

Münchhausen Manoeuvres

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An extended version of a review of Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London and New York: Verso, 2012) and Seán Sheehan, *Žižek: A Guide for the Perplexed*. published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 26th October, 2012, pp. 21-2.

Everybody knows, or thinks they do, how Hegel thinks history goes. At each point in history, 'spirit' (us, in a way) meets with its limiting or negative antagonist in the form of matter (as it might be, the world) The resulting conflict is resolved by a 'sublation', in which spirit assimilates to itself the very conflict between itself and its antagonist, thereby both preserving and overcoming the opposition. By this means, spirit steadily increases its repertoire, and matter is steadily engrossed by spirit. The Hegelian story of the engorgement of Spirit through history has been held responsible for every kind of modern totalitarianism, fascist or communist, and, in that the key principle of postmodernism has been a rejection of the horizon of totality, the denunciation of the Hegelian dialectic has been at the core of most forms of postmodernism. In a number of previous publications, and now in this everlasting gobstopper of a book, Slavoj Žižek insists that this view of Hegel is completely mistaken, thereby managing both to discredit postmodernist arguments insofar as they depend on a dishing of Hegel, and thoroughly to endorse the objections to totality that are key to those postmodernist arguments.

Not that Žižek has any desire to discredit the dialectical alternation of assertion and negation. But, while agreeing that it provides the time-signature for history, Žižek's version of the Hegelian dialectic places the stress on the off-beat, or negative phase of Spirit's self-division rather than the on-beat of Spirit's steady consolidation. History is therefore, says Žižek, not written in the waltz time of the number 3 (the reconciliation of opposites in synthesis), as is usually assumed, but rather in a kind of syncopated two-step of a 2 seen 'not as the duality of polar opposites, but 2 as the inherent self-distancing of the One itself' (474). Here is the most important, and most pitilessly reiterated aspect of Žižek's reading of Hegel. Spirit, or the Subject, in no sense come before, or simply 'undergo' negation. Rather, for Žižek, it is duality that is primary, with oneness being plucked out retroactively from a primary condition of division.

The idea of retroactivity is at the core of *Less Than Nothing*, and the preoccupation in particular of the chapter entitled 'Is It Still Possible To Be An Hegelian Today?' It argues that Hegel shows us the force of the 'future anterior', that is, the effect that excretes its own cause, the act that generates its own norm, the utterance that produces its own intention, the subject that posits its own content. The book provides many examples of the kind of Münchhausen manoeuvre that is often taken as a sign of faulty or paradoxical reasoning but is here actively and defiantly embraced. For Žižek, bootstrap operations are the motive principle of history and politics, since '[e]very authentic act creates its own conditions of possibility' (649). There is a characteristic circularity here, for it seems clear in any case that the only meaning that could attach to the word 'authentic' for Žižek would be 'having no cause extrinsic to itself', not that the demonstration of such circularity could count for anything but a further proof of the autogenic authority of the self-born. What is important about

the revolutionary impulse is therefore not that it is a screwing of historical contradictions to their sticking point, but that it comes out of nothing, and then subsequently determines its own history by back-formation. In the Žižko-Hegelian dialectic of history, ‘each new stage “rewrites the past” and retroactively delegitimizes the previous one’ (219). Not surprisingly, given the patrician cast of his contempt for all that is vulgar, stupid or pusillanimous, Žižek also has an adoring fascination with tyrants, monarchs and producers of power through pure appearance. At one remarkable moment, he quotes (without naming her) Lillian Hellman’s story that when Dashiell Hammett was imprisoned for refusing to testify to what Žižek (mistakenly) says was the House Un-American Activities Committee, the guards began after only two weeks to address him as ‘Sir’, this being, in Žižek’s grovelling estimate, ‘proof of the extraordinary power and dignity of his personality’ (521). The lickspittle attachment to self-legitimizing authority (‘die Partei hat immer recht’ reads his epigraph, the old tease) is the love that cannot help blurting out its name in Žižek’s work.

Retroactivity even extends bizarrely into the future, in what Žižek, borrowing a term from Franz Brentano, calls ‘teleiosis’, since ‘[e]ach historical form is a totality which encompasses not only its retroactively posited past, but also its own future, a future which is by definition never realized’ (914). One of the more perverse consequences of this is that Žižek must advise fellow-communists to abstain from any positive imagination of the communist future, or even seeking out promising intimations of that felicity-to-come in the present: for that would be illegitimately to tie that hands of a future that, if it is truly authentic, can be relied upon to whistle up its forerunners and preconditions for itself (222-3). I think Žižek knows perfectly well how little this prospect will appeal to most, even if he genuinely does not really understand what people like me might find so appalling about it, but, like the fat boy in *Pickwick*, he is addicted to making our flesh creep.

Žižek may be at risk of succeeding too well in his arguments for his own good. At one point, he says that ‘a precise definition of time’ would be the space of ‘the emergence of something radically new, outside the scope of the possibilities inscribed into any atemporal matrix’ (230). But, but, if this were true in anything like a ‘precise’ sense, there could be no question of any ‘emergence’ out of or into anything whatever; there could only ever be apparitions, out of nowhere. If the Absolute does not slowly and accretively emerge, but bursts at each point unannounced but fully-caparisoned on to the stage of history, it is hard to see what ‘history’, in the sense of something building or persisting through change, might mean at all. Each such moment would be a monad, providing itself with its own fixtures and fittings, and sealed off from all previous and subsequent moments, of the priority and posteriority of which it could by no imaginable means inkle. There could be no question of any communication between, let alone anything like a progression from, one such self-begetting epoch to another. Žižek seems nevertheless oddly determined to protect himself against ‘falling back into a relativist historicism’ (502) by willing himself into belief in what he boomingly calls ‘true historicity’ (218), but, given that he has deprived himself of any basis for such a logic of history, can do so only through a kind of chuffing I-think-I-can-I-know-I-can determination to succeed. Žižek’s desire to hang on to historicity amid the force-nine gale of his own arguments also means that, for all his espousal of the radically new, he is Gothically doomed to drag around dogmas of the most clanking antiquity, like the conviction that ‘modern bourgeois society could only have arisen through the mediation of Revolutionary Terror’ (524). He is

aggressively certain that ‘there is no substantial historical Spirit weighing up in advance the costs and benefits’ (525), but nevertheless has no hesitation in valuing historical phenomena as progressive and reactionary, or in defining the ‘proper’ dialectical response in different circumstances (making one wonder what an improper negation might be exactly, and how you might know).

Žižek is, to give a nineteenth-century term a retread, a revolutionist, who assumes that revolution itself is its own reason, or at least can be relied upon to kit itself out with its justification later on. Žižek gives us plenty of pseudo-reasons for revolutionary change, but it is plain that he can only keep up for short sprints his alleged outrage at the exploitation, brutality and misery that are all he will allow to capitalism. The real impulse to revolution is not to put any of this right, but to effect the joyous, violent emergence of the radically new, beyond any kind of prediction, likelihood or drearily utilitarian weighing of consequences. In this, Žižek may be said to adhere to a wholly formalist theory of revolution, which must be kept vigilantly void of any content save its own vehemence. What revolution is for, is not to usher in utopia, but to keep the dialectic alive. And the dialectic? That cannot be said to be for anything, unless it is, oh lor, to enforce the for-itselfness of the For-itself itself.

Žižek’s other principal purpose in this book, as it has in fact been the guiding ambition of his whole philosophical career, is to reconcile Hegelian philosophy of history with the psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan. This might seem to be one of those tall orders that Žižek has always found so tantalising, since Hegel is supposed (see above) to be the prophet of absolute Spirit, while Lacan is the Sybil of the split subject. The principle of retroactivity is enlisted to provide their rapprochement. Just as each historical moment projects its own past, so the Subject, lacking any kind of intrinsic substance, and struggling in vain to syllable itself in a symbolic order in which every label can be relied upon to be a libel, comes into being in this very shortcoming. It is the failure to add up to a subject that gives rise to oneself as a subject. This makes the Lacanian subject perfectly adapted to the hey-presto process of Hegelian history, given that this is itself, according to Žižek, ‘a process without a subject’ (405). Žižek pauses to allow himself to wonder whether such an off-with-its-head view of the historical subject condemns us always to acting blindly, without any sense of the likely effects of our actions, other than that they will somehow retrospectively justify themselves. The cheerful rejoinder he immediately offers to his own enquiry is to invite us to see this impossibility of measuring the consequences of our acts not as a restriction on our freedom, but as ‘the zero-level (negative) condition of our freedom’ (263). This is certainly a kind of answer, just not to the question he has asked, and is characteristic of the skittish zig-zaggery of Žižek’s logic, the famed lissomness of which seems sometimes like a simple unwillingness to pay attention.

Žižek maintains throughout his book that it is a defence of ‘dialectical materialism’. It will help readers of *Less Than Nothing* to know that Žižek’s materialism is a rather exotic kind of thing. He rejects any view of the material world that sees it as alien to or an external constraint on the work of thought. So materiality is nothing given, no kind of out-there in-itselfness, that Spirit might run the risk of bumping up against unexpectedly. Instead, it comes about from the process whereby one struggles against others to make one’s interpretation of the Real stick rather than theirs. Materiality therefore arises (there is an awful lot of ‘arising’ in Žižek, is there not?) as a kind of friction effect of the forcible assertion of truth. Žižek is glad to inform us

that ‘radical materialism’ thereby flips over into something that looks a lot like what used to be called idealism.

The degree to which traditional conceptions of material reality are beside the point for Žižek is nowhere clearer than when he is dealing with Hegel’s own dialectics of nature. He tells us that Hegel has been hooted at because ‘he deduced the necessity of eight planets round the sun, not knowing that astronomers had already discovered the ninth (Neptune)’, but then allows himself a triumphant snicker at what he calls the ‘irony’ that ‘a decade or so ago, astronomers re-categorized Neptune as a satellite, no longer as a planet – so, in fact Hegel was right’ (461). The wrongness of this farrago is miraculously, because almost immaculately, entire. Neptune is the eighth planet, not the ninth, and in any case it was not discovered until 1846, fifteen years after Hegel’s death. The ninth planet was not in fact discovered until 1930, and was not Neptune, but Pluto. This is the planet that in 2006 was recategorised, not Neptune (which has a mass 17 times that of the Earth, and is therefore the third most massive body in the Solar System), and it was recategorised not as a satellite, which would require there to be some other planet for it to orbit, but as a dwarf planet (and then again, in 2008, rather lovably, as a ‘plutoid’, of which one senses that Žižek might have made something). The story that Žižek seems to have in mind, if that is the expression, is that, in his Habilitation dissertation, *de orbitis planetarum* of 1801, Hegel deduced the necessity of there being only seven planets in the very year that the eighth was discovered. But even this story is pure moonshine, since in fact nowhere in his dissertation does Hegel proclaim the logical necessity of there being seven, eight, or any number in particular of planets. An eighth ‘planet’ was indeed discovered in the year of Hegel’s dissertation, but it was the body orbiting between Mars and Jupiter that is now known as the dwarf planet Ceres. The whole confusion was tidily disposed of nearly 60 years ago in an article by Bernard Beaumont; but plainly the dialectic is not going to stand for any back-talk from something as ditheringly unable to make up its mind about itself as the Solar System.

Later in the book, Žižek recruits arguments from quantum physics to his cause. But for all his dalliance with wave-particle dualities, Žižek applies and operates in the philosophical equivalent of classical physics, in which everything is always all-or-nothing, and which is violently allergic to any odour of the by-and-large or on-the-whole. The book bulges with what Peter Medawar once memorably described as ‘Nothing-buttery’. Everything is ‘exactly’ this, ‘precisely’ that, or ‘strictly homologous’ with the other; things must be taken ‘*stricto sensu*’, or, most compulsively of all, shown to be seesaw-symmetrically the opposite of what you first thought they might be. Amid the hiss and clang made by the falling blades of these *either/ors*, the thin squeak of a word like ‘sometimes’ or ‘probably’ has little chance of making itself heard. Much philosophy depends on reading and rereading of other philosophers, but Žižek’s arguments and methods are almost wholly second-order: they require a limitless supply of arguments from others that can be shown to be the exact opposite of the truth. I lost count of the number of times I had been told that ‘One should therefore reverse the standard notion’ (486) (Žižek has only to describe something as ‘the standard argument’ for it to start glumly limbering up for its headstand). This is why the book fails to be about anything much other than Žižek’s relentless rug-pulling operations.

Žižek’s intoxication with negativity means that his discourse is flung about by an oscillation between absolute and middle-excluding opposites, in which if something

is not completely x it must be completely not-x. So, for example, there is either a definite and grounded subject or, in the absence of absolutely determining grounds, there can be nothing at all; so that, if subjects nevertheless persist in taking themselves to exist, it can only be because they have been miraculously spun out of the void, rather than because subjects, like wars, love, law decisions and the price of fish, might just have to be patched together from fudge, supposition and hunch. Žižek says that the act in which I choose myself is ‘the founding gesture of consciousness’ (274) – but why would anyone think that something like consciousness would have any need of such a thing as a ‘founding gesture’? Taking the absence of absolute foundations to imply the absolute absence of any foundations at all is a logical fumble to which philosophers of Žižek’s absolutist stripe seem much more liable than the fuzzy-minded ‘morons’ he loves to mock. In his dialectical swordplay Žižek’s is like a philosophical Errol Flynn, carving out on every surface the Mark of Zorro. First, there is the straight-line incision of what is confidently declared to be ‘the standard interpretation’, then a bend sinister of rakishly diagonal logic, preparing us for the final slash in precisely the opposite direction of where we started. Žižek seems to quite like being called a sophist; but, though sophistry has a soft and soapy sound, it can be done with razors too.

Although Žižek can prove perplexing or exasperating to the reader, it is not usually because of any particular obscurity in his manner of explication. It may sometimes be a bit mysterious why he thinks what he does, or why he thinks that the things he thinks might join up in the way he thinks they do, but the elements of that thought are usually plain enough and plentifully enough reiterated. Still, there is a great deal of it, and Seán Sheehan’s *Žižek: A Guide for the Perplexed* provides a useful and economical primer not only of the elements, but also of the syntax of Žižek’s thought. Though his book stops at 2010, unlike Žižek himself, which obviously means it can take no account of *Less Than Nothing*, it shadows its structure, the discussion being divided into a tour through Lacanian terms and themes, followed by an account of Žižek’s Hegel, which gives due and careful allowance to the eccentricity of Žižek’s perspective on him, and an examination of the revolutionary politics that Žižek derives from their synthesis. The final chapter provides an impressively concise series of digests of the arguments of all Žižek’s principal works. Altogether, Sheehan’s *Guide* is a clear-eyed, comprehensive and temperate explication of Žižek’s signature philosophical moves, by one who finds them more absorbing and compelling than I do. To read it after *Less Than Nothing* is to become sharply aware how much the latter book depends on its own past, making it less the *summa* that its immense length suggests it might be meant to be and more a lexicon of *déjà lus*, crammed full of ideas, arguments, examples, anecdotes and jokes that loyal followers of Žižek will recognise and sing along with lustily. The only perplexity with which one might be left would be why Žižek should feel the need to keep rehearsing the catechism of questions and answers over and again, in pleasing defiance of his demand for radical newness.