore, to be implicitly endorsing a revival of a distinction between conservative, right-wing and theologically-minded Old Hegelians and radical, left-wing atheistic Young Hegelians, but without laying out the battle field.

In various places in Žižek's work, he characterizes his project as strictly *Hegelian* because, like Hegel, the enigma which occupies him is the possibility of *appearance* itself, how the phenomenal realm of reality could emerge from the self-actualization of substance in such a way that subjectivity becomes irreducible to the flux of the

17 Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure in Hegel's Phenomenology*, trans. Samuel Cherniak & John Heckman (Northwestern University Press, 1974), p. 145.

18 Interestingly, Žižek himself goes so far to say that Lacanian psychoanalysis is the answer to a fundamental paradox in Adorno's philosophy of the subject (OB 94-96).

material world. Yet, the only way for Žižek to guarantee that subjectivity is not illusory is by inscribing idealism into the heart of materialism as a rupturing event, the premonitions of which he claims to see in Hegel's philosophy. Arguing for a *self-splitting* of the noumenal, Žižek tries to show how the only consistent way to explain why there is experience is to posit an ontological *breakdown* of being as the ontogenetic basis of the subject. Consequently, Žižek makes the following his axiomatic first-principle to explain the true meaning of *Todestrieb*: *Freedom is not a raw, brute fact, but an expression of the caustic collapse of material being, a brissure in the heart of Real, which is synonymous with the subject itself*; "it designates ... the primordial Big Bang, the violent self-contrast by means of which the balance and inner peace of the Void of which mystics speak are perturbed, thrown out of joint" (TS 31).

But in Žižek's own descriptions of this process of the *autodisrupture* of the Real there is an uncertain oscillation between the characterization of this process as *Schellingian* or *Hegelian*. Žižek goes as far as to say that Schelling was "the first to formulate this task" (PV 166) and the philosopher who "gave the most detailed account of this X in his notion of the Ground of Existence" (TS 55). All of this, however, presents internal tension within his philosophy insofar as Žižek explicitly disavows any essential relationship between Lacanian philosophy and Schelling.

Drawing largely upon the structural similarities between Schelling's account of disease and evil and the eruption of freely existing subjectivity, as well as Adrian Johnston's descriptions of the ontogenetic emergence of desire in the *Stuttgart Lectures*, my aim is to show how Žižek's transcendental materialism is a complex hybrid of Schellingian ontology and Hegelian logic. I will try to show that Žižek relies much

more upon Schelling in the development of his own materialist theory of the subject than he admits. It is here that we see the most fully developed account of the “self-sundering” of being in terms of Schelling’s logic of the *Grund*. Yet, as we will see, Žižek is only able to read Schelling’s descriptions of the birth of consciousness from its material *Grund* as a metapsychology insofar as he imposes a Hegelian logic unto its structure which allows him to formalize Schelling and “purify” him from his theosophic commitments. If, as will become apparent through this thesis, it is Schelling that is the philosopher who most fully describes the material ontogenetic conditions for the emergence of the subject and who thus more penetratingly develops the logic which supplies the primordial basis for Žižek’s own metaphysics, Žižek’s preference for Hegel over Schelling needs to be rethought. It appears inconsistent with the development and trajectory of Žižek’s thinking.

Immediately after his remarkable and provocative reading of Schelling within the first chapter of the *Indivisible Remainder*, Žižek goes on to argue for the supremacy of Hegelian dialectics over Schellingian logic. For him, Schelling is inferior because *Grund* and existence remain distinct from one another only by being *grounded* within Absolute Indifference, which is in itself neither. For Schelling, “the Absolute is primarily the ‘absolute indifference’ providing the neutral medium for the coexistence of the polar opposites” of the real and the ideal (ID 105). Hegel provides a superior logic in which there is no need for a third principle of mediation. Here, the category of “and” changes. It becomes, in essence, *tautological*: the third term is already the second insofar as it has merely taken over the position of the first. In terms of substance and subject, this means that “*this very reversal is the very definition of subject*. ‘subject’ is the name for the

principle of Selfhood which subordinates to itself the substantial Whole whose particular moment it originally was" (ID 106). Nothing at the level of content changes; it becomes a purely formal self-relation from within the radical non-coincidence of the Absolute with itself. The dialectical movement from (i) immediacy → (ii) negation → (iii) negation of negation is superior because (which Žižek suggests is contra to mainstream readings of Hegel, although here one is forced to think of Kojève's famous and popular introduction to Hegel) there is no genuine return movement to the first. Something irreducibly different emerges (negativity is now made foundational to identity), an "out of joint" spirit which has a degree of notional self-reflexivity.

As we shall see, Žižek's criticism of Schelling, however, does not apply to the entirety of Schelling's work. For Žižek, Schelling's philosophy is not characterized by an organic unity or continuity, but by a series of irreconcilable ruptures. He draws a distinction between Schelling₁ of the period of quasi-Spinozism (the philosophy of indifference), Schelling₂of the radical ontology of freedom as seen in the second draft of the *Weltalter*, and Schelling₃of the philosophy of mythology and revelation, which is in a certain way a return to the first. What distinguishes the middle Schelling is strictly speaking the ontogenetic emergence of *self-positing* of freedom in a manner remarkably similar to the Hegelian dialectical movement from abstract immediacy to notional self-reflexivity.

Žižek himself draws attention to the pivotal importance of Schelling for understanding the ontogenesis of the subject, only in the end to disavow his debt to Schelling. Even if the logic of the *Grund* contains a premonition towards a radical transcendental materialism, Schelling is at the same time the father of "New Age

obscurantism" (AF 4). Expressing a reliance and debt to Schelling would, in essence, potentially bring Žižek's own thinking uncomfortably close to everything he denies – the non-Freudian unconscious (Bergsonian, Jungian, and Deleuzian), "pre-modern" cosmology, Romantic theories of nature, theosophy, and its pop-culture descendent, New Age spirituality. By placing the logic of the *Grund* at the heart of the psychoanalytic subject, Žižek in many ways risks "destabilizing" the primacy of the Lacanian mode of the unconscious insofar as it opens up the possibility of interpreting the Real as excess.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter, "From Transcendental Philosophy to Substance as Subject" is an account of Žižek's interpretation of the movement from Kant to Hegel, focusing on the role of Kant's articulation of the concrete experience of freedom and its repercussions for metaphysics. This will enable us to see how Žižek's derives his own metapsychological parallax ontology from a specific reading of the *Grundlogik* which characterizes German Idealism. Next, in "The Logic of Transcendental Materialism" I sketch how, for Žižek, Hegel's attempt to think through the deadlock of freedom as opened up by Kant is in the end incomplete because it fails to think through its irrevocable implications in terms of the passage from nature to culture. Here I present my argument for the priority of Schelling over Hegel in terms of an ontogenetic account of the emergence of the subject, insofar as Žižek relies almost exclusively on the former to articulate the ontological collapse that serves as its basis. In the last chapter "The Abyss of the Unconscious" I deal with Žižek's argument for the superiority of Hegelian dialectics over the Schellingian tendency to found ground and existence in a

third principle and how he purports to “fix up” Schelling’s metapsychology in the second draft of the *Weltalter*. Finally, in my conclusion I lay out what is at stake in Žižek’s parallax ontology and raise some critical questions as to the ambiguous nature of the Real.

Because one of the goals of this project is to prove the primacy of Schelling in Žižek’s transcendental materialism, I only deal explicitly with *three* of Žižek’s works. I use what he refers to as his two theoretical *magnum opera*, *The Ticklish Subject* and *The Parallax View*, insofar as it is most clearly here that Žižek articulates the theoretical concerns of his ontology. I add *The Indivisible Remainder* to this list, insofar as in my view it is crucial for understanding the Žižekian subject.

There has been a recent explosion of secondary works published on Žižek and even an international journal inaugurated in 2007 on his philosophy. Yet the majority of the books written on his thinking is lacking any significant study of the relationship of his appropriation of German Idealism to his own transcendental materialism. The most obvious exception, however, is Adrian Johnston’s *Žižek’s Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity*, which is an attempt to systematize the ontological edifice that underlies Žižek’s philosophy through an in-depth representation of his reading of Kant, Schelling and Hegel. Insofar as this is a book written in the spirit of Žižek (and is in many ways a celebration of his work) and which demonstrates a high degree of quality, I treat it throughout with the same kind of theoretical primacy as one of Žižek’s own works.

My thesis distinguishes itself from the body of current literature that exists on Žižek because it argues for the logical primacy of Schelling over Hegel in Žižek’s

transcendental materialism – a point which not only Adrian Johnston would disagree with, but even Žižek himself, insofar as this would bring his own philosophical account of the subject dangerously close to aspects of the Schellingian unconscious that he disavows. This present work, therefore, is an attempt to add to the secondary literature on Žižek's relation to German Idealism and further our understanding of his project by explicating its overt “Schellingian” character.

In terms of the rest of Žižek literature, most books can be divided into three categories. (i) The phenomena of thin postmodern “introductions” which attempt to summarize and give easy to understand accounts of the fundamental concepts of a philosopher. Here I am thinking specifically of Sarah Kay's *Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), Tony Myers, *Slavoj Žižek* (London: Routledge, 2003) and Ian Parker's *Slavoj Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2004). Although interesting, these studies are general to the point of superficiality. (ii) Works which focus on Žižek's critical theory and politics. Here the list is longer: Rex Butler's *Slavoj Žižek: Live Theory* (London: Continuum, 2005); Jodi Dean, *Žižek's Politics* (London: Routledge, 2006); Adrian Johnston's *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change* (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2009); and Matthew Sharpe's *Slavoj Žižek, a little piece of the Real* (London: Ashgate, 2004) come to mind. These works demonstrate a certain tendency to read Žižek as an important sociopolitical critic rather than a philosopher. (iii) His relationship to theology: Frederiek Depoortere's *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy: Gianni Vattimo, Rene Girard, and Slavoj Žižek* (New York: T & T Clark, 2008), Adam Kotsk's, *Žižek and Theology* (New York: T & T Clark, 2008) and Marcus Pound's *Žižek: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Grand

Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008). Even if these books demonstrate more of a sincere attempt to penetrate into the core of Žižek's philosophy by investigating his ambiguous relation to theology, they still fail to explicitly deal with the nature of Žižek's encounter with German Idealism as essential to the core of his own philosophy (moreover, Pound's focal point is the relationship between the political and the theological in his work). One of the major exceptions in this category, however, is the book Žižek himself co-authored with John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), which deals with Žižek's turn to German Idealism in terms of the Christian legacy.

Chapter I: From Transcendental Philosophy to Substance as Subject

In this chapter I will sketch Žižek's interpretation of the philosophical movement from Kant to Hegel by focusing on Kant's articulation of the concrete experience of freedom and how it radically reshapes the terrain of metaphysical inquiry. In the aftermath of the critical philosophy, what is clear is that any philosophy which is unable to think system *and* the irreducible autonomy of the human is to be rejected. By following certain premonitions within Kant's pedagogical writings which appear to link transcendental spontaneity to the psychoanalytical concept of *Todestrieb*, Žižek reads Hegelian Absolute Idealism against standard interpretations by claiming that Hegel's attempt to think Substance as Subject implies the ontogenetic emergence of freedom through a self-sundering of being. Not only does this enable Žižek to rethink the Kant-Hegel relation in a provocative manner, but it also lets him at the same time develop the logic of his own transcendental materialism.

Following Lacan's claim that "Kant's practical philosophy [is] the starting point of the lineage culminating in Freud's invention of psychoanalysis," Žižek's project could be described as having two goals (PV 48). Firstly, because the Lacanian subject is lacking any theory of its own ontogenesis, Žižek turns to German Idealism to develop a transcendental materialism that would ground it, insofar as there is an obvious structural parallelism that exists in the underlying problematic that plagues both post-Kantian idealism and contemporary psychoanalysis. Secondly, and more strongly, Žižek's claim is that this parallelism is more than a mere shared set of theoretical concerns. If we read Kant, Hegel and Schelling through the Lacanian subject, we actually can see the underlying *identity* that exists between the psychoanalytical subject,

haunted by the *Todestrieb* as the constitutive ground of its very existence, and the operative logic of the German Idealism tradition.

Leaving aside the controversial nature of the second claim, Lacan's assertion, at first, appears counter-intuitive, if not completely false. One would expect the clearest elaboration of the subject in Kant's philosophical treatises on the mediating structures of consciousness. And what do we see by delving into practical reason except an attempt to ground the ethical in the self-legislative spontaneity of human freedom, the expression of the categorical imperative and an outlining of duties? However, even if this might be the image of Kantian practical philosophy that always comes to mind, the matter at hand is, of course, far more complicated.

Kant's *practical* philosophy is of essential importance because it is an expression and systematization of the experience of *freedom*, here understood as the self-legislative spontaneity at the core of human subjectivity, that faculty that which separates us from the rest of mechanical nature insofar as we generate our own laws.¹⁹ One must also remember that for Kant, the *Critique of Pure Reason* is an attempt to make room for faith by *limiting* knowledge and reason. This is a point that directs the entirety of the critical enterprise to penetrating into the irreducible primordially of human spontaneity at all costs. Like the other representatives of German Idealism, Žižek sees something fundamentally ground breaking in Kant's ethical writings: "Kantian practical reason provides a glimpse into the abyss of freedom beyond (or beneath) the constraints of traditional metaphysical ontology" (TS 48).

What interests Žižek in Kant's pedagogical writings is how they set the stage for

¹⁹ Schelling, for instance, situates the true Kantian breakthrough in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. See FS 232.

what he claims is the *Grundlogik* of German Idealism:

The key point is thus that the passage from “nature” to “culture” is not direct, that one cannot account for it within a continuous evolutionary narrative: something has to intervene between the two, a kind of “vanishing mediator,” which is neither nature nor culture – this In-between is silently presupposed in all evolutionary narratives. We are not idealists: this In-between is not the spark of *logos* magically conferred on *Homo sapiens*, enabling them to form his supplementary virtual symbolic surroundings, but precisely something that, although it is also no longer nature, is not yet *logos*, and has to be “repressed” by *logos* – the Freudian name for this In-between, of course, is the death drive. Speaking of this In-between, it is interesting to note how philosophical narratives of the “birth of man” are always compelled to presuppose such a moment of human (pre)history when (what will become) man is no longer a mere animal and simultaneously not a “being of language,” bound by symbolic Law; a moment of thoroughly “perverted,” “denaturalized,” “derailed” nature which is not yet culture. (TS 36)

According to Žižek, within Kant this “In-between” finds its expression in the necessity to discipline the excessive “unruliness” (*Wildheit*) of human nature, the “wild, unconstrained propensity to insist stubbornly on one's own will, cost what it may” (TS 36.). Yet, this “unruliness” cannot be equated with the brute reality of animal existence (contrary to standard readings). Žižek quotes Kant himself:

The love of freedom is naturally so strong in man, that when once he has grown accustomed to freedom, he will sacrifice everything for its sake.... Owing to his natural love of freedom, it is necessary that man should have his natural roughness smoothed down; with animals, their instinct renders this unnecessary.²⁰ (TS 36)

For Žižek, this demonstrates that the enigma of the emergence of subjectivity cannot be reduced to a mere dichotomy between *nature* and *culture*, as if in order to conform to the symbolic law of our own making we must first tame the blind, egotistical pleasure-seeking principles of our animal nature. The self-creative, ontologically autonomous milieu of culture is only possible through a prior, infinitely uncontainable freedom

20 Kant, *Kant on Education*, trans. Annette Churton (Boston: D. C. Heath & Co, 1900), p. 4-5.

which acts as the “vanishing mediator” between brute animal reality and structured human sociopolitical existence. The passage to culture does not consist in a overcoming or sublimation of animalistic needs, but rather through a disciplining of an excessive “unruliness” that marks human nature.²¹ Žižek links this to the Cartesian gap between man and nature because it names an intrinsic *break* or *breach* from the order of positive being that sets the stage for the *cogito*'s autonomy. It points to its primordial ontological basis as that which can only be grasped through its own uncontainable nature, which is simultaneously a potentially excessive diabolic evil. If human subjectivity is *truly* self-legislative, this means that, at its zero-level, there can be no formal distinction between a good and evil free act insofar as both are self-guiding, self-chosen: good itself is only possible through the gentrification, the *taming*, of evil.

For Žižek, therefore, Kantian practical philosophy is the beginning of psychoanalysis because here we can already see its *traits principaux*. Consequently, insofar as Kant himself asserts an ultimate identity between the theoretical and practical ego, Žižek argues for the interpenetration of modern transcendental philosophy and psychoanalysis through the concept of “unruliness.” *Todestrieb* becomes a synonym for the transcendental subject by giving expression to the pre-subjective conditions of the possibility of freedom as some kind of violent “disturbance” in nature that serves as its ontogenetic basis. But many questions remained unsolved in Kant: Why does the transcendental spontaneity itself develop? What is its exact relation to the “unruliness” at the core of our being which appears to logically precede

21 This could be further explicated by supplementing it with a number of possible citations from *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, the first book of which attempts to deal with the radical propensity to evil at the core of subjectivity by arguing two major points: (i) “the ground of this evil cannot be placed, as is so commonly done, in man's sensuous nature” and (ii) “neither can the ground of this evil be placed in a corruption of the morally legislative reason.” *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. T.M. Greene and H.H. Hudson (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), p. 30.

it? Insofar as transcendental spontaneity is related to the synthetic powers of the imagination and to "unruliness," what is the relationship between them?

Within the trajectory of modern philosophy, the inheritors of the legacy of the critical philosophy all agree that it is with Kant that we see the *first* truly penetrating account of the essence of human freedom.²² For Žižek, this means that it is here that the principal intuitions that heralded forth modernity – the schism between thinking mind and extended substance, the irreducible reflexivity of subjectivity – get radicalized and find stronger theoretical articulation. Post-Kant, all of the immediate representatives of German Idealism agree that there is *no* going back: this would be to give up on the intuition of irreducible human freedom. Any system which regresses into a more "primitive," "pre-modern" way of philosophizing is, in effect, merely recoiling from the unbearable burden of freedom. After Kant there is only "the uncanny abyss of freedom without any guarantee in the Order of Being" (PV 93).

In the immediate aftermath of transcendental idealism, however, there is an ambiguity as to how to proceed. Although there is some general consensus concerning the various different ways in which the critical system is flawed, inconsistent, and by itself incomplete, internal discords quickly emerge within the tradition. Not content with Fichte's own response to the dilemma because it only intensifies the problematic by making nature a mere posit of the Absolute Subject, Schelling and Hegel attempt to give an account of the *birthplace* of the "I" as *causa sui*. In the language of the early Schelling, Fichte creates an acceptable subjective idealism insofar as the creative potency of nature as more than and inclusive of the "I" is lost. What is necessary for

²² Schelling says in his *Freiheitschrift* that it is idealism that "we have to thank for the first perfect concept of freedom" (FS 231). The same applies to Žižek: "No wonder Kant is *the* philosopher of freedom: with him, the deadlock of freedom emerges" (PV 94).

Schelling is a theoretical project which attempts to supplement the solipsistic Fichtean subject with an account of the immanent genesis of subjectivity out of a creative, unconscious nature, which would implicate an elaboration of the interpenetration and ultimate identity of the two.²³ Initially satisfied with Schelling's response to the deadlock of Fichtean idealism,²⁴ Hegel later breaks from what he refers to as an "objective idealism," a mere reactionary form of idealism. By attempting to solve the excessive internal contradictions of subjective idealism, Schelling ends up being its inverted opposite.²⁵ But *what* exactly, then, is the Hegelian attempt to solve the enigma of the Kantian subject and how does it differ from Schelling's? And, more importantly, why is this juncture important for understanding Žižek's transcendental materialism?

Žižek *refuses* the conventional interpretation of Hegel as a pan-logicist, "the standard cliché according to which German Idealism pleads the 'pan-logicist' reduction of all reality to the product of the self-mediation of the Notion" (TS 55). This conventional, textbook reading of German Idealism goes against what Žižek holds is really at stake in the tradition. It levels off the radicalness of Hegel's articulation of freedom by making it look like another classical metaphysical system. This interpretation is false for two reasons. Not only are Hegel and Schelling attempting to demonstrate *how* it is still possible to do metaphysics *within* the very

23 See Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, trans. Peter Heath (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), p. 232.

24 According to Hegel, for "Fichte comes closer than Kant to managing the antithesis of nature and freedom and exhibiting nature as an absolute effect and deed," while, for Schelling, "nature is not a stillness of being;" rather, "it is a being that becomes; or, in other words, it is not split and synthesized from the outside, it sunders itself freely, not just as something limited, but as the whole." In this sense, Schelling represents a philosophical advancement towards the System. *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, trans. H. S. Harris & Walter Cerf (Albany: SUNY Press, 1977), p. 143 & 168.

25 In his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel declares Schelling as merely Fichte's *successor*, ironically going against the spirit of his early work on the intrinsic and insurmountable *differences* between them.

framework of the breakthrough of critical philosophy and *without* denying any of what they take to be its necessary/essential presuppositions, but also, and most importantly, *why* it is necessary to do so. Although this means a vigorous *rethinking* of concepts such as transcendental spontaneity and imagination, the noumena and the status of nature, in the end neither of them want to give up on Kant's descriptions of freedom in order to substitute transcendental idealism with another classical system.

This becomes more obvious when we realize that for both Hegel and Schelling, Spinoza is the emblem of a philosopher. Both Schelling and Hegel see the two questions of system and freedom as ultimately intertwined and refuse to separate them as Kant does. Amongst other things, Spinozistic metaphysics represents an avid attempt to rethink the Cartesian ontological splitting of mind and matter by reconceiving the very notion of substance so that the two categories no longer represent a schismatic split but are subsumable under a single, unified substrate. Mind and matter, the brute material Real of the universe and the reflexive powers of ideal Spirit, are merely different expressions of the same, unchanging substance, a kind of epistemic parallax shift between two different logical modalities of an all-persuasive weave which encompasses all things within its vital ebb and flow. This means that humans *are* free, but only insofar as they participate within the self-actualizing movement of substance (God, nature) as *causa sui*. Here Žižek makes the claim that within this picture the apparent autonomous essence of subjectivity is merely an epiphenomenon, a false appearance, of the vital flux of a more primordial life-force that runs through and simultaneously is the universe, leaving nothing untouched and no room for an otherness within its self-contained, harmonious machinery.

In Spinozism, the individual, subjective freedom therefore arises out of a misrecognition of our fundamentally determined character. By locating freedom within the kernel of my being, I am merely misperceiving its notion: real spontaneity lies in the self-generating harmony of the universe, the self-creative flow of life and difference, of which I also play a constitutive part through direct participation. Spinoza's account of human freedom, instead of being a pure cancelation of concrete human freedom by its submission to the total system of the world in its oneness, unity and harmony, is an attempt to, in many ways, show its greater truth, meaning and role in the life of God or nature, its basis within the self-actualization of substance. What Žižek adds here, however, perhaps implicitly basing himself on various assertions of the inadequacy of Spinoza's account of freedom within the post-Kantian German Idealist tradition,²⁶ is that this direct participation can only be *passive* participation. Even if Spinoza, for example, allows for the power of mind over body and a certain degree of spontaneous activity (substances and its modes must, after all, constitute one another), this does not come close to articulating the radicalness of freedom attested by Kant and even precludes it.²⁷ Spinoza is unable to articulate the true kernel of human autonomy, a failure which not only makes the Spinozist metaphysical system insufficient in terms of the phenomenologically lived essence of freedom, but also thereby robs its ontology of life and richness. Humans are not mere passive players of a predetermined role in the self-unfolding drama of the universe, but must be irreducibly constitutive writers of it. What Žižek adds here is the claim that what Hegel and the middle Schelling implicitly find unsatisfactory about Spinoza is that he

²⁶ See FS 230ff.

²⁷ See FS 227.

is unable to articulate the *ontogenetic condition of the possibility of the emergence of free transcendental subjectivity out of the purely immanent plane of being*. The problem is that freedom is *not* compatible with substance qua devouring totality. How, then, are we to think substance *and* subject/system *and* freedom if we are to retain the spontaneity attested by Kant? For Žižek, “[t]he passage from the Spinozan One *qua* the neutral medium/container of its modes and [sic] the One's inherent gap is the very passage from Substance to Subject” (PV 42).

The immediate problematic in the aftermath of the critical system is that the Kantian affirmation of transcendental freedom must be grounded in an ontological edifice that can rival Spinozism, since otherwise a Spinozist could argue that freedom is merely the *misrecognition* of man's subsumption within the positive order of being and the universality of the immanent laws of (divine) nature. Hegel remains unsatisfied with the results of Schelling, both in terms of Schelling's “objective” idealist response to Fichte and his attempts to ground transcendental subjectivity and creative nature in Absolute Indifference between the two. As Žižek's version of Hegel and the middle Schelling shows, Hegel here must have, at some level, implicitly recognized that Schelling missed the true radicalness of Kantian freedom and its implications. Consequently, Hegel tries to save the breakthrough of the critical system by thinking substance *as* subject, by thinking *how* the order of being *exists* in the mode of subjectivity, instead of merely tying two seemingly different yet complementary areas of thought together in a precarious unity. The task to be done is to fully actualize the primordial insight of the *cogito* by instituting the transcendental “I” and the *schism* it evokes directly into the Absolute. Hegel's goal is to balance Spinoza and Kant by

creating a metaphysical system that *renders possible* rather than *precludes* freedom.

The problem is to explicate how a truly existing free subject can emerge from within the internal mechanics of substance. Žižek's radical claim is that the only way to explain this is by taking the ontological split announced by Cartesian subjectivity and pushing it to its limits by inscribing the non-coincidence of mind to matter within the very heart of being, the premonitions of which we see already in Hegel. If human freedom is *irreducibly* self-reflexive and autonomous it cannot be understood in terms of the immanent pulsation of the Absolute. Reading the Hegelian response to Schelling through psychoanalysis, Žižek suggests that what provokes the immanent movement from transcendental philosophy to Hegelian Substance as Subject is how Spinozism and the Kantian articulation of freedom reciprocally expose each others' intrinsic limitations. While the latter lacks a metaphysics, the former misses the irrevocable (ontological) disturbance of nature at the foundational basis of the *cogito*, which signals that human spontaneity cannot be contained in the positive order of being. For Žižek the true breakthrough that we see in Kantian idealism, which gets radicalized and made explicit for the first time in Hegel, is the proclamation of transcendental freedom as *Todestrieb*, as an excess of being that breaks from all externally given laws. Because of the primordially Žižek accords to the psychoanalytical experience of discord between mind and body, here he arrives at a conditional: If freedom exists, substance cannot be all. Substance's autodisruption is the condition of the possibility of the subject.

What intrigues Žižek in Hegel's articulation of the subject as negativity is how it links up with the Kantian pedagogical concepts such as "unruliness" and "diabolic

evil.” Insofar as the latter indicates, for Žižek, that the zero-level of human subjectivity is in some sense *non-natural*, it shows that the various Hegelian descriptions of spirit in concepts such as “abstract negativity,” “tarrying with the negative”²⁸ and the “night of the world”²⁹ point to its basis in a disruption from the closed-circuitry of the homoeostatic laws of nature. His claim is that we normally overlook something crucial in Hegel's account of the dialectical movement from the first, dull, inarticulate stirrings of spirit into full-fledged self-consciousness subjectivity. What Žižek's Hegel adds to the Kantian notion of the transcendental constitution of experience is a gesture towards its ontogenetic conditions, a glimpse into how the spectral pandemonium of the pre-logical Real we see in “unruliness” precedes and makes possible the autonomy of the *cogito*. What this means is that prior to the self-legislative laws of practical reason and the *synthesis* of imagination that constitutes the unity of phenomenal reality, we must posit some kind of ontological going haywire that represents a savage *tearing apart* of the immanent flow of vital being.³⁰ The chaotic aggregate of ghastly forms and shapes which constitutes the quasi-phenomenological self-experience shown in the unruliness of the human organism is nothing other than another logical modality of transcendental imagination, its most originary expression. It is this vital hemorrhage of

28 See Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 19.

29 See Hegel, “Jenaer Realphilosophie,” in *Frühe politische Systeme* (Frankfurt: Ullstein, 1974), p. 204; quoted in Donald Philip Verene, *Hegel's Recollection* (Albany: SUNY Press 1985), p. 7-8 and by Žižek TS 29-30. For a discussion, see AF 4-14 and TS 26-48. As we shall see, Schelling radicalizes this.

30 “The pre-synthetic Real, its pure, not-yet-fashioned “multitude” not yet synthesized by a minimum of transcendental imagination, is, *stricto sensu*, impossible: a level that must be retroactively presupposed, but can never actually be encountered. Our (Hegelian) point, however, is that this mythical/impossible starting point, the presupposition of imagination, is already the product, the result of, the imagination's disruptive activity. In short, the mythic, inaccessible zero-level of pure multitude not yet affected/fashioned by imagination is nothing but *pure imagination itself*, imagination at its most violent, as the activity of disrupting the continuity of the inertia of the pre-symbolic “natural” Real. This pre-synthetic “multitude” is what Hegel describes as the “night of the world,” as the “unruliness” of the subject's abyssal freedom which violently explodes reality into a dispersed floating of *membra disjecta*.” (TS 33)

nature that prevents the ideality of the subject from being subsumed the within self-actualizing of the Absolute and proclaims its primordial irreducibility and incommensurability to positive being.

Hegel is the one who makes the first crucial step towards elaborating the true ground of the subject by demonstrating that it is this haywire *dysfunctioning* of substance that makes the subject incommensurate with material being and renders possible freedom in the truly “idealist” sense of the word. Hegel's account of the “I” out of nature is the first to explicitly implicate the eruption of an extimacy that afterwards cannot be recontained within the oneness of the Absolute. There is no smooth union, no ultimate self-penetrating identity within the fabric of pervasive being: “Substance designates the ‘imperfection’ of Substance, the inherent gap, self-deferral, distance-from-itself, which forever prevents Substance from fully realizing itself, from becoming ‘fully itself’” (AF 7). Subject, therefore, has no *positive* substrate: the zero-level of human freedom is a blockage, a mistake in the mechanics of nature. The claim is that, without the articulation of this ontological place of self-relating negativity (*Todestrieb*) as emerging immanently within being, all accounts of human freedom risk its reductionist-monistic cancelation. For Žižek, this is the only coherent conclusion: “[t]here are two options here: either subjectivity is an illusion, or reality itself (not only epistemologically) is not-All” (PV 168).

One thing should be clear at this juncture. Although Žižek's Hegel glimpses the foundational basis of the spontaneity of the pure “I” that precedes the transcendental constitution of the fabric of experiential reality, he cannot account for one thing: *the immanent generation of irreducible negativity within the material flux of substance*. How does the

vital flow of being itself *rupture*, how does this estimate core germinate within the Real and cause a violent explosion which forever precludes the ontological fullness and unity of the Real, thus making it barred, nothing but a series of *membra disjecta* (scattered fragments)? How exactly does the Hegelian night of the world come about?

Chapter II: The Logic of Transcendental Materialism

In this chapter I will demonstrate why Žižek needs to go beyond Hegel in order to articulate a crucial dialectical moment of his parallax ontology. First I will outline Hegel's attempt to think Substance as Subject by focusing on Žižek's criticisms of the Hegelian mature logic. Then, I will illustrate the structural parallels between Schelling's concept of disease and evil and Žižek's account of the eruption of freely existing subjectivity, while drawing heavily upon Adrian Johnston's description of the emergence of desire in the *Stuttgart Lectures*. My aim is to show how Žižek's philosophy is radically dependent upon Schellingian ontology in order to articulate the notion of metaphysical breakdown so crucial to his own transcendental materialism, and thereby establish the neglected place of Schelling in Žižek's thinking.

The night of the world is merely a kind of description, a haphazard glance into, the disarray and pandemonium that precedes the transcendental reconstitution of reality into a (relatively) unified fabric of experience. It does not itself explain the primordial moment of withdrawal from complete immersion in the positive order of being that signals the birth of irreducible subjectivity. In order to comprehend this movement, we must first plunge into the immanent pulsation of the vital ebb and flow of being itself in order to see how it sets the stage for the subject, a movement, which Žižek explicitly says, is most acutely developed in Schelling:

Kant was the first to detect this crack in the ontological edifice of reality: if (what we experience as) "objective reality" is not simply given "out there," waiting to be perceived by the subject, but a artificial composite constituted through the subject's active participation – that is, through the act of transcendental synthesis – then the question crops up sooner or later: what is the status of the uncanny X that *precedes* the transcendently constituted reality? F. W. J. Schelling gave the most detailed account of this X in his notion of the Ground of Existence – of

that which "in God Himself is not yet God:" the "divine madness," the obscure pre-ontological domain of "drives," the pre-logical Real that forever remains the elusive Ground of Reason that can never be grasped "as such," merely glimpsed in the very gesture of its withdrawal. (TS 55)

This, however, creates a problem internally within Žižek's texts insofar as he describes his own project time and time again as Hegelian and *never* as Schellingian. If, as will become apparent, it is Schelling that is the philosopher who most fully describes the material ontogenetic conditions for the emergence of the subject (rather than Hegel), Žižek's critique of Schelling demonstrates some kind of error, inconsistency or slight of hand. Žižek not only fails to give any systematic argumentation for the superiority of Schelling over Hegel in terms of the obscure origins of the "I," he also at times levels off the differences between the two insofar as he is evidently reading them reciprocally through each other. Here I am thinking specifically of his endeavour in *The Parallax View* to show that, "far from posing an irreducible obstacle to dialectics, the notion of the parallax gap provides the key which enables us to discern its subversive core. To theorize this parallax gap properly is the necessary first step in the rehabilitation of the philosophy of *dialectical materialism*" (4). This idea of an internal insurmountability in the immanent movement of the dialectic, the necessity of positing the non-coincidence and irreducibility of its moments to one another in order for it to function, has a more manifest affinity to Schellingian logic, which, developed as a response to Hegelian self-mediating Notion, centred around the idea of the indivisible remainder, *der nie aufgehende Reste*, as an irremovable snag in every logical system that guarantees its vitality. Žižek appears, therefore, in many ways to be interpreting Hegelianism retroactively through Schelling (which would, for example, explain his

comments on the irremovable element of parallax over notional interpenetration as the “perverse” truth of Hegelian logic). This suggests that the core of his philosophy is a hybridism of Schellingianism and Hegelianism.

The question that imposes itself is the following: At what point is Žižek's own theory of the subject *Schellingian* or *Hegelian*? The very posing of this question is relatively misleading within the context of Žižek's “reactualization” of the tradition insofar as what interests him is not *Kant*, *Schelling* or *Hegel* as particular historical thinkers with different theoretical concerns per se, but rather, *a truth that is self-unfolding throughout their works*, a truth inaugurated by the Cartesian *cogito* and which culminates in psychoanalysis. However, even if what intrigues Žižek is the specific *Grundlogik* driving the tradition, we can nevertheless demonstrate the priority of Schelling by showing how Schelling helps fill in a theoretical void opened up by Hegel and therefore radicalizes the foundational insight of German Idealism.

What is clear from Žižek's version of the Hegelian attempt to think Substance as Subject is that what remains underdeveloped is the essence of that impossible X which eternally precedes the “I” remains under developed. Although Hegel articulates the fundamental paradoxes that arise out of the ontologization of transcendental imagination, Žižek clearly expresses this general dissatisfaction in his discussion of Hegel's philosophy of nature in *The Ticklish Subject*. Since this text is written *after* his major work on Schelling *The Indivisible Remainder*, it would appear that Žižek's critical reading of Hegel and its account of the passage to culture is based on the presuppositions that guide his own transcendental materialism, which obviously have their origins in his crucial work on Schelling published only three years earlier. His

dissatisfaction is an implicit demonstration of the prioritization and theoretical supremacy of Schellingian ontology within his theorization of the parallax.

Pointing to what he takes as an ambiguity that persists within Hegel's account of the dialectical movement from self-contained Notion, to nature and then to spirit in his mature logic, Žižek suggests that Hegel was unable to bring into conceptual fullness the groundbreaking realization that he was on the verge of articulating.³¹ What is left aside is, strictly speaking, the night of the world that Hegel's earlier *Realphilosophie* had uncovered. In the mature logic, it is uncertain how this radical self-relating negativity, this moment of irreducible ontological breakdown, truly fits in. Instead of the precarious, never-to-be-complete "reconciliation" between nature and finite spirit as we see in the *Realphilosophie* (due to the abyssal void of the subject), culture itself becomes a closed circuit, a complete return of the Idea to itself out of its self-outsidedness in nature, which completely does away with the "psychotic" contraction into Self. The "here shoots a bloody head, there another ghostly apparition," disappears and subject as the irreconcilable In-between of nature and culture, the bone in the throat of substance, loses all currency.

For Žižek, there are thus two forms of Hegelian dialectics: either we have the perfect dialectical *triad* of the mature system (Logic → Nature → Spirit), or a non-closed *quadruple* which signals the self-collapse of dialectical logic itself of *Realphilosophie* (Logic → Nature → finite Spirit → objective/naturalized Spirit) (TS 82). In Žižekian ontology, the triad is thus, strictly speaking, *incomplete*. It is *inconsistent* with its true earlier breakthrough. At the most basic level, culture can never completely

31 See Žižek, Chapter 2, "The Hegelian Ticklish Subject," TS, specifically the section entitled "3, 4, 5," p. 79-86.

sursume³² the infinite contraction into the Self and simply make it a sublimated moment in the self-meditation of the Notion: there must always be a minimal distance between the unruliness of human nature, the withdrawal into nocturnal *Innenwelt* (inner world) of the Soul that is the primordial basis of human subjectivity, and the symbolic, cultural network that attempts to discipline this unnatural violence into a second nature. The two can never overlap so that the latter encompasses the former or presents an all-pervasive totality, insofar as this levels out the *singularity* that marks human subjectivity, the fact that it cannot be fully subsumed or explained by material and cultural determinations.

For Žižek, the difference between traditional accounts of Absolute Idealism and the quadruple dialectic of the *Realphilosophie* demonstrates the nature of dialectical logic he wants to defend. Whereas the former can be understood as a series of upward moving spirals where each new turn completely encompasses the previous so that eventually we have a completely enclosed, organic totality, the very self-unfolding operation of the later precludes the possibility of such a self-totalizing activity. Although Absolute Idealism itself does move forward on the basis of a fundamental non-coincidence or immanent contradiction (there is conflict internal to the system), it is always ultimately productive of new, more comprehensive unity. Within transcendental materialism, however, the passage from nature to culture does not reveal a struggle of transmutation, but an irrevocable standstill in the heart of being that cannot be sublated into a higher moment of truth: the immanent breakdown within the ebb and flow of substance ontogenetically creates an irreducible subject

32 In this thesis, I have decided to use "sursume" to translate "aufheben" on the basis of a trend in French translations of Hegel. In the context of this piece, it has the advantage of avoiding ambiguities which could arise with the normal translation of "sublate," a concept that has its own unique psychoanalytical meaning, and does not fall into the trap of "subsume."

only through its autodisruptive movement. This means that the process of subjectivation (culture) emerges out of the negativity of the pure "I" and thus holds a position of radical autonomy over nature. Instead of a self-enclosed spiral or circle of circles, we see a "break" in nature which prevents the next dialectical phase of self-appropriation from occurring, from which are derived two radically different areas of autonomous activity. The image is of two cones – one ontologically positive, the other immersed in a virtual zone of nonbeing – linked together by a black hole that is the subject. Nature and culture self-actualize in isolation to one another, but are nevertheless negatively linked together by the abyssal void of subjectivity, that which "protrudes" out of both. It stands for the throat of substance that prevents the Absolute from being a devouring all that operates according to its self-unfolding immanent laws,³³ just as much as it stands for that snag in the cultural machine (the kernel of the Real) that can never be filled in and thus is the impetus for the infinite proliferation of new symbolic, cultural forms.³⁴ Here we have a rich account of the *emergence* of various autonomous zones of activity which remain irreducible to although simultaneously dependent on the precedent levels which constitute their genetic ground. To any one familiar with the *Freiheitsschrift* or the *Weltalter*, this demonstrates the manifest *Schellingian* character of Žižek's criticism of Hegel (with an important twist), while at the same time locating the germ of the former's logic of the *Grund*

33 For Žižek, "this is in fact the crucial achievement of psychoanalysis: its claim is that that sexuality itself, sexual drives pertaining to the human animal, cannot be accounted for in evolutionary terms" (PV 167). The subject is always a leftover, something which sticks out and protrudes from the natural and cultural world.

34 One must remember, that since the Symbolic is *never* all for Lacan, the true core of Hegelian dialectical logic for Žižek is that it must include an irremovable moment of irreconcilability and non-coincidence, an interruptive and ideally devastating "In-between" position. Bruce Fink refers to this as "kinks in the symbolic order," that which prevents the symbolic constitution and yet keeps it going. See Chapter 3, "The Creative Function of the Word: The Symbolic and the Real," in *The Lacanian Subject* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 24-31.

within Hegel's early *Realphilosophie*.³⁵

Accordingly, what is so interesting within Žižek's reactualization of German Idealism is its implicit claim that Schelling's radical "departure" from the throes of reason in the *Weltalter* does not demonstrate a break from the thrust of modern philosophy inaugurated by Descartes, but is, in some sense, its "perverse" truth. Schelling's attempt to present a logical system that would be able to combat what he perceived as the horrifying "pan-logicism" of Hegelian dialectics is actually a radicalization, a *completion*, of its fundamental insight. In terms of the discussion above, therefore, it is Schelling and *not* Hegel who gives the fullest articulation of the dialectical movement that leads to the birth of the subject insofar as it is he who outlines the basis of a *quadruple* logic, whereas Hegel, going against his own initial tendencies, apparently falls back into a triad at a crucial moment and loses the radicalness of the subject. What thus characterizes the passionate fury of the middle-late period is its embrace, its giving itself over to, the paradoxes that constitute the metaphysical basis of subjectivity – the essence of ontological unruliness as the ground of freedom, transcendental human spontaneity as linked to the libidinal frenzy of the *Todestrieb*, and the theory of nature which they implicate, the dark chaos of the Real that precedes and exceeds consciousness, thereby renders impossible the primacy of self-mediating, self-transparent reason. Interpreting the *Weltalter* through this frame, Žižek is then able to appropriate this logic into his own transcendental materialism.

First and foremost, the *Weltalter* manuscripts understand themselves as a theosophic exploration of the birth of God. Perceiving Hegelian Logic as a purely

35 The entirety of the parallax logic that Žižek is, in effect, an attempt to fully articulate and bring into conceptual fullness Schelling's logic of the *Grund*. See FS 227 for Schelling's description of his logic as a kind of relative autonomy that exists through dependence.

conceptual artifice that suffocates the freedom not only of God but also of humanity under the self-actualizing necessity of the Notion, Schelling applies his philosophical prowess to give his own account of emergence of temporality and finitude that could rival that of his great adversary. His basic thesis is that, although Hegelian Logic can express notional necessity (what something ideally is), it ultimately fails to grasp the *fact* of being, the primordial basis of its raw reality in freedom, something which forever eludes the self-mediation of conceptuality. For Schelling however, this is not a admittance of the intrinsic limitations of knowledge and human reason. It must be distinguished from Kantian Critical Philosophy because this dialectical deadlock does arise not due to the finite synthesizing activity of the subject, the impasse of the conditions of the possibility of knowledge, but through a logically disruptive and yet positively productive metaphysical activity; that is to say, the epistemic deficiency, the notional snag, announced by the indivisible remainder as the incomprehensible basis in reality is caused through the radical incompleteness of reality rendered necessary by the fact of irreducible freedom. It is not merely that we are ignorant of a totalizing principle or cause which holds being together: freedom proclaims that there is not any, that there could not be any. In trying to systematize freedom, Schelling reaches a contradiction – a contradiction that is, paradoxically, the very vitality of the system itself, insofar as the totality of being must be understood in terms of an immanent and constitutive conflictual relation with its other: “Were the first nature in harmony with itself, it would remain so. It would be constantly One and would never become Two. It would be an eternal rigidity without progress” (WAI 219). The central conceptual work and theoretical concern of the *Weltalter* is to outline the necessary *snag* in the

dialectical machine, the primordial unruly *excess* of the real over the ideal as that which prevents system from being static, self-enclosed unto itself and guarantees its dynamism by making it inclusive of freedom at its very core.

In order to situate ourselves more firmly within the dialectical radicalness of Schelling's *Weltalter* and show how, in relation to the structure of Žižek's ontology, it therefore holds a position of theoretical primacy over Hegel, we can use the problem of evil as an entry point, since it is perhaps in Hegel's and Schelling's respective theories thereof that they most strongly distances themselves from each other. Whereas for Hegel evil becomes merely a sursumed moment in the self-development of the Good, a necessary phase for its establishment, for Schelling evil remains at its very core *irrational, illogical* – by definition it cannot be sublated as a moment within a higher dialectical standpoint because it is, at its primordial basis, the effect of an irreducible act of will. There is something spontaneous about the choice for evil which forever eludes our concepts of understanding, something insurmountable about the unruliness of a soul that insists on that which it wants and will sacrifice whatever it can in order to achieve it. There is something crazed, frantic, and psychotic about it: evil is the capacity to say “No” with the full knowledge of the implications of one's action.

As soon as evil is *understood* and *conceptualized*, it fails to be *evil* – it becomes, rather, misguided good in the Platonic sense that no one does wrong willingly. Hence Schelling's articulation of freedom as the possibility for good *and* evil: freedom in itself must rest radically incomprehensible, analogous to a self-chosen, self-positing gesture that can only resemble madness insofar as it *precedes* and *makes possible* the articulation of a table of values and by itself cannot be subsumed by them. It of itself knows no

order, no rationality. There is always something essentially impenetrable in a free act. That is to say, insofar as the *act* itself is concerned, both the modalities of good and evil as expressions of freedom are *formally identical* insofar as they involve the choice of a set of values *without any guarantee and without any external determination*. What this suggests is that evil is itself at the core of every good act: in order for an act to be *truly* good and *authentically* free at the same time, it must “pass” through evil, discipline it, and use it as the tamed *Grund* for its own expansive power.³⁶ In this sense, the Schellingian concept of freedom is an explicit rethinking of the Kantian notion of diabolic evil and its related concept of the original “unnatural” unruliness of the human organism as that which precedes and constitutes the condition of the possibility of autonomy, so that these concepts become an intrinsic part of his own logic of the *Grund*.

It is this conviction of the irreducibility of free decision that leads Schelling into the abyssal labyrinths of self-exploration that constitute the conceptual fabric of the *Weltalter*. In the same way the intuition of freedom made Kant limit knowledge in order to make room for faith and articulate diabolic evil and unruliness in his pedagogical writings. The main motivation for Schelling was to battle against what he perceives as the ultimate downfall of Hegelian dialectics which, in his opinion, is how it completely overlooks, neglects and levels out the anarchic element of subjectivity. For Žižek, therefore, it is not an accident that Schelling's own descriptions of the vortex of *Triebe* (drives) which precede the spoken Word are remarkably similar in spirit to Hegel's descriptions of the night of the world: both are driven by an attempt to give a philosophically adequate bedrock to Kantian freedom.

Using the operative logic that he had already programmatically developed in

³⁶ See WAIII 217.

the *Freiheitsschrift* as a guide or outline, Schelling utilizes a specific form of introspective analysis to develop a theosophy, the guiding intuition of which is that same process which underlies the birth of human subjectivity is ultimately structurally identical to God's creation of the world. In another vein, the idea is that *psychological* experience is in some sense directly revelatory of the Real, *even if* it must pass through the meditating filters of self-reflexive consciousness; the experience of the autonomous, yet dependent relationship between one's pre-subjective, material *Grund* and the matrices which constitute personality is primordially disclosive of an ontological occurrence that is a symbol of God's relation to the finite created world. But because the methodological starting point is similar to the psychoanalytical experience of disharmony/freedom, Žižek is lead to discard the entire theosophic scope of the work as ultimately accidental to its "true" core, so that the structure of divine creation according to Schelling presents itself as a "*metapsychological* work in the strict Freudian sense of the term" (ID 9). Whether or not Žižek himself is justified in *completely* removing the theosophic scope from Schelling's argument, at the very least Žižek's move follows the spirit of Schelling's middle-late philosophy, insofar as Schelling himself declares in the *Freiheitsschrift* to "have established the first clear concept of personality" (281).

What interests Žižek is merely the status of this elusive X, the *je ne sais quoi*, which haunts transcendently constituted reality, precedes it, in some radical manner appears to constitute its condition of possibility, and how these three conceptual aspects of its appearance are interconnected. These three conceptual aspects of the X as *je ne sais quoi* map unto three modalities of the Real: (i) Real as a "kink" in the Symbolic, a snag in the dialectical machine; (ii) Real as pre-symbolic immediacy which

is lost through the advent of language; and (iii) Real (\mathbb{R}) as autodisruptive substance ($N \neq N$) whose self-laceration creates the necessary ontogenetic space within which the transcendental reconstitution (the Symbolic-Imaginary matrices of self-experience) of reality can emerge, which somehow grounds the first two. Prior to these middle-late works of Schelling, our relation to this mysterious X had already been partially “schematized” by a list of concepts, as we have seen – from Kantian transcendental freedom and unruliness to the Hegelian accounts of the night of the world and substance as subject. However, for Žižek, it is only with Schelling's own dialectical additions that we move away from the paradoxes of the ideal representation of the extrasubjective world or a glimpse into the ontological breakdown that precedes it, and plunge into the autodisruptive logic of the pre-symbolic Real. The difficulty, however, is how to articulate a philosophical system which attempts to synthesize these various concepts together into a stable whole insofar as the very ontological space whose exploration would enable this retreats the very moment that conscious experiences begins. As Žižek says in the opening of his book on Schelling, the problem that haunts the entire book is:

... the *problem of the Beginning itself*, the central problem of German Idealism – suffice it to recall Hegel's detailed elaboration of this problem and all its implications in the *Science of Logic*. Schelling's 'materialist' contribution is best epitomized by his fundamental thesis according to which, to put it bluntly, *the true Beginning is not at the beginning*: there is something that precedes the Beginning itself – a rotary motion whose vicious cycle is broken, in a gesture analogous to the cutting of the Gordian knot, by the Beginning proper, that is, the primordial act of decision. The beginning of all beginnings, the beginning *kat' exochen* – the “mother of all beginnings,” as one would say today – is, of course, the “*In the beginning was the Word*” from the Gospel according to St John. According to Schelling, however, “eternity” is not a nondescript mass – a lot of things take place in it. Prior to the Word there is the chaotic-psychotic universe of blind drives, their rotary motion, their

undifferentiated pulsating; and the Beginning occurs when the Word is pronounced which "repressed," rejects into the eternal Past, this self-enclosed circuit of drives. (ID 13)

Schelling demonstrates a remarkable insight into the immanent, thriving forces of the extra-/pre-subjective, material Real, the elusive, obscure phase of darkness that precedes and constitutes the birth of the light of consciousness. But what intrigues Žižek is the radicalness, the depth, of his *materialist* response to Hegel, which still remains immersed in the fabric of transcendental idealism. This is why Žižek describes Schelling as a vanishing meditator between classical philosophy and the contemporary discourse of finitude: Schelling stands in a position of irreconcilable contradiction, of infinite parallax, between the two. It is this tension that Žižek takes it himself to further develop and articulate in a different way in his parallax ontology. If we superimpose unto the ground/existence distinction, which Schelling propounds in the *Freiheitsschrift* and the *Weltalter*, the real(ity)/ideal(ity) distinction that is operative within modern philosophy from Descartes onward, we perceive a nuance in the ontologization/grounding of the subjectivity: this *split* announced between mind and matter, which makes them non-reconcilable to one another, occurs "within" or "on the side of" the material Real through an ontologico-metaphysical deadlock, a schismatic rupture. The standard debate between idealism (ideality precedes and structurally makes possible the positive order of being) and materialism (there is nothing but the ebb and flow of matter) is thus split on its head:

idealism posits an ideal Event which cannot be accounted for in terms of its material (pre)conditions, while the materialist wager is that we *can* get "behind" the event and explore how Event explodes out of the gap in/of the order of Being. The first to formulate this task was Schelling, who, in his *Weltalter* fragments, outlined the dark territory of the 'prehistory of Logos,' of what had to occur in preontological

protoreality so that openness of Logos and temporality could take place.³⁷ (PV 166)

So how, then, do the pulsations of pure, raw materiality open up unto the irreducible event of the ideal? What one notices in Schelling's philosophy from the beginning to the end is a breath-taking and sustained ability to penetrate into nature as something which *exceeds* and *preceeds* consciousness.³⁸ His articulation of the primacy of the physical as the material, extrasubjective reality in order to explain the genesis or emergence of experience (which, in this period, also applies to the ground of God's self-consciousness in his theosophic narrative, hence the identity between the birth of consciousness and the creation of the world) does not on the surface seem so disconnected and unique in terms of the corpus of his writings. Indeed, the opening pages of the second draft of the *Weltalter* show us that, when Schelling plunges into this metaphysical zone of reality that existed before the upsurge of the pure "I," he is doing nothing other than attempting to approach the self-unfolding core of materiality that constitutes the indwelling logic of nature, which situates the entire project within his own attempts at a *Naturphilosophie*. The last paragraph of the *Freiheitsschrift* only confirms this. He is searching for a full intuition of the magic of the Eternal Past of consciousness as nature acting as *Grund*.³⁹

Žižek's takes Schellingian nature as more than a symbol, a representation of the Eternal Past that precedes consciousness, but as that elusive, impossible X of the pre-symbolic Real. This suggests that we have some direct contact with the extrasubjective world, direct contact with substance qua substance outside of the

³⁷ For a further discussion, see PV166-1667.

³⁸ Although one is tempted to say that the late philosophy is an exception, this is not at all evident, specifically insofar as in 1844, with *Presentation of the Process of Nature*, Schelling tries to define the positive philosophy in terms of the logic of nature.

³⁹ For a discussion, see WAI 116.

meditation of language. When we move outside of the world of human meaning and into the self-enclosed circuitry of the vital ebb and flow of nature, we see that “everything that surrounds us points back to a past of incredibly grandeur. The oldest formations of the earth bear such a foreign aspect that we are hardly in a position to form a concept of their time or origin or of the forces that were then at work” (WALL 121). The crucial observation to be made here is not that nature has a history which self-unfolds through an activity of internal self-transmutation (whether this be placid and smooth or implying an neverending strife of opposites) that is inclusive of man. There are, of course, stages, eons, varying levels of dynamic evolution and interaction within the immanent activity of material nature. Yet, when we look around, we cannot find the subject within the teleological totality of nature. It does not fit: the peculiarity of human subjectivity represents an irreconcilable *break* with the *autopoiesis* of nature, a self-legislative spontaneity that defines itself in direct opposition to its self-organizing totality. Human history begins with a *repression* or *cutting off* of immemorial natural history.

Žižek tries to base this on the fact that, when we witness the genealogy of natural history in the *Weltalter*, we realize that nature is not the unconscious proper. Strictly speaking, nature is nonconscious. We only see a pulsation of matter, a circular, rotary movement of contraction and expansion that follows its own mechanistic, automatic rhythm – what we see knows no time, no linear temporality; it merely eternally repeats in an infinite, self-enclosed cycle of life and death, day and night, fullness and lack. Outside of it, there is nothing – *everything* is caught within an agonizing deadlock. There is no room for free movement. For Žižek, we get a sense of

this all-devouring force when we look inside the body and specifically the skull. This raw flow of biochemical and electrical energy is so “terrifying” for him because it is *faceless – it has absolute nothing to do with the orbit of phenomenal experience or the human universe of meaning*. There is merely the anonymous, dull palpitations that resemble the industrial buzzing of automatic machinery, a machinery that may amaze us with its complexity and dynamism, but which nevertheless exists as a closed circle locked within its own self-enclosed movement, which is not only greater than us, but “threatens” our very existence as subjects at every step. The ego “sits enthroned over a world of terrors” (WA III 49). But this is not to suggest that the irreducible gap between our phenomenal experience and the mechanisms of the natural world proclaims the irrelevance of contemporary neurobiology and cognitivism for understanding the fullness of human subjectivity, as perhaps various representatives of phenomenological psychiatry or psychoanalysis would advocate; on the contrary, for Žižek they adequately describe the Real of our lives with a rigorous vigour and precision before unimaginable. Žižek criticizes various attempts to respond to the threat announced by neurobiology concerning the irreducible character of the subject, seeing the only feasible way to find a solution to develop its logic “to its extreme,” to follow its discourse “at its purest” (PV 175). The question is how a parallax gap, an irreducible negativity, could emerge from within the neuronal interface inside the skull. What we will see is just how much Žižek's own recent endeavour to outline how in contemporary cognitive science “the 'mental' itself explodes within the neuronal through a kind of 'ontological explosion’” is influenced from his engagement with Schelling (PV 211).

Within the elusive X of nature, when we look around at the immemorial epochs of geological time, the evolutionary strata of biological autodevelopment or the dynamism of libidinal economics, there is nothing but a devouring blind necessity. Insofar as this self-totalizing immanent causality represents a closed circle, how is this deterministic “deadlock” surpassed so that free movement is possible? Although Žižek's own descriptions in *The Indivisible Remainder* and “The Abyss of Freedom” of the passage from the rotary movement of *Triebe* to a subject that is non-coincident with its material *Grund*, focus on the founding gesture of subjectivity as a fiat, this is not enough. The question is *how* the id-like pulsation of the drives *grounds* the self-positing act of the decision. As Adrian Johnston makes astonishingly clear, even if the self-positing act of the subject is an arbitrary, groundless act “analogous to the cutting of the Gordian knot,” Schelling searches for a way to inscribe the very condition of the possibility of the act itself within the material palpitations of nature in works for the most part not discussed by Žižek.⁴⁰ In this sense, Žižek's own account is dissatisfying because it has a tendency to present the drives as an irrevocably closed system of blind determinism without specifically explaining how they, of themselves, short circuit (a theoretical emphasis that would be advantageous to his overall attempt to ground a new materialist ontology).

As Johnston points out, within the Schellingian ontogenetic narrative, the self-positing of the subject is first possibilized by the emergence of *desire* (*Begierde*) within being. Desire marks the first juncture of some kind of blockage in the heart of blind necessity, some kind of immanently generated intrusion, which obfuscates the automatic oscillation of drives by shattering its pure immanence. In place of a smooth,

40 See Johnston ŽO, Chapter 7, “Substance Against Itself: The Disturbing Vortex of *Trieb*,” p. 80-92.

determined relation to the environment wholly programmed by instincts (the coincidence of *Innenwelt* and *Aussenwelt* through a predetermined set of biological schemata that hardwire the organism into its “exterior” surroundings), we get a degree of liberation from the various sense data of perception which normally determine an organism's actions mechanically. Desire in its Schellingian mode is thus mainly an intermediary stage between instinct and drive within the ontogenesis of the transcendental “I.” But what must be noted here is how desire, as the beginning of the idealization of reality, is essentially identical to the conventional definitions of psychosis. Consequently, it is Schelling and *not* Hegel who most succinctly describes the ontological passage through madness insofar as it is the former who describes *how* the night of the world disrupts the world into a series of *membra disjecta*.

The Žižekian night of the world emerges as the nonconscious drives of nature for the first time liberate themselves from the blind necessity of being through an immanently generated pandemonium within the corpo-Real of the body. Properly speaking, desire is an impasse within the ontological life of substance – “[s]ince there is consequently an unremitting urge to be and since it cannot be, it comes to a standstill in desire, as an unremitting striving, an eternally insatiable obsession with Being” (WAIII 21) – which prevents it from devouring, *encompassing*, all, because the organism now obeys its own nonnatural logic. Here, the analogue with the body is useful to perceive the radicalness of Žižek's appropriation of Schelling. Although the biological unity of the corpo-Real can astound us with its organic dynamism, the very awing force of this self-organizing totality can cast a shadow over its dark underbelly. This a fact often betrayed by the mindless proliferation of cancerous tumours, muscular

dystrophy, and emergence various forms of mental illnesses caused by pure organic dysfunction, a fact which demonstrates how, from within the closed totality of a determinist system, a part can assert itself from within and hegemonize the organic whole, restructuring it according to its own “unruly” whim. Even if everything is logically pre-determined (for example, the ebb and flow of matter can only follow certain paths carved out by genetics, the neuronal interface of the brain, and various different natural systems), the laws that normally regulate and sustain the body can, of themselves, immanently generate a (bio)logical short circuit, thereby opening up a negative space within its corpo-Real that can assert itself as such and reek havoc over its self-governing unity through a glitch. Like an illness or disease within Schellingian logic, desire does not stand for a positive ontological unity (it has no substantial being in and of itself) in any way for Žižek, but, rather an internal scrambling of the biological circuitry of a system (which, as a false unity, represents an ontological collapse, a distortion of being) that does not follow its supposed path within the whole and instead stubbornly asserts its own Self at all costs – even its own downfall by cutting away the life-stream that keeps it in being.⁴¹

As the force of desire is raised to a higher degree of ideality, matter enters into a self-lacerating rage (*sich selbst zereißende Wut*) like a cancer-ridden, disease-stricken body, howling under its own out-of-control energy.⁴² Desire is a violent self-destructive mania that *tears apart* the smooth fabric of the world. This is why Žižek finds Schelling's “Wagnerian” vision of God so terrifying. It represents a nature which, through the full amplification of desire into *Todestrieb*, becomes *denaturalized*: “[t]he horror of the rotary

41 In the *Indivisible Remainder*, Žižek talks of Jacques-Alain Miller's remarks on an unsettling rat experiment mentioned in one of Lacan's unpublished seminars, where it is only through a kind of neurological *mutilation* that a rat can be made to behave like a human. See. 219-220.

42 See WAIII 91.

motion resides in the fact that it is no longer impersonal: God already exists as One, as the Subject who suffers and endures the antagonism of drives" (ID 24). The primordial unruliness of human nature and its coequal term diabolical evil are therefore synonymous with this grotesque excess of life that we witness in the breakdown of the corpo-Real in times of illness.⁴³ The freedom of the subject is not a positive characteristic or attribute: it is the failure of autoactualization of essence, its inability to contain itself within its own preset logistics, which immanently generates an ontological catastrophe:

Žižek. What I am currently engaged with is the paradoxical idea that, from a strict evolutionary standpoint, consciousness is a kind of mistake – a malfunction of evolution – and that out of this mistake a miracle emerged. That is to say, consciousness developed as an unintended by-product that acquired a kind of second-degree survivalist function. Basically, consciousness is not something which enables us to function better. On the contrary, I am more and more convinced that consciousness originates with something going terribly wrong – even at the most personal level. For example, when do we become aware of something, fully aware? Precisely at the point where something no longer functions properly or not in the expected way.

Daly. Consciousness comes about as a result of some Real encounter?

Žižek. Yes, consciousness is originally linked to this moment when "something is wrong," or, to put it in Lacanian terms, an experience of the Real, of an impossible limit. Original awareness is impelled by a certain experience of failure and mortality – a kind of snag in the biological weave. And all the metaphysical dimensions concerning humanity, philosophical self-reflection, progress and so on emerge ultimately because of this basic traumatic fissure. (CV 59)

Since Žižek, in some sense or other, situates his own philosophical project within the heritage of the philosophical problems plaguing German Idealism, his passage from Kantian unruliness and the Hegelian night of the world to the Schellingian logic of the *Grund* is an attempt to show how the subject is not external to

⁴³ Or, as Johnston says, "[t]he surplus of autonomy is made possible by the deficit of heteronomy. Freedom emerges from the dysfunctioning of determinism" ŽO 114.

the Absolute. As a *mode* of substance itself, it must express for Žižek an interior “rupturing” of its pure immanence. The gaze of the subject, therefore, must be seen in Žižekian ontology as being the material universe finally “gaining” the power to look upon itself through an internal reflection: “the whole domain of the representation of the world (call it mind, spirit, language, consciousness, or whatever medium you prefer) needs to be understood as an event within and of the world itself. Thought is not at all opposed to being, it is rather being’s replication within itself.”⁴⁴ Yet, when the subject finally opens its eyes for the very first time, the world does not celebrate as it glances upon itself. It whimpers under its own weight while hearing its own inarticulate cry. Experiencing itself in a moment of unbearable agony and catastrophic self-diremption in “a mixture of terror and perplexity,” Žižek compares the event of the emergence of the subject to the atrocity of sexual abuse and the horrific pictures of children dying from radiation exposure in Chernobyl (PV 73).

What the world first sees is not its own awe-striking unity and oneness that holds everything together in an all-encompassing totality. All it sees is the tumultuous uproar of erratic pulsation, an irreconcilable, non-masterable chaos resulting from the degradation or collapse of its own productive activity. The self-awareness of the world, its self-experience in the first-person in the finite human subject – and, thus, *all* experience – is necessarily preceded by this irreducible and irrevocable autodisruption that must be seen as catastrophic. Žižek’s argument is that this is a *necessary* theoretical posit if free experience is to be possible instead of a blind experiential void:

We cannot pass directly from nature to culture. Something goes terribly

⁴⁴ Markus Gabriel & Slavoj Žižek, “Introduction,” in *Mythology, Madness and Laughter: Subjectivity in German Idealism* (New York: Continuum, 2009), p. 3. In this recently published book both Gabriel and Žižek define their mutual projects in terms of the “need [of] a concept of the world or the real which is capable of account for the replication of reality within itself” (p. 13).

wrong in nature: nature produces an unnatural monstrosity and I claim that it is in order to cope with, to domesticate, this monstrosity that we symbolize. Taking Freud's fort/da as a model: something is primordially broken (the absence of the mother and so on) and symbolization functions as a way of living with that kind of trauma. (CV 64-65)

The implication, therefore, is that the Symbolic is nothing but an attempt to tame this primordial mayhem, but this can only be accomplished at the level of the virtual. This ontologico-foundational basis, which is a complex rerendering of the mirror stage, is insurmountable: this libidinal chaos remains supreme and never tamed or sublimated into a higher metaphysical unity, since otherwise we would be back to a Hegelian triadic logic, which according to Žižekian logic is necessarily incomplete. The passage from darkness to light occurs merely at the level of the Symbolic; in the Real, nothing changes. It is this aspect of the intrinsic *madness* of culture, language and phenomenal reality, its psychotic *lack* of contact with the world, that Žižek claims we forget, that we *must* necessarily forget, if the fantasy formation is to be a successful "compensation" for the unbearable truth of the radical dismemberment of one's own being.

Žižek's own ontology, therefore, is an attempt to take various hints within Schelling's materialism a step further. Following various marginal hint and gestures in texts such as the *Freiheitsschrift* and the *Weltalter*, Žižek takes what he sees as premonitions of the psychoanalytical experience of the irrevocable discord between mind and body and rethinks Schelling's logic of the *Grund* through them. This leads Žižek to the idea of ground and existence as a dialectically irreconcilable pair that emerges through the caustic collapse of material being. The paradox that guides the entirety of Žižek's own parallax ontology, therefore, is that it is *only* through this ontological catastrophe that the true "miracle" of freedom can emerge, but he relies

entirely on Schellingian texts to develop an account of this ontogenetic basis of subjectivity. But, matters become more complicated as we shall see in the next chapter, insofar as Žižek is only able to appropriate this category of “metaphysical collapse” through exposing and excavating the Hegelian logic of negativity that he sees hidden within the second draft of the *Weltalter*.

Chapter III: The Abyss of the Unconscious

This chapter will demonstrate that, although Žižek's parallax ontology depends upon Schelling's ontology in order to explicate the emergence of the subject, Hegel is omnipresent in Žižek's work. We will see that, since Schelling's own account of the logic of the *Grund* has theosophic tendencies that are in contradiction with the logic of the Lacanian subject, Žižek is only able to extract a consistent metapsychology from Schelling insofar as he can "formalize" or "purify" its content. Perceiving a strictly *Hegelian* structure of self-relating negativity in the exposition of freedom in the second draft of the *Weltalter* that opens up unto an identification of *Grund* and existence, Žižek internally reconstructs the entire conceptual structure of Schelling's text through Hegelian dialectics and psychoanalysis. In the conclusion, I will show how this complex hybridism of Hegelianism and Schellingianism allows Žižek to challenge traditional accounts of the unconscious and exposes a possible fatal inconsistency in the Lacanian category of the Real.

The ambiguity of the Hegel-Schelling relationship within Žižek comes from his critique of Schellingian logic. Even if Žižek's own parallax ontology is founded upon a notion of emergent ontological catastrophe which forms the foundational basis of the subject as self-relating negativity, which he largely derives from the *Weltalter*, Žižek clearly distances himself from the theosophic trajectory of these texts. The issue at hand is further complicated by Žižek's division of Schelling's philosophy into three distinct and irreconcilable stages, which he finds reflected in three existent drafts of the *Weltalter*.⁴⁵ Schelling₁ is largely co-incidental with his quasi-Spinozistic philosophy of Absolute Indifference, where freedom is completely subsumed under the positive order

⁴⁵ See ID 35-39.

of being. In the first draft this is seen with the explication of freedom as a logical mode of necessity within the inner articulation of substance. In Schelling₂ of the second draft of the *Weltalter* and the *Freiheitsschrift*, we see an interesting twist in terms of how the contraction of material being itself is made possible. By conceiving the act of contraction itself as ultimately free and self-positing, here Schelling is able to think the will-to-contraction (the No) and the will-to-expansion (the Yes) as identical and therefore internal to the dynamic of freedom, which makes his thinking approach that of Hegel's. For Žižek, this brief period of breakthrough was quickly left behind by Schelling₃ of the philosophy of mythology and revelation. Here we see a return to pre-modern "essentialism," which he claims we already see hinted at in the third draft of the *Weltalter*, in which Schelling posits a third principle of synthesis within which freedom and determinism are grounded as opposites.

Because of these tendencies, which explain why Žižek qualifies Schelling as the father of "New Age obscurantism" just as much as he is the father of contemporary philosophy of finitude, immediately after his provocative reading of Schelling in the first chapter of the *Indivisible Remainder*, Žižek quickly changes tone and argues for the supremacy of Hegelian dialectics over Schellingian logic. Although consistent with his interpretation of Schelling, it is simultaneously ambiguous insofar as Žižek does not distinguish *which* Schelling he is arguing against or justify *how* he is able to read the second draft of the *Weltalter* as a radical and ephemeral rupture that "goes farthest in the direction of Freedom" (ID 38). Since, as we have seen, the only possible way for freedom to exist for Žižek is through the notion of the irrevocable caustic collapse of the ontological, how is Žižek able to see this in the second draft,

insofar as it is evidently against the spirit of the rest of Schelling's career, even as he sketches it?

The answer is that in the second draft Žižek sees a distinctively *Hegelian* structure that enables him to develop a metapsychological reading of the text that prevents its underlying ontology from succumbing to philosophical commitments (reductionistic determinism, theosophy and mysticism) that Lacanian psychoanalysis rejects. The claim is that, after the radical ontology of freedom that he had developed in the second draft, Schelling immediately recoils from the implications of metapsychology through positing a fourth principle of meditation which enables the neutral coexistence of *Grund* and existence through grounding them within the *Ungrund*, as that which precedes them both and is neither one nor the other. Because Schelling here understands the freedom of the act of decision (*Entscheidung*) which primordially separates *Grund* from existence as a return to this abyssal origin of all reality, Schelling's philosophy displays a structure of quaternity, which gets articulated in his thinking theosophically through a systemization and reconceptualization of Jakob Böhme. But insofar as the second draft displays freedom as a kind of self-positing activity which identifies *Grund* (the will-to-contraction, the No) and existence (the will-to-expansion, the Yes), Žižek sees the possibility to "formalize" its metapsychology by "purifying" it of all extraneous theosophic commitments through Hegelian logic. It is in this sense that Žižek's philosophy is a hybridism of Schellingian ontology and Hegelian quadruple dialectics of non-reconciliation (which, in a certain sense, could be said to be a three and a half, insofar as the abyssal void of subjectivity has no ontological value, but represents an irremovable "in-between").

Hegel is the superior logician for Žižek because his dialectics has no need to posit a principle of mediation. Although textbook Hegelianism presents the third moment of the logic as a kind of synthesis of two previous incompatible and incomplete polarities through a *cancellation* of the falsehood and a *preservation* of the truth contained in each into a higher, more comprehensive dialectical standpoint, Žižek thinks this picture misses the radical breakthrough that we see in the movement. The third moment itself is only the second insofar as it hegemonically usurps the position of the first through the achievement of notional self-reflexivity. The dialectical movement from (i) immediacy → (ii) negation → (iii) negation of negation is superior not only because there is no return to the first (something irreducibly different and operatively new emerges), but also because there is no need to posit something outside of the self-movement of negativity to explain the logical process. The negativity of the second is inscribed within the first, which only became explicit in the third.

Within the still-born drafts the *Weltalter*, Schelling divides the passage from the eternal past to the Present into three distinct stages. The immediate problem presenting itself to us here is the fact that Schelling's treatise is a theogony, an account of the birth of God. In order to read it as a metapsychological theory explaining the emergence of subject from the pre-symbolic Real, Žižek has to treat it purely as a myth in the form of the Lacanian lamella. Since Schelling's text operates on two levels (the theosophic and the metapsychological), I will quickly summarize Žižek's presentation of each stage.⁴⁶

In the absolute beginning prior to God's contraction of material being and the

⁴⁶ In the context of this piece, instead of outlining the various conceptual distinctions and internal differences that occur within the three existent drafts of the *Weltalter* in terms of the movement from Past to Present, I will only be dealing with Žižek's own exegesis which centres on the second draft. A complete explication of the three drafts is outside the scope of this thesis.

blind, annular rotation of drives, there is a joyous nothingness, a pure potentiality that exists in timeless, inexhaustible rapture. For Žižek, in contemporary terms this would be equivalent to the pure void that exists before the vacuum fluctuation declared by quantum cosmology, a nothingness that must be declared positively charged because through its (auto)disturbance something emerges. What is of utmost importance here is the irreconcilable contrast between this stage and the next: the joyous void of divine nonbeing is “breached” by the contraction of finitude and the infinite self-diremption of perfection that it entails. This sundering of heavenly symmetry is thus structurally identical to the disruption of the oceanic unity of child and mother that supposedly precedes the Oedipus complex, the smooth, placid functioning of nature, which is skewered by the advent of human subjectivity.

After the contraction of material being, we have what Žižek calls “Schelling's grandiose 'Wagnerian' vision of God” (ID 24). Within Schellingian cosmogony, this is so “terrifying” because, instead of the endless joy of divine eternity, we have a God as subject who finds Himself unfree and caught within the self-lacerating rage of matter. To exemplify this point further, Žižek claims that this corresponds to the unfathomable chaos that occurs after the collapse of the wave function leads to the contraction of matter into an infinite point of absolute singularity, an incomprehensible upheaval where the logic of our known universe breaks down. In terms of a metapsychology, it can be read as a mythopoetic description of the ontological short circuit within the blind rotation of *Trieb* which occurs before the eruption of full-fledged subjectivity.

Finally, we have God who is able to speak the Word and thus overcome the deadlock that he found himself lodged within by becoming a full-fledged subject.

Ejecting the materiality he had contracted, he bestows upon it an independent existence and becomes God the Creator. For Žižek, in physics this corresponds to the primordial Big Bang itself, the beginning of our universe. Metapsychologically, in the Word we see the unconscious *Entscheidung* which separates *Grund* and existence for the first time. The Symbolic erupts as an attempt to discipline the unruliness of the material of the previous stage, which lacks any self-organizing schemata.

For Žižek, however, the psychoanalytical problem is that the structure of the investigation has the fundamental structure of fantasy.⁴⁷ In the articulation of the absolute beginning, we insert ourselves as a pure gaze into the Real that is prior to our own conception, just as if we were to imagine ourselves as a spectator in our funerals watching our friends react to our death. If the introspective analysis which leads to the discussion of the joyous nothingness that precedes the contraction of being is merely an imaginary falsification, how can Žižek rely on it to propound his own account of the subject or parallax ontology? The problem which Žižek faces is one of the pitfalls of the Real-as-lack into which Schelling fell: because we can only retroactively posit the material origin of subjectivity from within the Symbolic and the Imaginary, the descriptions of this natal, abyssal darkness can serve as a mere screen upon which we project fantasmatic supplements. By protecting us from the true traumatic Real of our being, they lead us away from the psychoanalytical truth.

It is not merely that that which we are investigating exists *beyond* the limits of conscious experience. The risk is that if our investigation operates *only* on the level of phenomenological self-analysis it jeopardizes having all of its significance abolished through a reduction to the narcissistic orbit of the Imaginary. Since Žižek does not

⁴⁷ See ID 22.

clearly articulate his own solution to this problematic, the matter at hand is how he is able to formalize Schelling's philosophy by purifying it from its theosophic content (the illusion of an oceanic bliss) by cutting through its psychoanalytical superficiality. In order to do this, Žižek relies on the primordially of the psychoanalytical experience and the Hegelian logic of the self-movement of negativity, which he believes allows us to reconfigure and reconceptualize Schelling's descriptions of the three stages involved in the movement from the Past to the Present and remove this element of fantasy.

According to psychoanalytical experience, the primordial zero-level fact in the passage from the Past to the Present has to be the second stage, the self-lacerating rage of matter. The joyous nothingness, which corresponds to the eternal calm of the pure immanence of substance that precedes the ontological unruliness in the deadlock of drives and the struggle to speak the word, is merely a part of the fundamental fantasy of the ego. The claim is that one cannot draw a metaphysical distinction between substance as a nothingness that rejoices in the oceanic bliss of non-experience and the unruly basis of human subjectivity which "disrupts" this unity.

For Žižek, the materialist logic that we see premonitions of in the second draft allows us to add precision to the German Idealist attempt to think substance as subject. The model of the ontogenetic basis of subjectivity as a contraction of a disease within the vital fold of being needs to be clarified, insofar as there was never a state of originary health and innocence. There was never a perfect balance that the haywire of human unruliness destroys. This is exactly why Žižek proclaims the superiority of Hegelian logic and dismisses Schelling's notion of the Absolute Indifference. The former does not need to posit a fantasy of original health because it can explain

everything through the restless movement of unsurpassable negativity.

If the human subject is in some manner an irrevocable blockage in the vital fold of being, it must represent an amplification of an already existing potentiality in nature. We can see this in various forms – deformed animals, degenerative diseases, viruses, natural disasters, all of which point to ways in which the originary “harmony” of the world is predicated upon disorder, eruptive disarray, the inability to sustain itself in perfect symmetry. Here, one must think of the fundamental presupposition of Schellingian philosophy: If substance (God) *were* all, if from the very beginning there was nothing but a balanced movement, no subjectivity and no experience would be possible. Žižek has taken it upon himself to radicalize this insight by reactualizing the movement of the second draft through Hegelian dialectics and psychoanalysis, so that Schelling's brilliant metapsychological account of the emergence of the subject out of its pre-symbolic material *Grund* does not succumb to its theosophic tendencies.

Žižek thus reconceptualizes and modifies Schelling's descriptions of the Past as that elusive X that forever haunts and precedes consciousness by modifying its logical core. This has interesting implications. First, we must remember that at the level of logic Schelling's mythopoetic narrative of the Past does not primordially present a *chronology* of the Absolute. The “stages” Schelling refers to are logical and organized according to priority. Consequently, there is no sense in which the joyous nothingness temporally *precedes* the subject caught in the self-lacerating rage of matter. Yet, insofar as freedom *exists*, the abyss of freedom as pure potentiality – a freedom which is not yet posited – *must* be said to logically precede the rotation of drives that constitutes material being. Žižek follows the argument thus far, but then makes a crucial

modification. Insofar as the third element – the *Entscheidung* – demonstrates notional self-reflexivity, it retroactively institutes itself at the beginning of the entire process through the paradoxical causality of Freudian *Nachträglichkeit* (deferred action)/Lacanian *après-coup* (after the fact). Freedom is not in direct contact with the *Unground* as that which neutrally grounds the conflict of the polar principles, nor is it a resurgence of the primordial Abyss of Freedom now in a higher exponent: it is the second usurping the position of the first and thus instituting a mere formal reconfiguration of the structure of the whole. Instead of an androgynous union of opposites, the negative becomes the essential core of the entire movement as *Grund* and existence become identified. Žižek's reading tries to foreclose the possibility of a theosophic quaternity from within Schelling's text.

There is, therefore, according to Žižek a truth hidden in Schelling's description of the passage from joyous nothingness to the all-consuming rage of the unfree subject. Insofar as there is no separation between substance and subject, the description of the joyous nothingness of non-experience and the infinite negativity of *Todestrieb* are, in essence, two sides of the same coin. The passage from one to the other is only a logical conversion.⁴⁸ The ultimate paradox of the shift from the joyous nothingness of eternity (which Schelling refers to in the *Freiheitsschrift* as the *Ungrund*,

48 "Let us step back for a moment and reformulate the primordial contraction in terms of the passage from a self-contented Will which wants nothing to an actual Will which effectively wants something: the pure potentiality of the primordial Freedom – this blissful tranquillity, this pure enjoyment, of an unassertive, neutral *Will which wants nothing* – actualizes itself in the guise of a *Will which actively, effectively, wants this "nothing"* – that is, the annihilation of every positive, determinate content. By means of this purely formal conversion of potentiality into actuality, the blissful peace of primordial Freedom thus changes into pure contraction, into the vortex of "divine madness" which threatens to swallow everything, into the highest affirmation of God's egotism which tolerates nothing outside of itself. In other words, the blissful peace of primordial Freedom and the all-destructive divine fury which sweeps away every determinate content are one and the same thing, only in a different modality – first in the mode of potentiality, then in the mode of actuality." (ID23)

the Ungrounded⁴⁹) to the *Triebe* of the *Grund*, which serves as the stepping stone to full-fledged freedom, freedom as the predicate of a subject, is that *there is no movement at all – Grund is always-already the Ungrund, the “closed” circle of nature is always already the scene of (possible full emergence of) freedom.*⁵⁰ The *Ungrund* is not a fourth principle which exists prior to *Grund* and existence as that which unifies them together as mutual pairs, but the radical self-relating negativity at the heart of the human subject, which now, instead of being a single part in the totality of material being, posits itself as such as an independent centre that hegemonically dominates the whole to which it belonged.

The idea of nature as a harmonious *Grund*, a tranquil oscillation of forces caught within a blind necessity, is a fantasy: the beginning is not a solid, inert density, but a seething mass of heterogeneous matter lacking symmetry. The pure immanence of substance is not a permeating weave of positive being, a neverending sea whose fullness encompasses all: it is plagued by self-fragmentation. The libidinal frenzy of the unruliness of human nature does not merely represent a single case of the diseased breakdown of the ontological, but, rather, the inability of substance to posit itself as all. The “ground fails to ground” (ŽO 92). Here we see the extremely Hegelian logic that Žižek superimposes over/extracts from Schelling in the second draft: it is the failure of the first moment (the self-positing of substance) which leads to the second (the unruliness of human nature, the unbearable instinctual short circuit of *Triebe*); the failure of the second leads to the third (the self-positing of this rupture in the fold of being). The essence of the third moment is, therefore, negation of the previous two, which gives it a notional self-relationality. In contrast to conservative orthodox

49 See FS 276-277.

50 See ŽO 92.

Hegelianism, the negation of the negation is not merely a return to affirmation, but an absolutization of the negative in the unsurpassability of its restlessness.

In terms of Žižek's "reactualization" of Schelling, it is here that its most textually violent moment is located. It proclaims that the only way to save the Schellingian legacy is to say that nature as a full, rich creative potency inherent in the dark womb of the world is an illusion. Nature was always-already a sickly creature, whose collapse coincides with her conditions of (im)possibility. It is not only that nature never knew a moment of eternal happiness and joy, but that the dull, inarticulate pressure of her own gasping for breath (spirit, we remember, comes from the Latin *spiritus*, "breath," and is related to *spirare*, "to breathe") precedes the very positivity of her being. Substance can only *be* substance – nature can only *be* nature – insofar as it is *already* internally torn apart by a constitutive moment of autolaceration that is the site of spirit/subject. This is why the passage is merely a "logical conversion" – it merely requires a certain gesture, an opening, to be brought to a new power, while nothing changes at the level of positive being. The idea of a unified, self-penetrating substance only comes *après-coup* as part of the imaginary reactive/retroactive reconstruction of reality, as part of a fundamental fantasy :

True "anthropomorphism" resides in the notion of nature tacitly assumed by those who oppose man to nature: nature as a circular "return of the same," as the determinist kingdom of inexorable "natural laws," or (more in accordance with "New Age" sensitivity) nature as a harmonious, balanced Whole of cosmic forces derailed by man's *hubris*, his pathological arrogance. What is to be "deconstructed" is this very notion of nature: the features we refer to in order to emphasize man's unique status – the constitutive imbalance, the "out-of-joint," on account of which man is an "unnatural" creature, "nature sick unto death" – must somehow be at work in nature itself, although – as Schelling would have put it – in another, lower power (in the mathematical sense of the term). (ID 220)

In terms of the ontogenetic emergence of unruliness, this means that the material processes of nature were already *broken*, their rhythms disordered, uncertain, their circulation fragmented and unsteady. Within the passage from *drive* to *desire*, substance to subject, no positive content is added, nothing changes at the level of the Real qua Real; there is nothing but a parallax shift. The point is to articulate the radically constitutive material contingency that lies at the centre of the flux of the world. The immanent causality of nature is predicated upon its potential internal inconsistency and ontological breakdown. There is no constancy in the Real: nature is *not* a closed, harmonious system in the sense of following a fixed, all-pervading structural schemata. Its immanently-generated inconsistencies “entice” the gesture of the eruption of a space of self-relating negativity. Within its self-torsion, something new – subjectivity – emerges as a glitch that gains its own self-actualizing autonomy within a relatively closed system of laws.

But what remains even more radical in Žižek is his reformulation of the unconscious through the *Entscheidung*. What Žižek focuses on is the very structure of the act itself, its activity as *separating* the Real into unconscious drives and phenomenal reality by repressing the Past and therefore creating the Present. Since the *Entscheidung* itself is that which originally constitutes the conscious/unconscious distinction, Žižek argues that the fundamental breakthrough of the *Weltalter* is its demonstration that drives themselves are strictly speaking *nonconscious*. Since the conscious/unconscious distinction only occurs *with* the utterance of the Word (there cannot be a *ground* without a *grounded*; prior to the grounded, the ground cannot be posited as such and is merely a self-subsisting, semi-closed system of materiality), it would be philosophically

fallacious to call this energetic rotation of energy the unconscious proper. The result is that the Lacanian subject of the unconscious is radically non-coincident with both the id-forces of the body in its primary mode (the Real of *Triebe* can only be unconscious as a secondary effect after the self-positing of the unconscious act of scission as such) and the more-than-conscious matrix of the Symbolic (the self-generating play of language and culture can only emerge *after* the founding gesture that marks the beginning of transcendental self-reflexivity).

This marks a challenge to conventional interpretations of Freud and Lacan, who respectively assert the unconscious as the biological movement of instinctual energy within the corpo-Real of the body and as the split between the subject of enunciation and the enunciating subject caused by the unpredictable reverberations of meaning within the infinite web of language, both of which have devastating effects on the imaginary orbit of phenomenological self-experience. For Žižek, one must presuppose a more primordial level of activity than the vital energetics of the body or the alienating effects of language that is the unconscious proper, an act which utilizes the libidinal frenzy of the Real of the human body, the unruliness which represents that implosion of instincts and therefore the negative void of nonbeing, in order to ground the possibility of the self-generation and self-proliferation of the automatic machinery of language. In this sense, Žižek's reactualization of the Schellingian unconscious is an attempt to sursume both the traditional Freudian and Lacanian accounts within a higher dialectical unity by showing their dependence on another more fundamental conceptual level.

Žižek's controversial wager is that there is something more primordial within

Schelling's descriptions of the birth of the subject out of the utter twilight of pre-personal being than an account of the self-transformation of "unconscious" spirit of nature towards the openness of self-revelation. Žižek levels out the richness of the Schellingian account of nature to a material *autopoiesis* that has nothing to do with the true seat of personality. What the *Entscheidung* proclaims is that there is no ontological interpenetration between nature as *Grund* and the subject of the unconscious, insofar as the *Entscheidung* usurps the position of the *Grund* through its own self-relating freedom: the former does not come close to establishing the unconscious proper because the unconscious is never an evolutionary product subsumable within the dynamic movement of natural history, but a radical activity of irreducible self-positing. Accordingly, to say the unconscious is an unknowingly creative subject synonymous with the mercurial womb of nature is false for the Lacanian subject on two accounts. Firstly, the subject of the unconscious can only emerge from the short circuit of instincts. There is no dialectically *positive* relationship between the corpo-Real of the body (whether that be of an alchemical potency or libidinal dynamism in terms of the body's own self-organization and automatic processes) and phenomenal reality: the intuition behind the psychoanalytical experience shows the incommensurability of nature (body) and culture (mind). One could therefore understand Žižek's project as an attempt to establish the ontological edifice implied by a structuralist metapsychology, which would presuppose the articulation of a rupturing event within being that alienates it to itself. It is this necessary self-sundering of substance (the scission of the *Entscheidung*) that precludes the possibility of the birth of light from darkness.⁵¹ there can be no internal reconfiguration of matter in order to bring forth some kind of

51 This is another direct contradiction of Schelling. Cf FS 239.

hidden potency because this would create the possibility of a Real as excess. Secondly, the birth of the unconscious is spontaneous, like a quantum fluctuation or a pathological symptom formation. It is a glitch. Yet, when it erupts, it restructures the very Real of the world in such a way that it hides from us its very abyssal origins as pure self-relating negativity

Insofar as the annular oscillation of potencies only becomes the *Grund* of existence *after* the originary act of *Entscheidung*, the Real of drives becomes *unconscious* only in the aftermath of the very self-positing of the act of decision itself. Consciousness and the unconscious as the Real of drives *both* emerge in one magical brushstroke which *retroactively* creates their own evolutionary past by subsuming the ontogenetic prehistory of the subject (the emergence of desire in the flux of pure materiality) as part of its own self-effectuation through the paradoxical causality of Freudian *Nachträglichkeit*/the Lacanian *après-coup*.⁵² Here, however, we notice the Real as lack: the material ontogenetic origins of the subject become a mere retroactive posit that are in and of themselves never knowable or directly experienceable from within the differential network of language. Instead of *exceeding* and *preceding* the Symbolic and the Imaginary, it is only generated through their own immanent activity. Although the ontogenetic condition of desire (Real-as-excess) *precedes* and *renders possible* the self-positing of the *Entscheidung*, the latter proves itself in a logical sense to be “superior” by “absorbing” it as part of its own free activity (Real-as-lack). In a paradoxical movement where temporally prior *condition* becomes an a posteriori retroactive *effect*, the self-unfolding causality of the universe is “torn apart” in the upsurge of freedom as self-relating negativity, which demands primordially. It must be remembered, however,

⁵² This is why Žižek compares the act of decision to Baron Münchhausen. See ID 19.

that this all occurs at the level of psychic reality (solipsistic notional self-reflexivity) and is therefore virtual. Yet, the *Entscheidung* can cause effects in the Real. This means that although the unconscious as act gains absolutely *no* positive being, the abyssal nonbeing of the subject is able to modify the fabric of reality in a way analogous to how language restructures the neuronal Real even if the differential network of signifiers does not exist “in the world.”

The primordial act that creates a wound that never heals in substance by separating *Grund* from existence is the unconscious proper for Žižek and is synonymous with the Lacanian subject. Although one might be tempted to read works such as *Freiheitsschrift*, the *Weltalter* and *Clara* through the earlier *Naturphilosophie*, Žižek warns us from doing so. This would make us lose sight of what he takes to be the primordial originality, the premonition of a disruptive logic of transcendental materialism and its potential to reconceptualize the unconscious through Real-as-lack rather than Real-as-excess. His claim is that, regardless of how, for example, Schelling may seem to say that nature as *Grund* is the unconscious, this interpretation would strictly speaking be in contradiction with the logic of the *Entscheidung* that he propounds. Even if nature is nevertheless a life-giving source of energy or an *autopoiesis* and as such a more-than-conscious activity that *sets the stage* for its autonomy, it must be again asserted that the energy that circulates through and sustains the very ontological fabric of the universe has *nothing* to do with the unconscious proper for Žižek.

What should be taken, therefore, from the *Weltalter* is *not* just the ontogenetic account of the birth of the subject from the twilight of pre-personal being. Schelling's myth has a tendency to make us forget that the *Grund*, “this monstrous apparition with

hundreds of hands, this vortex that threatens to swallow everything, is a lure, a defence against the abyss of the pure *act*" (FA 70). Because freedom has no guarantee in objective being, a materialist articulation of the emergence of the unruly basis of the human subject overshadows the restlessness of the negative that posits itself through it. Even ontological collapse defers us from the true horror of subjectivity as solipsistic notional self-reflexivity that has *no* direct or necessary connection to the extra/pre-subjective world. Focusing on the labyrinth of the pre-symbolic Real-as-excess, we forget the abyss of the Real-as-lack that stares us in the face.

There is an element of *undecidability* in the category of the Real in Žižek. If he is to be faithful to Lacanian metapsychology, he must stick to the structuralist/idealist notion of the Real-as-lack and distance himself as much as possible from the notion of a reality that both precedes and exceeds our representations. Yet, in order to articulate the material basis of such a metapsychology, he must return to Schellingian ontology to describe the movement from the pre-symbolic *Grund* to the self-enclosed, solipsistic universe of human language. Insofar as this implies a contact to the Real-as-excess, there is an ambivalent oscillation between the two omnipresent in Žižek's work.

Žižek highlights an irreconcilable contradiction. Even though the Real-as-lack is logically superior due to the unsurpassability of the negative, in order to truly account for its existence we must rely on some access to a pre-subjective zone of experience. The shift from Real-as-excess to Real-as-lack is the ultimate parallax shift: it tries to designate the autodisruption of the noumenal Real-as-excess, how it becomes an impossible concept through its own immanent activity. Although the undecidability of the Real is a problem Žižek inherits from Lacan, he therefore remains forever true

to his great master's attempt to *desubstantialize* the Real. What clearly distinguishes Žižek's endeavour from Lacan's is that he refuses to take this desubstantization as a brute fact and instead inscribes it within the very activity of being. Substance desubstantializes itself through the extimate genesis of the Symbolic, which renders Substance inaccessible to itself. The question, however, is whether Žižek's account of this ontological "parallax" is philosophically consistent or even possible. It can only occur after it has emerged and the pre-symbolic Real is made impossible.

What is potentially so problematic is Žižek's usage of Schelling to explain this process of autodisruption. The irreconcilable tension between Real-as-lack and Real-as-excess is *not* a problem for Schelling. The positing of a fourth principle is meant to make possible non-reconcilable oppositions (Yes and No, *Grund* and existence) in a way that brings them beyond the level of pure binary antagonism and the paradox of purely formal negativity. What Žižek fails to consider is the precise position that Schellingian logic holds in terms of its relation to Hegel, a relation which Žižek's own parallax ontology in a certain sense radicalizes. Rightfully claiming that Schelling's later texts are a response to the *incompletion* of the triadic dialectic in Hegel's mature logic, he fails to see that the theosophic quaternity that Schelling develops is an attempt to correct Hegel's supposed shortcomings. For Schelling, Hegel fails because his Absolute Idealism is unable to account for a level of reality which is prior to the ideal. In Hegel's philosophy, the spectral of the real haunts the ideality of spirit just as it does in Žižek's. Schelling tries to solve this problem by saying the real can be ideal and the ideal real in the *Ungrund*. This tries to retain both the irreducible autonomy of the Hegelian movement of the purely logical negative *and* the activity of the real, their

productive and irremovable difference, without making the latter an impossible concept. Because opposites coincide in Absolute indifference, the limitations of the Real-as-lack are one with the surplus of the Real-as-excess as it presses itself upon us due to their point of metaphysical interpenetration. For Schelling, the suffering of negative determination (tarrying with the negative) is the joy of overwhelming ontological positivity (a saturating, world-shattering experience).

Conclusion

The fundamental presupposition and guiding principle of Žižekian transcendental materialism is the Lacanian subject. What Žižek finds so compelling about Lacan is exactly this element of irreducible freedom upon which the psychoanalytical experience depends. The subject is always an indivisible remainder, something which protrudes out of all explanatory systems that attempt to contain it. This means that there is always something in man which is more than both his material and cultural determinations, something unpredictable because it is radically free. Žižek's philosophy attempts to assert that we cannot be merely reduced to a place within the mere ebb and flow of matter (reductionist neurobiology), political ideological discourse (vulgar postmodern critiques of subjectivity) or dogmatic metaphysical systems of the world (everything has its reason within a self-totalizing activity) because all fail to come to terms with the ultimate *irreducibility* of human activity in the technical sense that Žižek bestows upon it. The claim is that only an ontology that is able to think the contradiction between system and freedom will be adequate to give us a satisfying account of reality. Instead of being based on self-enclosure and totalizing absolutes, Žižek therefore tries to make it so that the very vitality of his system is sustained and conditioned by the rupture, breakdown, and non-coincidence of its own logical fold. Yet, it refuses to view this element of metaphysical collapse as a mere failure of substance to ground itself: the short circuiting of a closed, deterministic system is the space for the emergence of freedom. Žižek searches for the productive power latent in the very self-contortion of system, the positive theoretical potential in ontological parallax and irrevocable, self-positing

negativity in the heart of being.

This is why in Žižek's work we find such an emphasis on the "traumatic" core of subjectivity, the "unbearable agony" of freedom, or the "unruly excess" of life at the basis of human ipseity. The freely self-relating negativity that is the subject always threatens to erupt at any second and internally devastate the coordinates of everyday reality in all of its determinations. Žižek finds freedom "monstrous" because it does not obey the principle of sufficient reason. It ruptures and immanently shatters any attempt to enclose it. The only way we can experience it in the fullness of its primordially is as madness – the groundless can only appear as a "trauma" within phenomenal experience because it founds a new order and thereby restructures the whole of reality in an unpredictable manner. Freedom, if it is to be irreducibly free, must be formally identical to evil: it cannot be subordinated to a higher dialectical standpoint, but must be irreducibly self-assertive and self-grounding, arising from within itself and not in relation to any external determination. As the founding gesture of order itself, it must remain orderless; as soon as it is given a ground, it fails to be free. Here we see the specifically Schellingian character of Žižek's philosophy.

Žižek is only able to guarantee such a conception of freedom through a new form of materialism in which the pure "I" receives its freedom from immanent ontological breakdown. Žižek's reading and appropriation of the *Grundlogik* of German Idealism has such a transcendental materialism as its goal, because he sees premonitions of it within various gestures within the post-Kantian attempt to think through the abyss of freedom constitutive of the subject, premonitions which only become truly visible retroactively after the advent of psychoanalysis. Yet, there is a

problem which arises out of Žižek's uncertain hybridism of Schellingian ontology and Hegelian logic, a problem which internally threatens to destabilize the conceptual structure of Žižek's transcendental materialism. Although Žižek's "mutual bugging" of both Schelling and Hegel creates a perhaps uncannily consistent philosophical whole, it, perhaps unwittingly, draws our attention to an ambivalent and perhaps irreconcilable oscillation between the Real as lack and the Real as excess. This ambiguity lies at the core of the Lacanian subject and points to the intrinsic limitations of Lacanian psychoanalysis as a scientific explanatory system of the psyche.

Within the Lacanian registers, the Real appears necessarily as a lack. As soon as the Symbolic emerges as a self-replicating, self-evolving differential system, which transcendently constitutes the phenomenal world of experience, any direct contact with the Real is precluded. The Lacanian thesis is a variation of structuralist linguistic idealism. It is not only that concepts do not need to coincide with objects. The ciphering of the Real means that signification has *nothing* to do with objective reality in itself: signifiers only participate in an endless chain of self-relation which precludes access to the "outside" world.⁵³ There is no realist epistemology possible within structural linguistics for Lacan because the link between *signifier* and extra-linguistic object is cut.

Whatever the Real is in itself prior to language remains essentially unknowable. The Real is an impossible concept which we nevertheless have to posit in order to account for the condition of the (im)possibility of language. Yet Lacan goes to great lengths to distance his conception of the Real from the Kantian noumenon because of

⁵³ See Lacan, "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), p. 6-50. Bruce Fink gives a marvellous recapitulation and analysis of ciphering in Chapter Two, "The Nature of Unconscious Thought, or How the Other Half 'Thinks,'" in *The Lacanian Subject* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 14-23.

the latter's implied metaphysical commitment to a full, complete-unto-itself reality that precedes and exceeds the schematic categories of language and understanding. The notion of noumenon posits the Real as excess in a manner disagreeable to Lacan insofar as it assumes that extrasubjective reality is the cause of our representations. The pre-subjective Real, therefore, becomes a mere illusionary construct necessary to sustain the internal consistency of the symbolic system.

Žižek's philosophy, however, is more than linguistic idealism. As Adrian Johnston has clearly shown, Žižek's philosophy must be conceived as an attempt to give a purely materialist ontogenetic account of the subject. Without some account the emergence of the subject out of its pre-symbolic ground, Lacan's whole project would be theoretically void. Yet, it is clear that, insofar as the Real can only appear as lack within the colonizing activity of language, the subject is necessarily lost in some sort of linguistic idealism. Žižek tries to break out of the correlationist circle of the differential system of language to show how it requires a materialist grounding. Johnston's formulation of the problematic is useful here: "materialism ... formulates itself vis-à-vis the deadlocks internal to radical transcendental idealism. On this account, materialism is philosophically tenable only as the spectral inverse of idealism, accompanying it as the shadow cast by idealism's insurmountable incompleteness" (ŽO 19). But this does not suffice. The immanent "breakdowns" of this solipsistic self-enclosure, which represent the inability of the subject to posit itself as a self-sufficient, autocratic all, only point to a negative experience of the Real. "Extimacy" is still formally an idealist *lack*, a conceptual non-coincidence: it is unclear how this notional obstruction, an internal hindrance to the self-positing of subjectivity, can serve as a foundation for a

new materialist metaphysics of the absolute.

Even if the pre-symbolic *Grund* can only show itself negatively through an internal pressure that explodes the ideal from within, and never in the fullness of its being an indivisible remainder, Žižek nevertheless attempts to explain the genesis of a structuralist self-enclosed system that prevents our direct engagement with the Real. His fundamental thesis is that our inability to grasp the thing in itself is already that which we are searching for: the limitation of linguistic idealism is inherent to reality itself, inscribed within the fold of being, so that substance is radically non-coincident with itself. The difficulty is that, since he admits that Schelling is able to mythopoetically describe the movement from material drives to the Symbolic and draws upon this for his own theory of the subject, he appears to assert that an immediate proximity to the Real, instead of its shadow, is philosophically tenable, that is, that is not rendered impossible by the ciphering activity of language and only approachable negatively through its immanent breakdown. But this seems inconsistent with the basic presuppositions of Lacanian psychoanalysis. The implication is that, even if Schelling had to resort to language in order to express the ontologico-foundational basis of human experience, not only is an experience of the pre-symbolic Real possible in itself in Schelling's view, but we can reach it through language. For Schelling the proto-structuralist, Hegelian Real as lack must ultimately open up unto and be surpassed by a pure ontology of the Schellingian Real, the indivisible remainder, that which *precedes* and *exceeds* the Symbolic and the Imaginary. But Žižek's Lacanian commitments make it impossible to develop such an ontology and it is uncertain how he can balance his own radical idealism with materialism. His attempt

to inscribe the former within the latter, to make the epistemic limitations of linguistic idealism synonymous with being's non-coincidence to self, only intensifies the problem: how is the subject able to step outside of its own self-enclosed differential system to describe such a parallax movement from materialism to solipsistic idealism?

A further difficulty with Žižek work is its uncertain relation to Lacanian orthodoxy. In some ways, Žižek can be interpreted as overstepping Lacan's attempt to conserve the equivalency of the registers. Žižek asserts that focusing on Lacan's famous mottos such as "the unconscious is structured like a language" only covers up a more primordial conceptual level of the subject. Yet, Žižek's own thinking is not a radical rupture with Lacan by any means, insofar as the later Lacan himself points to the need to develop a philosophy of nature consistent with the psychoanalytical subject. In the seventh seminar Lacan gestures towards the barring the Real to show that substance as not-all is a necessary ontological implication of the psychoanalytical experience.⁵⁴ But if the Real is only lack, and the essential link between signifier and transcendent, extra-linguistic signified is cut, how can Lacan make such a statement? Where does this "direct touching" of the Real come from?

The problem appears to lie at the heart of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Žižek himself is often inconsistent in his own descriptions of the Real. Although most of his comments on Schelling bespeak the theoretical possibility and necessity of the Real as excess, other descriptions of the Real focus almost explicitly on it as lack. His discussions of the night of the world in the *Ticklish Subject*, for instance, have a tendency to treat the Real as the other side of transcendental imagination, hence as a

⁵⁴ See Lacan, *Le séminaire, Livre XVIII: L'envers de la psychoanalyse, 1969-1970*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. (Paris: Seuil, 1991), p. 36.

logical rather than an ontological concept, although the notion clearly has metaphysical reach. Žižek relates it to the Kantian conception of unruliness, the irremovable In-between that makes the conventional Hegelian dialectical triad incomplete. Other categories that Žižek extracts from Hegel show why he has a preference for Hegel over Schelling and allow us to pinpoint what exactly radically differentiates Žižek's transcendental materialism from German Idealism while illustrating the internal ambiguities of the former.

The Hegelian concept "tarrying with the negative," for instance, is essentially the Real as lack. It emerges from Hegel's own critique and extension of the Kantian noumenon as a necessary limit-concept. For Hegel, the theoretical posit is superfluous. Objects as they are in themselves give themselves to consciousness; there is no inner core that is hiding. This becomes most evident in the experience of non-coincidence between our concepts and that which they represent. Within the inconsistency of the immanent structure of knowledge, the object in itself shows itself through the form of a negative determination which burdens experience. Its positivity is hidden within its shadow, but this can only be brought fourth, *posited*, retroactively, in a modification of the concepts that constitute the mediation of the world in such a manner that the original paradox or blockage disappears. What so interests Žižek here is the necessity of what Hegel describes as "looking the negative in the face." Not only does it link Hegel to concepts such as *Todestrieb*,⁵⁵ but more importantly there is no "intuited excess," no "pure exteriority" that we come up against in experience; even this

55 "Death, if that is what we want to call this non-actuality, is of all things the most dreadful, and to hold fast what is dead requires the greatest strength.... But the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself." Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 19.

"otherness" is created through the activity of spirit, so that it only shows itself as the immanent *lack* or *kink* within the symbolic order. There is no need for a direct contact with the extra-ideal world because everything happens within the self-enclosure and internalized pressure of the logical movement of the Symbolic.

It is at this juncture that we see the immediate problem that Slavoj Žižek's reactualization of German Idealism presents to Lacanian psychoanalysis. Insofar as Žižek relies on Schelling's account of the movement from the pre-symbolic Real to the universe of human meaning, he assumes some kind of direct contact with pre-subjective reality. We do not just "tarry with the negative"; we come up against the Real in its "fullness," not its "lack" through the negative contortion and internal obstruction of idealist representation. The X that evades consciousness, the centre-piece of Schelling's thought, is never a mere formal limit: it is an attempt to express the subject-independent interiority of nature to which we have access despite the mediating activity of consciousness. Schelling refuses to separate this ontological in-itself of precognitive or extra-symbolic reality from the epistemological sphere of idealist representations: the two must be intimately connected if philosophy is to be well founded, which implies a dialectically positive interchange between mind and matter as a complex identity in difference. Yet, Lacan's structuralist metapsychology prohibits such a move because this requires that the chain of signification that constitutes human language is not based on an infinitely self-referential closed system. It would suggest that we are primordially connected with nature at some pre-symbolic level of experience, that the subject is not a dialectically non-sursumable in-between that exists as the psychotic withdrawal of nature into Self as the guarantee of the

solipsistic self-enclosure of the Symbolic.

It is also, perhaps, for this reason that Žižek separates himself from the mature Hegelian triad of Logic, Nature and Spirit, seeing Hegel's description of the passage to culture as ultimately dissatisfying because it suggests a complete return of the idea to itself. What this means is that if nature *is* spirit, there is no disjunctive parallax between the two; insofar as the categories of thinking are simultaneously the metaphysical categories of the world, the core of the psychoanalytical experience as infinite, constitutive conflict between mind and body is precluded. This is why, for Hegel, the deadlock of linguistic idealism does not emerge: if the ideal is not a mere "cipher," but is in some sense nature or the Absolute speaking itself, the real and the ideal are a dialectical self-differentiating unity in difference. The real, subject-independent world can only show itself in the immanence of ideality, but it is raising itself up into self-conscious. For Žižek, this means that the gaze of the subject cannot be in any sense external to substance, but must be an internal reflection of its being upon itself. But insofar as this reflection is predicated upon an irrevocable moment of ontological catastrophe which forever alienates substance from itself, the entire *Grundlogik* of German Idealism as an attempt to rethink the subject-object relation internally collapses. The Absolute can only open its eyes to gaze upon itself through an ontological parallax which traps it within psychotic misrecognition.

The problem here is two-fold. Firstly, if the entire conceptual framework of Lacanian psychoanalysis is dependent upon a notion of the Real as lack and its concomitant concept of the infinite dichotomy between mind and body, *any* ontogenetic history of the emergence of the psychoanalytical subject must be a mere

retroactive posit. One can never gain knowledge of the material origins of subjectivity because there is absolutely no point of positive contact, no place of conjuncture, between the real and the ideal. The freedom of the Symbolic is based on the fact that it can cipher the Real arbitrarily according to its own internal logic; it does not depend upon some kind of pres-symbolic engagement or immersion in extrasubjective reality. This precludes a theoretical explanation of the *emergence* of the psychoanalytical subject. Secondly, if Žižek's metapsychology is to be an advancement towards the explication of the obscure origins of the subject, Žižek needs to admit some level of primordial contact with the Real as that which *precedes* and *exceeds* the Symbolic and the Imaginary, either in a traditionally Hegelian or Schelling manner. Yet this very possibility suggests that the psychoanalytical experience cannot be one of *infinite* conflict between mind and body, the real and the ideal. There must be a point of dialectical union, a place where they touch and are interpenetrated, a point of indifference. The dilemma is the following: if, in order to articulate the materialist ontogenesis of the subject, his own radical idealism has to be qualified so that there is some primordial proximity with a substantial, subject-independent Real, then Žižek's own attempt to prioritize the Lacanian unconscious over other modes must be rethought. His dependence on Schelling's philosophy brings to the fore other conceptual possibilities for understanding the nature of subjectivity and the relation of mind to nature than the purely negative, even psychotic one, emphasized by Lacan, conceptual possibilities that Žižek attempts to foreclose through the development of his own parallax ontology.

This central undecidability is becoming even more noticeable in Žižek's latest

works. In the *Fragile Absolute*, for example, we see an unavoidable oscillation between the unsurpassable superiority of Real-as-lack, the self-enclosed system of language, and the necessity of the Real-as-excess. In Chapter 6 "The Fantasmatic Real," Žižek goes to great lengths to interpret Schelling's descriptions of the *Grund* in terms of the Freudian myth of the primal father. This means that, in essence, the event of the *Entscheidung* that violently separates *Grund* from existence *never* occurred: it is a fantasmatic, retroactive posit. Therefore, Schelling's "obscurantist idealist" manner of "deducing" the act from the pre-symbolic is only true insofar as it gestures towards the fundamental horror of subjectivity, just as the empirically false statements of those suffering false memory syndrome (child sexual abuse) reveal the deadlock haunting a patient (the inability to come to terms with the infinite deferral of desire). What is clear from this new spin on Žižek's earlier interpretation of Schelling is Žižek's attempt to distance himself from any notion of a substantial Real *outside* of the self-positing of the act and its concomitant solipsistic ciphering of reality. But then in the next chapter "Why Is The Truth Monstrous?" Žižek discusses the constitutive element of the shadow of originary "untruth" in Heideggerian ontology. Following Heidegger, he speaks of this "untruth" as the primordial thickness of the forest that comes before all clearings. In an interesting move given his previous demeaning of the Schellingian position, he identifies this necessary level of "imponderability" with the pre-subjective Real, as that which exceeds, precedes and even constitutes the condition of the possibility of Symbolic and the Real-as-lack. Yet, he goes even one step further.

In order to account for the emergence of his clearing, Žižek shows how Heidegger needs to have recourse towards the notion of "ontological derangement" in

his *Beiträge zur Philosophie*, an originary reversal in the order of being where man asserts himself over the totality of the whole. What is the most revealing for Žižek is that the creation of this concept, which he identifies as structurally identical to *Todestrieb* and diabolic evil, coincides perfectly with Heidegger's intensive reading of Schelling's *Freiheitsschrift*. Linking Heidegger's notion of the imponderable thickness of untruth that surrounds every disclosive clearing to the pre-symbolic Real, Žižek demonstrates that, despite his previous disavowal of Schelling's description of the emergence of this derangement as just a "lure," it must nevertheless be paradoxically expressive of an underlying metaphysical, pre-/extrasubjective truth: one must understand "the emergence of the symbolic Order as the answer to some monstrous excess in the Real" through the description of the genesis of ontological perversion that precedes and exceeds the symbolic structures which it renders possible (FA 83). In only a couple pages of the same text Žižek oscillates irreconcilably between the Real-as-excess as a necessary fantasmatic narrative with no claim to objective truth (like the Freudian myth) and as an ontological phenomenon the description of which is fundamental to our understanding of psychoanalysis.

In this sense, we can see why Žižek is perhaps so selective in his reading of German Idealism. He knows that what we see in the wake of post-Kantian idealism is *not* limited to a logic which renders possible human freedom through a metaphysical short circuit. System and freedom are not necessarily ontological "parallaxes": the relation between free spirit and the material body is a one of mutual interaction and dialectical interpenetration, possibly emerging out of a creative and ontologically rich natural teleology. Because Žižek's philosophy claims that the psychoanalytical

experience of discord is irreducible, he merely dismisses the idea of a properly speaking dialectical materialism based on a positive interplay between mind and body. The problem is not necessarily the emergence of the gap that holds them in relative independence from one another, but their dialectical identity in difference, how body is mind (which, as Schelling says, is not an identification but a statement of dynamic logic⁵⁶).

But we must ask ourselves about the very nature of the Real in Lacanian psychoanalysis. Are the Real-as-excess and the Real-as-lack necessarily irreconcilable? If the former is possible, does this mean that other interpretations of Lacan are possible too? If, as Žižek at some places suggests, the Real as *Grund* is only another fantasmatic attempt to save us from a realization of the true horror of subjective experience, how are we to interpret his own endeavour to develop a metapsychological account of the emergence of the subject? How can we explain the ontogenetic preconditions which possibilize the unconscious act if the Real as excess is merely an illusion? Rather than providing Lacan with a solid metaphysical foundation, Žižek's reactualization of German Idealism intensifies the conceptual paradoxes underlying Lacanian psychoanalysis.

⁵⁶ See FS 223-225.

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