The Cunning of Reason: Lacan as a Reader of Hegel

By Slavoj Žižek

[The] question of the termination of an analysis is that of the moment at which the subject’s satisfaction is achievable in the satisfaction of all—that is, of all those it involves in a human undertaking. Of all the undertakings that have been proposed in this century, the psychoanalyst’s is perhaps the loftiest, because it mediates in our time between the care-ridden man and the subject of absolute knowledge.

This passage from Rapport de Rome contains in nuce Lacan’s program of the early 1950s—a program that, without a doubt, every professional philosopher would dismiss as nonsense: to bring together Heidegger (who defines “care” as the fundamental feature of the finite Dasein) and Hegel (the philosopher of the infinite absolute knowledge in which the Universal and the Particular are fully mediated). The Lacanian analyst as a figure of Absolute Knowing? Is this thesis not constrained to a specific historical moment (early 1950s), when Hegel’s influence on Lacan (mediated by Alexandre Kojève and Jean Hyppolite) was at its peak. Is it not that, soon afterwards, Lacan moved from Hegel to Kant, insisting on the inaccessible (“impossible”) character of the Real that forever resists symbolization, on the subject’s unsurpassable separation from the cause of his or her desire? Is not the best description of Lacan’s central project that of a critique of pure desire, where the term “critique” is to be understood in its precise Kantian sense: maintaining the gap that forever separates every empirical (“pathological”) object of desire from its “impossible” object-cause whose place has to remain empty? Is not what Lacan calls “symbolic castration” this very gap, which renders every empirical object unsatisfactory? And, indeed, in the following paragraphs of the very Rapport de Rome, Lacan already outlines the “limits within which it is impossible for our teaching to ignore the structuring moments of Hegel’s phenomenology”:

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But if there is still something prophetic in Hegel’s insistence on the fundamental identity of the particular and the universal, an insistence that reveals the extent of his genius, it is certainly psychoanalysis that provides it with its paradigm by revealing the structure in which this identity is realized as disjunctive of the subject, and without appealing to the future. Let me simply say that this, in my view, constitutes an objection to any reference to totality in the individual, since the subject introduces division therein, as well as in the collectivity that is the equivalent of the individual. Psychoanalysis is what clearly relegates both the one and the other to the status of mirages.

We are thereby back into familiar waters: the Hegelian self-consciousness, the subject of absolute notional self-mediation which supersedes/devours every alterity, versus the Lacanian divided subject of the unconscious, by definition separated from its Cause? However, it is not enough to reduce Hegel to his big formulas (the Absolute not only as Substance, but also as Subject; the actuality of the rational; Absolute Knowing: the self-canceling force of negativity; etc.), and then to quickly reject him as the utmost expression of the modern delirium of total subjective-notional mediation-appropriation of all reality. One should display, apropos Hegel himself, what the author of one of the best books on Hegel, Gerard Lebrun, calls the “patience of the notion” (La patience du concept, the book’s title): to read Hegel en detail, to follow the miniatures of his theoretical practice, of his dialectical cuts and turns. The wager of such an operation is double: it can ground the (only serious) critique of Hegel, which is the immanent critique of measuring Hegel with his own standard, of analyzing how he realizes his own program; but it can also serve as a means to redeem Hegel, to unearth the actual meaning of his big programmatic maxims as opposed to the standard understanding of them.

Where, then, do we effectively stand with regard to Absolute Knowing? When, in his writings around the Rapport de Rome, Lacan himself defines the conclusion of a treatment as the position of the Hegelian Absolute Knowing, how are we to read this together with Lacan’s insistence on human finitude, on the irreducible future antérieur that pertains to the process of symbolization (every conclusion involves a gesture of precipitation, in never occurs “now,” but in a now viewed backwards)? See the following passage:

What is realized in my history is neither the past definite as what was, since it is no more, nor even the perfect of what has been in what I am, but the future anterior as what I will have been, given what I am in the process of becoming.

But the same goes for Hegel—when he adopts the position of the “end of history,” presenting us with a coherent narrative about the entirety of history, he does not simply look at the past from the present position. Although he prohibits philosophy from speculating about the future and constrains it to comprehending what is the case, past and present, the position from which he enacts the final “reconciliation” has a futural dimension of its own, that of a “future perfect” from which the present itself is seen from a minimal distance, in its accomplished form:

It is a present that raises itself, it is essentially reconciled, brought to consummation through the negation of its immediacy, consummated in universality, but in a consummation that is not yet achieved, and which must therefore be grasped as future—a now of the present that has consummation before its eyes; but because the
community is posited now in the order of time, the consummation is distinguished from this ‘now’ and is posited as future.

This “future perfect” is that of accomplished symbolization, which is why, in his Rapport de Rome, Lacan systematically identifies the conclusion of the analytic treatment with the Hegelian “absolute knowing”: the aim of the treatment is to achieve the same “future perfect” of accomplished symbolization. Each day’s edition of Le Monde, the most prestigious (and proverbially haughty) French daily newspaper, appears in the early afternoon of the previous day (the issue for July 4 is on sale around 3 PM on July 3), as if the editors want to signal a simultaneous movement of precipitation and delay: they write from eternity, observing events from the point which comes later than that of other daily newspapers caught in immediate “live” reporting; however, simultaneously, they are able to see the present itself from its immediate future (that is, in its true potentials, not only the way it appears in its chaotic immediacy)—there, you can learn already in the afternoon of July 3 how things look from the perspective of July 4. No wonder Le Monde is accused of arrogance: this coincidence of delay and precipitation effectively betrays its pretense to stand for a kind of “absolute knowing” among the (other) daily newspapers which merely report fleeting opinions . . .

So when, in his Rapport de Rome, Lacan refers to Hegel’s Absolute Knowing, one should read closely his indications of how he conceives this identification of the analyst with the Hegelian master, and not succumb to the temptation of quickly retranslating the Absolute Knowing into the accomplished symbolization. For Lacan, the analyst stands for the Hegelian master, embodiment of Absolute Knowing, insofar as he renounces all enforcing (forçage) of reality and, fully aware that the actual is already in itself rational, adopts the stance of a passive observer who does not intervene directly with the content, but merely manipulates the scene so that the content destroys itself, confronted with its own inconsistencies—this is how one should read Lacan’s precise indication that Hegel’s work is “precisely what we need to confer a meaning on so-called analytic neutrality other than that the analyst is simply in a stupor.”—it is this neutrality which keeps the analyst “on the path of nonaction.” 8 The Hegelian wager is that the best way to destroy the enemy is to give him the free field to deploy his potentials, and that his success will be his failure, since the lack of external obstacles will confront him with the absolutely inherent obstacle of the inconsistency of his own position:

Cunning is something other than trickery. The most open activity is the greatest cunning (the other must be taken in its truth). In other words, with his openness, a man exposes the other in himself; he makes him appear as he is in and for himself, and thereby does away with himself. Cunning is the great art of inducing others to be as they are in and for themselves, and to bring this out to the light of consciousness. Although others are in the right, they do not know how to defend it by means of speech. Muteness is bad, mean cunning. Consequently, a true master (Meister) is at bottom only he who can provoke the other to transform himself through his act. 9

The wager of the Hegelian Cunning of Reason is thus not so much trust in the power of Reason (we can take it easy and withdraw—Reason will take care that the
good side will win), as it is trust in the power of “unreason” in every determinate agent which, left to itself, will destroy itself: “If reason is as cunning as Hegel said it was, it will do its job without your help.” Cunning of Reason thus in no way involves the faith that there is a secret guiding hand of reason which guarantees that all the apparent contingency of unreason will somehow contribute to the harmony of the Totality of Reason; if anything, it involves the trust in un-Reason, the certainty that, no matter how well-planned things are, something will go wrong. This is what Lacan means when he writes that “a letter always reaches its destination”: there is no repression without the return of the repressed, every totality-of-meaning is always disturbed by its symptom.

Ironic is thus for Hegel at the very core of dialectics: “All dialectics lets hold that what should hold, it treats it as if it fully holds, (laesst das gelten, was gelten soll, als es gelte) and, in this way, it lets it destroy itself—the general irony of the world.” With his questioning, Socrates merely pushes his opponent-partner to render concrete his abstract idea-representation (“what do you mean by justice, by happiness?”), and, in this way, lets him bring out the inconsistency of his position and lets this position destroy itself. It does not impose external measures to an idea, but measures the idea by its own standards and lets it destroy itself through its own self-explication. So when Hegel writes that womankind is “the everlasting irony of the community,” does he thereby not assert the feminine character of irony and dialectics? What this means is that the very presence of Socrates, his questioning attitude, transforms the speech of his partner into prosopopoeia:

When the participants in a conversation are confronted with Socrates, their words all of a sudden start to sound as quotes and clichés, as borrowed voices, the participants are confronted with the abyss of what authorizes them in their speech, and the moment they try to rely on the usual supports of authorization, authorization fails. It is as if an inaudible echo of irony adds itself to their speech, an echo which hollows out their words and their voice, and their voice appears as borrowed and expropriated.

It is in this sense that, for Lacan, Socratic irony announces the subjective position of the analyst: does the same not hold also for the analytic session? Let us imagine the patient telling the analyst the impassionate story of some of his recent adventures or fantasies: the very presence of the analyst, his “ironic” stance, desubjectivizes the patient; it transsubstantiates his authentic subjective expression into a puppet-like rendering of a bric-a-brac of falsified memories and fragments from totally different situations, originally addressed at different persons (like the patient’s father), or even fragments from the speeches originally made by others. Recall Umberto Eco’s analysis of Casablanca, where he draws attention to the strange feature of the Resistance hero Victor Laszlo. In every scene, he orders a different drink: a Pernod, a cognac, a whisky . . . why? Is this to be read as an indication that, beneath the image of a heroic anti-Fascist fighter, there dwells a refined, decadent hedonist? No: it is simply that the authors did not treat Victor Laszlo as a psychologically consistent personality, but as a composite of multiple clichés. And it is the same in subjective reality: the mysterious “depth of personality” has to be demystified as the illusory effect of prosopopoeia, of the fact that the subject’s discourse is a bricolage of fragments from different sources.

The status of prosopopoeia in Lacan changes radically with the shift in
the status of the analyst from the stand-in for the “big Other” (the symbolic order) to the “small other” (the obstacle which stands for the inconsistency, failure, of the big Other). The analyst who occupies the place of the big Other is himself the medium of prosopopoeia: when he speaks, it is the big Other who speaks (or, rather, keeps silence) through him—that is, in the intersubjective economy of the analytic process, the analyst is not just another subject, but occupies the empty place of death. The patient talks, and the analyst’s silence stands for the absent meaning of the patient’s talk, the meaning that is supposed to be contained in the big Other. The process ends when the patient can himself assume the meaning of his speech. The analyst as the “small other,” on the contrary, magically transforms the words of the analysand (patient) into prosopopoeia, de-subjectivizing his words, depriving them of the quality of being an expression of a consistent subject and his intention-to-mean. The goal is here no longer for the analysand to assume the meaning of his speech, but to assume its nonmeaning, its nonsensical inconsistency, which implies, with regard to his own status, his de-subjectivization, or what Lacan calls “subjective destitution.”

This (not the ridiculous notion of some mysterious Spirit which secretly pulls the strings and guarantees the happy outcome of our struggles) is what the Hegelian “cunning of reason” amounts to: I hide nothing from you, I renounce all “hermeneutics of suspicion,” I do not impute any dark motives to you, I just let the field free for you to deploy your potentials and thus destroy yourself. It is easy to discern here the unexpected proximity of the Hegelian master to the analyst, to which Lacan alludes: the Hegelian Cunning of Reason means that the Idea realizes itself in and through the very failure of its realization. It is worth recalling the sublime reversal found, among others, in Charles Dickens’ *The Great Expectations*. When Pip, at his birth, is designated as a “man of great expectations,” everybody perceives this as the forecast of his worldly success; however, at the novel’s end, when he abandons London’s false glamour and returns to his modest childhood community, we become aware that he did live up to the forecast that marked his life—it is only by way of finding strength to leave behind the vain thrill of London’s high society that he authenticates the notion of being a “man of great expectations.” We are dealing here with a kind of Hegelian reflexivity: what changes in the course of the hero’s ordeal is not only his character, but also the very ethical standard by which we measure his character. This is what “negation of negation” is: the shift of perspective which turns failure into true success—and does the same not go for the Freudian *Fehlleistung* (*acte manqué*, Freudian slip)—an act which succeeds in its very failure? Robert Pippin is right to emphasize that “the realization that only in such ‘failure’ is there success (success at being Geist) is an achievement like no other” in the history of philosophy. This is where the standard reproach to Hegel (that Hegel fails to fully confront negativity, failure, collapse, and the like, since there is always a mechanism of redemption built into the dialectical process which guarantees that the utter failure will magically be converted into its opposite) misses the point: the story of the Hegelian dialectical reversal is not the story of a failure as a blessing in disguise, as a (painful but necessary) step or detour towards the final triumph that retroactively redeems it, but, on the contrary, the story of the necessary failure of every success (direct project or act), the story of how the only “success” the subject can obtain is, after his
first attempt necessarily fails, turns into disaster, the reflexive shift of perspective which recognizes success in failure itself.

But do we not contradict here Lacan’s explicit critique of the Hegelian “cunning of reason”? Does he not advocate Marx’s “materialist reversal of Hegel” as, precisely, undermining the totality of Reason (which asserts its reign through its “cunning”) with the symptom (proletariat as the “unreason within the domain of Reason,” as the non-sense that no cunning can legitimate and/or rationalize)? This dimension of symptom as “the return of truth as such into the gap of a certain knowledge” is:

highly differentiated in Marx’s critique, even if it is not made explicit there. And one can say that a part of the reversal of Hegel that he carries out is constituted by the return (which is a materialist return, precisely insofar as it gives it figure and body) of the question of truth. The latter actually forces itself upon us. . . . not by taking up the thread of the ruse of reason, a subtle form with which Hegel sends it packing, but by upsetting these ruses (read Marx’s political writings) which are merely dressed up with reason.16

Marx “invents the symptom” when he conceptualizes the position of the proletariat as the material “figure and body” which gives body to the “unreason” of the totality of Reason (modern State of Reason)conceptualized and legitimized by the Hegelian Knowledge. Marx thus sees through the Hegelian trick of legitimizing exploitation and other horrors as necessary moments of the progress of Reason (Reason uses human evil passions as means to actualize itself), denouncing this Reason as the legitimization of the miserable social reality which is merely “dressed up with reason.” As such, the “message” in the symptom is: “Men, listen, I am telling you the secret. I, truth, speak.”17 In a symptom, “it speaks,” the subject is surprised by it, taken aback, caught with his pants down, something that cannot be attributed to any subject or agent gets through. The temptation to be resisted here—the very temptation of the Cunning of Reason—is to surmise another meta-Subject or Agent who organizes these very apparent failures and mistakes, making them into steps towards the final Truth. The Cunning of Reason is the desperate wager to trust in history, the belief that the big Other guarantees its final, happy outcome—or, as Lacan put it in acerbic way:

The discourse of error—its articulation in action—could bear witness to the truth against the apparent facts themselves. It was then that one of them tried to get the cunning of reason accepted into the rank of objects deemed worthy of study. Unfortunately, he was a professor. . . . Remain content, then, with your vague sense of history and leave it to clever people to found the world market in lies, the trade in all-out war, and the new law of self-criticism on the guarantee of my future firm. If reason is as cunning as Hegel said it was, it will do its job without your help.18

A symptom is, on the contrary, that which undermines the big Other, that in which the big Other reveals its gaps, inconsistency, failure, and impotence. When Lacan writes “I, truth, speak,” this does not mean that the substantial “big Other” in me speaks, but, on the contrary, that the big Other’s failure breaks through. Error is the partial un-truth which can be sublated into a subordinate moment of the truth of Totality, while symptom is the partial break-through of the repressed truth of

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A symptom, typically, is the one which, as Lacan says, “denounces this Reason as the legitimization of the miserable social reality which is merely ‘dressed up with reason.’” As such, the “message” in the symptom is: “Men, listen, I am telling you the secret. I, truth, speak.” Marx “invents the symptom” when he conceptualizes the position of the proletariat as the material “figure and body” which gives body to the “unreason” of the totality of Reason (modern State of Reason)conceptualized and legitimized by the Hegelian Knowledge. Marx thus sees through the Hegelian trick of legitimizing exploitation and other horrors as necessary moments of the progress of Reason (Reason uses human evil passions as means to actualize itself), denouncing this Reason as the legitimization of the miserable social reality which is merely “dressed up with reason.” As such, the “message” in the symptom is: “Men, listen, I am telling you the secret. I, truth, speak.”17 In a symptom, “it speaks,” the subject is surprised by it, taken aback, caught with his pants down, something that cannot be attributed to any subject or agent gets through. The temptation to be resisted here—the very temptation of the Cunning of Reason—is to surmise another meta-Subject or Agent who organizes these very apparent failures and mistakes, making them into steps towards the final Truth. The Cunning of Reason is the desperate wager to trust in history, the belief that the big Other guarantees its final, happy outcome—or, as Lacan put it in acerbic way:

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the Totality, a truth which belies totality. Lacan opposes here error and mistake (meprise): while, in the Hegelian dialectical process, truth arises through errors, in the psychoanalytic process, it arises from mistake (or, rather, mis-apprehension). Truth says: “Whether you flee from me in deceit or think you can catch me in error, I will catch up with you in the mistake from which you cannot hide.”

When I am in error, I hold for true something that is not true; in a symptom, on the contrary, truth appears in what I hold to be least true, most contingent, and unworthy of universality—again, truth says:

I wander about in what you regard as least true by its very nature: in dreams, in the way the most far-fetched witticisms and the most grotesque nonsense of jokes defy meaning, and in chance—not in its law, but rather in its contingency. And I never more surely proceed to change the face of the world than when I give it the profile of Cleopatra’s nose.

And, in a way which differs radically from Marx’s critique (and which enables us to recognize in Marx himself the presence of the Hegelian notion of history as the story of dialectical redemption), did Heidegger not propose a much more radical critique of the Hegelian Cunning of Reason? For the Cunning of Reason to be operative, there is no need to resuscitate any transcendent higher rational agency that, invisible to the engaged finite agents, pulls the strings; particular, contingent, and finite facts must be accounted for not in the terms of such transcendent power, but in the terms of their own intelligibility, which is the true “infinite” immanent to the finite itself. The contrast with Heidegger’s full assertion of finitude cannot be clearer.

Heidegger deploys all the consequences of such a radical assertion of finitude—it involves a series of self-referential paradoxes. That is to say, when Heidegger claims that the ultimate failure, the breakdown of the entire structure of meaning, the withdrawal from engagement and care, that is, the possibility that the totality of involvements of Dasein “collapses into itself; the world has the character of completely lacking significance” (Being and Time p. 231), this all is the innermost possibility of Dasein. Dasein can succeed in its engagement only against the background of a possible failure:

The interrelational structure of the world of Care can fail in such a catastrophic way that Dasein will appear not as the world-embedded, open-to-meaning, engaged agent in a shared world that is, but, all at once as it were, the null basis of a nullity.

Here, Heidegger is not just making the decisionist-existentialist point that “being a subject means being able to fail to be one,” that the choice is ours and utterly contingent, with no guarantee of success. His point is rather that the historical totality-of-meaning into which we are thrown is always-already, “constitutively,” thwarted from within by the possibility of its utmost impossibility. Death, the collapse of the structure of meaning and care, is not an external limit which, as such, would enable Dasein to “totalize” its meaningful engagement; it is not the final quilting point that “dots the I” of one’s lifespan, enabling us to totalize a life-story into a consistent meaningful narrative. Death is precisely that which cannot be included into any meaningful totality, its meaningless facticity is a
permanent threat to meaning, its prospect a reminder that there is no final way out. (Here we touch the topic of Heidegger and psychiatric clinics: what about the withdrawal from engagement which is not death but a psychotic breakdown of a living human being? What about the possibility of “living in death,” of vegetating with no care, like the Musulmannen in the Nazi camps?) The consequence of this is that the choice is not a direct choice between success and failure, between authentic and inauthentic modes of existence: since the very notion that one can successfully totalize one’s life in an all-encompassing structure-of-meaning is the ultimate inauthentic betrayal. Rather, the only true “success” a Dasein can have is to heroically confront and accept its ultimate failure.

The contrast with Hegel thus cannot but strike the eye. If Hegel’s underlying axiom is that “the result of an untrue mode of knowledge must not be allowed to run away into an empty nothing”;24 (note the prohibitive-injunctive mode: “must not be allowed to”!), that is, through the work of “tarrying with the negative,” every outbreak of negativity can be accounted for (rendered intelligible) in a narrative of meaning and thus aufgehoben (sublated) in an encompassing infinite totality, then Heidegger assumes a formal (a priori) characteristic of Dasein’s finitude that every meaningful engagement will finally “run away into an empty nothing”: all our meaningful engagements are so many contingent attempts to postpone the inevitable, heroic acts against the background of the ultimate nullity of all human endeavors. Does, however, this critique of Hegel hold? At first approach, it cannot but appear justified—as Pippin remarkably noticed, when, in a famous passage from the Foreword to Phenomenology, Hegel provides the most outstanding formulation of the reversal of the negative into a higher positivity, of the resurrection of the infinite life after death, he has recourse to a very strange term:

Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it. This tarrying with the negative is the magical force (Zauberkraft) that converts it into being.25

Effectively, it is “as if Hegel cannot help giving away his dodge and his own uncertainty with that revealing (most un-Hegelian) word or Freudian slip, Zauberkraft”26—an admission that there is something magical, something of the intervention of a deus ex machina, in the dialectical reversal of the negative into the positive. This is why one should be very precise in circumscribing this reversal. The common knowledge of Hegel is that he criticized the idea of the Crusades for confounding the possession of the spiritual Truth of Christianity with the possession of the physical site of Christ’s tomb, the place of his Crucifixion and Resurrection; however, here, again, the choice is not an immediate one: in order for us to experience the spiritual Truth of Christianity one has first to occupy the tomb and then experience its emptiness—it is only through this disappointment, through this failure-in-triumph, that one gets the insight into how, in order to “live in Christ,” one does not have to go far and occupy empty tombs, since Christ is already here whenever there is Love between his followers. So to retell the experience in the terms of the well-known Rabinovitch joke from the last years of the Soviet Union: “We are going to Jerusalem for two reasons. First, we want to find Christ’s tomb, to dwell in the presence of divinity.” “But what you
will discover in Jerusalem there is that the tomb is empty, that there is nothing to find there, that all you have is yourself. Christians who are there . . .” “Well, this community of spirit IS the living Christ, and this is what we were really looking for!” The same goes for resurrection itself: “Christ will be resurrected!” “But we, his followers, who are waiting for him, we see nothing . . .” “True, you don’t see—what you don’t see is that the spirit of this community of yours, the love that bonds you, IS the resurrected Christ!” And the same goes even more for the entire topic of the Second Coming: nothing will “really happen,” no miracle of a God appearing, people will just realize that God is already here, in the Spirit of their collective.

Early in Christopher Nolan’s The Prestige (2006), when a magician performs the trick with a small bird which disappears in a cage on the table, a small boy in the public start to cry, claiming that the bird was killed. The magician approaches him and finishes the trick, gently producing a living bird out of his hand—but the boy is not satisfied, insisting that this must be another bird, the dead one’s brother. After the show, we see the magician in the room behind the stage, bringing in a flattened cage and throwing a squashed bird into a trash bin—the boy was right. The film describes the three stages of a magic performance: the setup, or the “pledge”, where the magician shows the audience something that appears ordinary, but is probably not, making use of misdirection; the “turn”, where the magician makes the ordinary act extraordinary; and finally, the “prestige”, where the effect of the illusion is produced. Is this triple movement not the Hegelian triad at its purest? The thesis (pledge), its catastrophic negation (turn), and the magical resolution of the catastrophe (prestige)? And, as Hegel was well aware, the catch is that, in order for the miracle of the “prestige” to occur, there must be somewhere a squashed, dead bird—in The Prestige, it is the rival magician Angier’s drowned body.

We should thus fearlessly admit that there is something of a “cheap magician” in Hegel, in the trick of synthesis, of Aufhebung (sublation). Ultimately, there are only two options, two ways to account for this trick, like the two versions of the vulgar doctor’s joke of “first-the-bad-news-then-the-good-news”: (1) the good news is good, but it concerns another subject (“The bad news is that you have terminal cancer and will die in a month. The good news is: you see that young beautiful nurse over there? I was trying to get her into bed for months; finally, yesterday, she said yes, and we made love the whole night like crazy.”), (2) the good news is bad news itself, from a different perspective (“The bad news is that we have discovered you have severe Alzheimer’s disease. The good news is the same: you have Alzheimer’s, so you will already forget the bad news by the time you get home.”). The true Hegelian “synthesis” is the synthesis of these two options: the good news is the bad news itself—but in order for us to see that, we have to shift to a different agent (from the bird which dies to another one which replaces it; from the cancer-ridden patient to the happy doctor; from Christ as individual to the community of believers). In other words, the dead bird remains dead, it really dies, as in the case of Christ who is reborn as another subject, as Holy Ghost.

One can retell in these terms even the remark allegedly made by Brecht in Sydney Hook’s apartment apropos of the accused at the Moscow show trials
in the 1930s:

In 1935 Brecht visited Hook’s house in Manhattan. When Hook raised the question of the recent arrest and imprisonment of Zinoviev, Kamenev, and thousands of others, Brecht is alleged by Hook to have replied calmly in German: “The more innocent they are, the more they deserve to be shot.” As Hook tells it, he then handed Brecht his hat and coat. Brecht left “with a sickly smile.”27

Brecht’s statement is thoroughly ambiguous—it can be read as the standard assertion of the radical Stalinist (your very insistence on your individual innocence, your refusal to sacrifice yourself for the Cause, bears witness to your guilt which resides in giving preference to your individuality over the larger interests of the Party), or it can be read as its opposite, in a radically anti-Stalinist way: if they were in a position to plot and execute the killing of Stalin and his entourage, and were “innocent” (that is, did not grasp the opportunity and do it), they effectively deserved to die for failing to rid us of Stalin. The true guilt of the accused is thus that, instead of rejecting the very ideological frame of Stalinism and ruthlessly acting against Stalin, they narcissistically fell in love with their victimization and either protested their innocence, or got fascinated by the ultimate sacrifice they delivered to the Party by confessing their non-existent crimes. So the proper dialectical way of grasping the imbrication of these two meanings is to start with the first reading, followed by the common sense, moralistic reaction to Brecht: “But how can you claim something so ruthless? Can such a logic which demands the blind self-sacrifice for the accusatory whims of the Leader not function only within a terrifying criminal totalitarian universe far from accepting these rules, it is the duty of every ethical subject to fight such a universe with all means possible, including the physical removal (killing) of the totalitarian leadership?” “So you see how, if the accused were innocent, they deserve all the more to be shot—they effectively were in a position to organize a plot to rid us of Stalin and his henchmen, and missed this unique opportunity to spare humanity from terrible crimes!”28 One can also discern the same ambiguity in the infamous statement usually (although wrongly) attributed to Herrmann Goering: “When I hear the word ‘culture,’ I reach for my pistol.” Goering’s intended meaning was probably that he was ready to defend the high German culture with arms, if necessary, against the Jews and other barbarians; however, the true meaning is that he himself is the barbarian who explodes with violence when confronting true works of culture.29

Back to the topic of Hegel and Heidegger, what this means is that Heidegger’s notion of death as the ultimate point of impossibility that cannot be dialectically “sublated,” included into a higher totality, economized, is no argument against Hegel: Hegel’s reply to it is just to shift the perspective and perceive this negativity itself in its positive aspect, as a condition of possibility. What appears as the ultimate obstacle is in itself a positive condition of possibility, that is, the universe of meaning can only arise against the background of its annihilation. Furthermore, the properly dialectical reversal is not only the reversal of negative into positive, of condition of impossibility into condition of possibility, of obstacle into enabling agency, that we encounter here, but, simultaneously, the reversal of transcendence into immanence, and the inclusion of the subject...
of enunciation into the enunciated content.

Crucial for the dialectical process is the reversal-into-itself, the shift in the status of what-is-at-stake from sign to thing itself, from predicate to subject: what first appears as a mere sign (property, reflection, distortion) of the Thing, turns out to be the Thing itself. If the Idea cannot adequately represent itself, if its representation is distorted/deficient, then this distortion simultaneously signals a limitation/deficiency of the Idea itself, and in order to get at the speculative core of the Hegelian dialectics, one should make a step further here: not only does the universal Idea always appear in a distorted/displaced way, but this Idea is nothing but the distortion/displacement, the self-inadequacy, of the Particular with regard to itself.

This brings us to the most radical dimension of the (in)famous “identity of the opposites”: insofar as “contradiction” is the Hegelian name for the Real, this means that the Real is simultaneously the Thing to which direct access is not possible and the obstacle which prevents this direct access; the Thing which eludes our grasp and the distorting screen which makes us miss the Thing. Is this not how trauma works? On the one hand, trauma is the X that the subject is unable to approach directly, that he can only perceive in a distorted way, through some kind of protective lenses, allusions, roundabout descriptions, and so on, never face to face. On the other hand, however, for a subject who experienced its shock, trauma also functions as the very opposite of the inaccessible Thing-in-itself which eludes his grasp: as something here, in me, that distorts and disturbs my perspective on reality, twisting it in a particular way. A woman who was brutally raped and humiliated not only cannot directly recall the rape scene; the repressed memory of the rape also distorts her approach to reality, making her over-sensitive to some of its aspects, ignoring others, and so on.

This brings us, unexpectedly, to the question: what is a dialectical self-deployment of a notion? Imagine, as a starting point, our being caught in a complex and confused empirical situation which we try to understand, to bring some order into it. Since we never start from the zero-point of pure, pre-notional experience, we begin with the double movement of directly applying to this situation the abstract-universal notions at our disposal, and of analyzing the situation, comparing its elements among themselves and with our previous experiences, generalizing, formulating empirical universals. Sooner or later, we became aware of inconsistencies in the notional schemes we use to understand the situation: something which should have been a subordinate species seems to encompass and dominate the entire field; different classifications and categorizations clash, without us being able to decide which one is more “true,” and so on. In our spontaneous mind-frame, we dismiss such inconsistencies as signs of the deficiency of our understanding: reality is much too rich and complex for our abstract categories, we will never be able to deploy a notional network able to capture its entire wealth. Then, however, if we have a refined theoretical sense, we sooner or later notice something strange and unexpected: it is not possible to clearly distinguish the inconsistencies of our notion of an object from the inconsistencies which are immanent to this object itself. The “thing itself” is inconsistent, full of tensions, struggling between its different determinations, and the deployment of these tensions, this struggle, is what makes it “alive.” Take a
particular state: when it malfunctions, it is as if its particular (specific) features are in tension with the universal Idea of the State; or take the Cartesian cogito: the difference between myself as a particular person embedded in a particular life-world and myself as an abstract Subject is part of my very particular identity, since to act as abstract Subject is a feature that characterizes individuals in modern Western society.

So when Hegel writes that the concept is “free subjective concept that is for itself and therefore possesses personality—the practical, objective concept determined in and for itself which, as person, is impenetrable atomic subjectivity,” he may appear to make a meaningless short-circuit between the abstract-logical domain of concepts, of notional determinations, and the psychological domain of personality, of actual persons. However, upon a closer look, one can clearly perceive his point: personality in its “impenetrable atomic subjectivity,” the abyss/void of the “I” beyond all my positive properties, is a conceptual singularity: it is the “actually existing” abstraction of the Concept. That is, in it, in the “impenetrable atomic subjectivity” of the I, the negative power of the concept acquires actual existence, becomes “for itself.” And Lacan’s “barred subject” is precisely such a conceptual singularity, a singularity devoid of any psychological content. It is in this precise sense that Hegel writes:

The singular individual is, on its own terms, the transition of the category from its concept into external reality; it is pure schema itself.

Every word has its full weight in this precise and condensed proposition. The subject in its uniqueness, far from standing for the singularity of existence irreducible to any universal notion (the idea varied endlessly by Kierkegaard in his critique of Hegel), is precisely the opposite: the way the universality of a notion passes over into “external reality,” that is, acquires actual existence as part of this temporal reality. The properly dialectical twist here is, of course, that universality acquires actual existence in the guise of its very opposite, of the retraction of the multiplicity of reality into pure singularity. Since external reality is defined by its spatiotemporal coordinates, the subject in his or her actuality has to exist in time, as the self-sublation of space in time; and since he or she is the notion that acquires temporal existence, this temporality can only be that of a “scheme” in Kant’s sense of the term, that is, the a priori temporal form that mediates between the atemporal conceptual universality and the spatiotemporal “external reality.” Consequently, since external reality is correlative to the subject that constitutes it transcendentally, this subject is the “pure scheme” of this reality—not simply its transcendental horizon, the frame of a priori categories of reason, but its scheme, the a priori form of temporal finitude itself, the temporal horizon of the atemporal a priori itself. Therein resides the paradox (towards which Heidegger, in his Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics, was the first to point): the pure “I” as the agent of transcendental synthesis is not “above” atemporal categories of reason, but the “scheme” of temporal finitude which delineates the field of their application.
Notes

1 This article is an expanded version of a piece that originally appeared as “Lacan as Reader of Hegel” in *Lacanian Ink*, Issue #27, The Wooster Press 2006.


3 If, measured by today’s standards, this goal of uniting Hegel and Heidegger cannot but appear blatantly inconsistent, one should remember the crucial role of Alexandre Kojève in Lacan’s development—to his end, Lacan referred to Kojève as his maître (the only other maître being the psychiatrist Clarand). Kojève’s central tenet was precisely to bring together Hegel and Heidegger, that is, to read Hegel’s motifs of negativity and exemplarily, the struggle-to-death between the (future) Master and Slave, through Heidegger’s topic of being-towards-death.

4 *E*, p. 79. Significantly, these paragraphs were rewritten for *Ecrits*—it would be interesting to analyze in detail how, in his rewriting of the *Rapport* for its publication in *Ecrits* in 1966, Lacan desperately tried to erase (or, at least, dilute) the traces of his Hegelianism.

5 *E*, p. 84.


7 *E*, p. 79.

8 *E*, p. 96.

9 G.W.F. Hegel, “Jenaer Realphilosophie,” *Werke* 5-6, Hamburg: Meiner Verlag 1967, p. 199. Incidentally, the text goes on: “Through cunning, the willing becomes feminine”—the “feminine passivity” is thus for Hegel not inferior to man’s, but superior to it: it is a passivity that lets the (male) other undermine itself.

10 *E*, p. 114.


16 *E*, p. 194.

17 G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 56.

18 *E*, p. 341.

19 *E*, p. 341.

20 *E*, p. 342.

21 Which accounts for the clear presence of the motif of “cunning of reason” in Marx’s theoretical edifice; for example, in his remarks on the results of the English colonial rule in India, Marx claimed how, in spite of all the destructive effects upon Indian society, the colonization will push India into modernity.

22 Pippin, op. cit., p. 64.

23 Pippin, op. cit., p. 67.

24 *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 19.

25 *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 19.

26 Pippin, op. cit., p. 77-78.


28 Although the same reversal also works in the opposite direction. Recently in Slovenia, the public prosecutor started a procedure against an old Communist functionary involved in show trials and mass killings without trial of the members of the Slovene anti-Communist units imprisoned immediately after the end of the WWII. After the event was announced in the media, I accidentally met another unrepentant old Communist cadre and asked him for a reaction; to my surprise, he told me that the accused functionary fully deserved the harshest punishment, and he added: “Not for what he is accused, of course, but for his true crime, decades later, of allowing the Communists to lose power!”
This, of course, in no way elevates Brecht above ethico-political suspicion. The case against Brecht was succinctly put by W.H. Auden: “To offer your art in vocal support of the Party is one thing. To do so and still keep a bolt-hole and nest-egg is quite another. . . . From the moment of his espousal of Communism, Brecht stood on the sidelines, cheering on a party he most emphatically did not wish to join, recommending that others submit to a discipline which he himself refused.” (Quoted in Caute, op. cit., p. 300) So when Brecht, the GDR Staatsdichter with an Austrian passport and a Swiss bank account, wrote in his poem “In Dark Times” against the poets who remain silent in times of oppression (later generations “won’t say: the times were dark / Rather, why were these poets silent?”), one should effectively raise the question: “So why was he himself silent whenever the dark places of the USSR and the international Communist movement were concerned?” (Op. cit., ibid.)

30 Phenomenology of Spirit, p. 143.