

Society of the Materialist Friends of Plato

The paper begins with some brief reflections suggesting that a different light can be shed on Plato's dialogues if they are understood monologically. Introducing the *Parmenides* (the dialogue of the One), the paper then takes an initial detour by providing an account of contemporary Platonism as represented by Alain Badiou; the main focus is then approached, namely Slavoj Žižek's reading of *Parmenides* in the initial chapter of his *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*.

'... the One proves to be what is absolutely incompatible with itself, what repels itself from itself, and being-for-itself with the figurative expression repulsion.'¹

'In other words, to say it all, Plato was a Lacanian.'²

The Platonic Monologue As the legacy of Plato's thought an exclusive fidelity to the dialogue form, does it effectively anticipate contemporary theories of "communicative rationality" and its offspring? It indeed appears to be the case if it is taken for granted that this form is "dialogical" in a sense which renders it indifferent to what Kant much later will announce as the antagonistic battleground (*Kampfplatz*) of metaphysics. In the latter's stead, philosophy is placed in an arena where a proliferation of subjective perspectives aim to establish in their constituted collectivity an objective democratic consensus, which would furthermore neatly provide an account of the historical coincidence of the birth of philosophy and political democracy. The Platonic motif par excellence is on this view that of rational deliberation: the vocation of philosophy, from Plato onward, can be boldly claimed as the promotion, if not realisation, of intersubjective discursive agreement.³ It is in this way,

¹Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences, Part I: The Science of Logic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 154.

²Jacques Lacan, ... or Worse: *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XIX* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 113.

³For an account which argues for the case that Plato's essential breakthrough consists in attributing to philosophy a transcenden-

no less, that philosophical reason is said to be “dialectical”, denoting the recurringly transcendent process through which such agreement is reached. In the so-called Socratic dialogues, Socrates underlying function consists in ensuring thriving discussion between himself and his various interlocutors. Rather than securing new grounds of epistemological insight, however, the vertigo of *aporia* seems to eternally recur. The point of the Socratic dialogues is not to draw attention to the successful production of new knowledge, but to stress that the dialogue form constitutes its own content. The dialogue is an end in itself. It is crucial that the explicit subject matter of these dialogues exclusively revolve around virtue, dealing with the building blocks of what Hegel will much later call *Sittlichkeit*.⁴

The concept of the dialogue form could thus be said to realise itself in the discursive context of ethical intersubjectivity. Questions of piety, courage, temperance, etc., can only be broached dialogically, as they are the conceptual “material cause” of the communal substance of the polis, whose fundamental unit is not the discrete individual (whose ancient placeholder is in any case the family) but the constitutive collective. Does the same hold beyond (or what will rather prove to be behind the back of) ethicality, in the sphere of metaphysical forms? The transition from the early to the middle dialogues is, broadly put, two-fold. First, Socrates is no longer simply someone who facilitates discussion through sessions of question and answer but instead emerges as an independent voice. This is traditionally taken to correspond to a transgression on Plato’s behalf of an allegedly faithful rendition of the historical Socrates. In the middle period, Socrates is utilised as Plato’s mouthpiece for the espousal of

tally dialogical dimension on these lines, see Frederic Cossutta, “Dialogic Characteristics of Philosophical Discourse: The Case of Plato’s Dialogues”, *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, Volume 36, Number 1 (2003): 48-76.

⁴In particular, apart from his *Rechtphilosophie*, see the chapter in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 206 where Hegel discusses *Sittlichkeit* in relation to the Greek polis, which culminates in his famous reading of *Antigone*.

his own ideas.⁵ The fictional Socrates' new-found autonomy in the middle dialogues marks the beginning of Platonism proper – an enterprise not in the first hand devoted to questions of ethical virtue but what it takes to be their metaphysical ground. The former are presented in a manner which puts them in a light where they are structurally underpinned by the latter. The theory of forms takes unequivocal precedence. In Platonism, then, ethics is not “first philosophy”. If the formal realisation of Plato's early dialogues qua dialogical is mediated by an ethical thematic unity, what is the status of the dialogue form in the middle period's pursuit of metaphysical speculation? Does not a repressed monologic-ity take increasing space? The theory of forms is not teased out interactively: Socrates does not abide by the discourse of the hysteric but that of the master; he instructs rather than teaches.⁶

In the Symposium, the structure of the dialogue follows a sequence of self-contained speeches given by a row of notable figures. The speeches could be said to constitute a dialectical progression from which a dialogical structure can be drawn out – if it were not the case that, upon closer inspection, the sequence constitutes a series of monologues. Each speech represents a narcissistic totality of its own. The “middle dialogues”, despite the superficial appearance of keeping line with the conversational-dialogical structure of the Socratic dialogues, represent a decisive shift to the monologue form, which is itself triggered by a thematic shift of focus from ethics to metaphysics. The metaphysical truths of the Idea are monologically disclosed. The theory of transcendent forms appeal to seemingly self-referentially isolated entities. It is therefore fitting that they are articulated by a singular voice.⁷ What, however, does

⁵Cf. Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.)

⁶For the theory of discourse to which this refers, see Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006).

⁷It should be kept in mind, however, that, strictly speaking, Plato never developed an explicit “theory of forms”. Peter Waterfield's formulation in his recent biography of Plato (the first one to be written in English since 1839) is precise: ‘We talk of a “theory” of Forms, and there is no doubt that some such theory is central to Plato's thinking,

this singularity imply? Is the monological voice which Plato's so-called metaphysical formalism seemingly demands a voice of tyrannical authority, or is it a voice which rather exposes itself as a source of impotence? Is there a point at which the tyranny of the master coincides with the self-doubting hysteric? In the late dialogues, the voice of Socrates fades away and virtually disappears. Having proved able to play both the parts of dialogical discussant and monological expositor, Socrates is now silenced. But he is not simply substituted for someone else. Many of the figures of the late dialogues are anonymised: rather than designated with proper names they appear on the scene as this or that "visitor". This marks the further intensification of the monological core of Plato's dialogues. The voice of the speaker is impersonal and performs according to the logic of the automaton, to use Aristotle's term from the *Physics*.⁸ Or more accurately, the late dialogues should perhaps be placed beyond the paradigm of language and speech, suggestive of an attempt to bypass the signifier as such. What instead comes to the fore, most notably in *Timaeus*, is a Pythagorean formalisation of the cosmos, indifferent to the human subject qua speaking being. In *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and Guattari, an anti-Platonist duo if there ever was one, rally against, in the name of philosophy itself, the very notion of dialogue. Philosophy, in its specific occupation as a discipline of concept-creation, has nothing at all to do with dialogue. 'Sometimes', indeed, 'philosophy is turned into the idea of perpetual discussion, as "communicative rationality" or as "universal democratic conversation."' Nothing is less exact . . . ' As Nietzschean anti-Platonists, they go the extent of diagnosing the participators of dialogue as slaves 'inspired by resentment.'⁹ Following what he takes to be Deleuze's lead, Slavoj Žižek, whose relation to Plato and more specifically to the Platonic dialectic is the telos of the following pages, does not hesitate to favour Platonic monologicity – 'one should fully endorse and

but he nowhere dedicates a dialogue or a stretch of argument to developing or demonstrating any such theory.' (Plato of Athens: A Life in Philosophy [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023], 165.)

⁸Aristotle, *Physics: Books I and II*, trans. William Charlton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 31-

⁹Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchill (London and New York: Verso, 1994), 28.

assume it.¹⁰ Not, however, in a way which affirms the perversion of pedagogical mastery (speaking from the position of the representative of the Other itself), but as a means to promote the end of encounters between seemingly radical incompatibilities. For such a cause, dialogue is insufficient: 'An encounter cannot be reduced to symbolic exchange: what resonates in it is the echo of traumatic impact. While dialogues are commonplace, encounters are rare.'¹¹

Actually Existing Platonism But the greatest champion of Plato today is no doubt Alain Badiou, for whom the whole terrain of post-Nietzscheanism can be apprehended as misguided modalities of anti-Platonism. From Heidegger's dismissal of Plato as the origin of ontological amnesia ("the forgetting of the meaning of Being") to the vitalist anti-Platonism of Bergson and Deleuze (adherents of the immanent principles of life and becoming); from analytic philosophy's scepticism of the mathematical metaphysics of the supersensible to Sartrean existentialism's verdict that Plato errs in prioritising essence over existence; and not least politically, from orthodox Marxism's diagnosis of Platonism as the mark of the origin of aristocratic and later bourgeois idealism to the liberal democratic (Popper, Arendt) allergy of the necessarily totalitarianism of Platonic politics. The questions which immediately emerge, then, concern the nature of Badiou's self-proclaimed Platonism. Why and in what sense does he insist on a "return to Plato"? Was not the underlying philosophical lesson of the twentieth century that speculative metaphysics must be confined to the "dustbin of history", and so not only Plato but also Hegel had to be left behind? For Badiou, Platonism rather signifies the antidote to the horizon this trajectory. More specifically, Platonism is to be mobilised against the hegemonic triumph of the linguistic turn, which Badiou without compromise reductively degrades to the absolutisation of sophisticated rhetoric. Indeed, the fundamental

¹⁰Slavoj Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), ix. Deleuze and Guattari would, however, most likely reject such an assumption. In the same stroke of their dismissal of dialogue, they aptly note Socrates' monological communicative drive, which they hold in even lower esteem. The verdict: no form of communication, neither dialogical nor monological, is any business of philosophy. If dialogue is bad, monologue is even worse.

¹¹Slavoj Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies*, xi.

Platonic gesture, in opposition to the deceptive cunning of the sophists, consists in struggling against “the rhetoricist temptation”. It is precisely according to this line of thought which the traditional Platonic distinction between rhetoric and dialectic acquire its potency: it is a question of the obscure contra rational mobilisation of language. Badiou’s avowed fidelity to Plato, however, consists in the affirmation of the primacy of mathematical rather than dialectical reason. Ultimately, Plato’s infamous call for the enforced exile of the poets from the public sphere was meant to ensure the hegemonic status of philosophical thought qua mathematical clarity. There is in this way a clear transition from the poem to the mathème. The difference between these two regimes – the two poles of thought as such – is in Badiou’s estimation transparent:

Now, poetry, as generous as its beauty may be, is indubitably an authoritarian form of declaration. It draws its authority only from itself, abhors argument, and states what is, in the sensory form of what imposes itself without having to share its imposition. It holds itself at the threshold of the Absolute, but too often regards itself as the self-proclaimed guardian of this threshold. Inversely, mathematics disciplines thought through explicit rules, not through the singular genius of language, and offers to everyone a shared demonstration, whilst never giving up on ultimate clarity – as complicated as its construction may be. It informs the True without conceding anything to the trembling or existential doubt before that whose cruel necessity it unveils.¹²

Poetry is thus not only unbut anti-scientific in the sense in which that it is radically self-authorising, strictly speaking authoritarian in its mode of articulation. It does not demonstrate the path to the Absolute (which for Hegel, the arch-philosopher perhaps only second to Plato himself, coincides with the Absolute itself), but it speaks as if its position of enunciation is situated from the very outset at the of end of this path. Poetry, in

¹²Alain Badiou, “Plato, Our Dear Plato!”, *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities* 11, no. 3 (2006): 39-41.

other words, does not dedicate itself to the bottom-up labour which is the hallmark of mathematics. In a public conversation with Jean-Luc Nancy (Badiou's dialectical opposite) on the topic of "German philosophy", covering ground from Kant to Adorno – they interestingly find agreement, and only relative agreement at that, when it comes to the question of Marx¹³ – Badiou characteristically refers to mathematical reason as the purest kind of reason.¹⁴ As the discussion proceeds, Badiou, in the same breath of criticising the famous formulation of Marx' eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, rallies against the sentiment that the activity of philosophy essentially proceeds hermeneutically, by "interpreting the world". Philosophy, whose basis is to be found in the rationality of the sciences, 'especially mathematics', is a primarily conceptual venture.¹⁵ Unlike Heidegger and his heirs, Badiou seeks to inject new life into the traditional philosophical drive of systematic explication. Given this shift of emphasis from the hermeneutical to the conceptual and thus what Badiou admirably takes to result in the revivification of classical thought, Nancy questions him on the very point of the origins of philosophy itself. With minimal obscurity, Nancy asks: 'Why did philosophy begin?', which triggers a Beckettian exchange:

BADIOU You're asking me?

NANCY Yes, I'm asking you!

BADIOU You're right to ask me, because I know very well why it began. Philosophy began because mathematics began.

¹³As Badiou remarks addressing the public: 'Please note, everyone, that it's on Marx that Jean-Luc and I have found some points of agreement. That's a symptom indeed!' (Alain Badiou and Jean-Luc Nancy, *German Philosophy*, trans. Richard Lambert, ed. Jan Völker (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2018), 40.

¹⁴Badiou and Nancy, *German Philosophy*, 9.

¹⁵Badiou and Nancy, *German Philosophy*, 36.

NANCY Why did mathematics begin?¹⁶

But as for the beginning of mathematics, Badiou pleads what is, to his mind, justified ignorance. He falls back on his notion of Event – the incalculable rupture from any ontological “situation” that cannot be accounted for within the horizon of the situation itself. And since ‘[t]he beginning of mathematics is an event’, the why of its beginning cannot be historically accounted for, as it is not a matter of ‘anthropological speculations’.¹⁷

Beyond the remarkable coincidence of the historically coincidental births of philosophy and political democracy, the claim that philosophy began because mathematics began is of a different nature. The former coincidence points toward a deeply intimate relation between philosophy and politics, that philosophy is always ripe for politicisation, indeed that it should always be on the verge on, if not totally entangled in, the political. This is already part and parcel of the Platonic thrust, but it is not what is distinctive about it. It is the assymetry of the latter coincidence which is crucial to Badiou’s Platonism. Mathematics renders necessary philosophy’s ahistorical entrance on the historical stage. What is at stake is a causal sequence: the event of mathematics, ergo the (possibility) of philosophy. But Badiou does not advance a naïve so-called “mathematical Platonism”, according to which mathematical structures are objectively existing transcendent abstractions waiting to be discovered “out there”. Against the mathematical Platonist, however, the point is not to bring to light that a subject is always-already involved in the transcendental constitution of its object (which would amount to the orthodox Kantian, and with minor tweaks phenomenological, retort). While the

¹⁶Badiou and Nancy, *German Philosophy*, 41.

¹⁷Badiou and Nancy, *German Philosophy*, 41. The continuation of the exchange (and the conversation as a whole) is despite its brevity remarkably instructive, but for present purposes I will not pursue it further here. Nancy’s immediate response nonetheless deserves to be noted: he clarifies that his question does not ask for the specific but general “why” as to the emergence of different theoretical and practical domains (philosophy, mathematics, politics, etc.) at a certain ancient historical juncture. His general answer appeals to the fact that a ‘a world has changed.’ This once again triggers a tragicomedy: Payam Masarrat

definition of an “objective” mathematical truth is subject-independent, orthodox mathematical Platonism nevertheless grossly mischaracterise Plato, as it ‘presupposes that the ‘Platonist’ espouses a distinction between internal and external, knowing subject and known ‘object’; a distinction which is utterly foreign to the genuine Platonic framework.’¹⁸ The distinction is an anachronism of modern empiricism before which the dualist technology of subject and object did not exist. Plato, however, is a Parmenidean monist insofar as he that he upholds the identity of thought and being. A “mathematical Platonism” worthy of its name is not concerned with the subjective mathematician or the objective mathematical structure but with the intelligibility of the real.¹⁹ Mathematics is the immediate mediation of the Idea – this is the ground of Badiou’s Platonism. While his charge against empiricist pseudo-Platonism hits the mark, Badiou’s mobilisation of Plato does not innocently lack an idiosyncratic agenda.²⁰ Though Plato is to be affirmed as a peculiar kind of heir to Parmenides, the paradigmatic philosopher of the One, the banner of Badiou’s Plato points in the opposite direction – “the Platonism of the multiple”. In direct opposition to the romantic insistence on existential finitude (the singular theoretical dominant of the twentieth century), the category of the multiple is in service of infinity, so ‘that the infinite must be understood as indifferent multiplicity, as the pure material of being.’²¹

Though vehemently anti-Heideggerian, Badiou announces at the outset of *Being and Event*, the work which marks the point of departure of his mature thought, that

¹⁸Alain Badiou, “Platonism and Mathematical Ontology”, in *Theoretical Writings*, trans. and ed. Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 49.

¹⁹And furthermore, for present purposes: ‘It is not the status of the so-called mathematical ‘objects’ that Plato is interested in, but the movement of thought, because in the final analysis mathematics is invoked in order to be contrasted with dialectics.’ (Alain Badiou, “Platonism and Mathematical Ontology”, 50. My emphasis.)

²⁰As Peter Hallward remarks in his landmark study, ‘Badiou’s own loyalty [to Plato] is partial, and partly strategic or provocative.’ (Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 5.

²¹Alain Badiou, “Philosophy and Mathematics”, in *Theoretical Writings*, 27.

Heidegger, indeed 'the last universally recognisable philosopher', must nevertheless receive the credit of having rightly refocused the attention of philosophy back to the 'ontological question'.²²

But only with this. The path which Badiou subsequently treads differs even on the level of the formal articulation of the question. It is not "What is the meaning of Being?" but "What is Being?" tout court.²³ That is, the classical question of Being qua Being.²⁴ And the claim is not simply that mathematics is an ontological science but that mathematics is the science of ontology itself. Philosophy is effectively exiled from the domain of the question of Being, which is a direct effect of the 'ontological destiny of mathematics.' It cannot be emphasised enough that Badiou's claim does not consist in that Being itself is mathematically structured, but that ontology is the essentially mathematical science which articulates Being. 'It is not a thesis about the world but about discourse.'²⁵ Mathematics, moreover, specifically post-Cantorian set theory, does not signify Being as presence but coincides with its presentation. Again, the equation between mathematics and ontology does not collapse being as such into mathematics, but points toward the exclusivity of being's mathematical mediation. Ontology is nothing but this mediation. Poetically, it is to say that 'mathematics is the guardian of being qua being'.²⁶

Within this paradigm, it is the notion of the multiple which reigns supreme, understood as the minimal element of

²²Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London and New York: Continuum, 2005 [1988]), 1-2.

²³Cf. Peter Osborne, "Neo-Classic: Alain Badiou's Being an Event", *Radical Philosophy* 142 (Mar/Apr 2007), 21.

²⁴It recalls the opening of Hegel's *Logic*: 'Being, pure being - without further determination.' (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans and ed. George di Giovanni [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010], 59.) What unfolds for Hegel, however, is a logic of determination.

²⁵Badiou, *Being and Event*, 8.

²⁶Badiou, *Being and Event*, 15. Indeed, Badiou's thought oscillates between the matheme and the poem. The underlying critical question is whether something indispensable is lost somewhere in between. The relation between these two poles is fruitful and should be accounted for but exceeds my present purposes here. For the latter, the point is Badiou's Platonism is unambiguously anti-poetic.

ontology's scientific enterprise. Its correlate, the One, is not presentationally given but an 'operational result', a retroactive effect.²⁷ It only emerges when the presentation of pure multiplicity is "counted-as-one", that is, when it is rendered in terms of coherent structure. At the same time, however, the presentation of being can only be grasped as inconsistent multiplicity after the fact of such a count. There is thus a coincidence of the temporality of the "disclosure" of the One and the multiple. It is not that inconsistent multiplicity is first identified and then counted and made consistent; inconsistent multiplicity is posited first after the emergence of consistency. The axiom of pure multiplicity, or rather the axiom which entails pure multiplicity, is therefore not a naïve presupposition. If it were an arbitrary starting point that "there is multiplicity" with reference, for example, to the immediacy of the plural appearance of the phenomenal real (or even without any such reference at all), pure multiplicity is defined from the outset and would not be able to stop itself from being transformed into oneness, 'and being would be lost again, since the presentation would cease to be the presentation of presentation.' There is no archic metaphysical principle of "the multiple" on which everything rests. The notion of the multiple does not precede but coincides with its proliferation, as 'every multiple is a multiple of multiple of multiples.'²⁸ The erection of a substantial foundation is rejected in favour of an absolute beginning rooted not in a notion of intuition but decision. The terms of situational presentation through which Badiou identifies with ontology, the exposition of pure multiplicity, takes deliberate distance from any "ontology of presence". Even architectures of thought which explicitly single out the multiple as a privileged category are at risk of falling into the trap of the latter,²⁹ and it

²⁷Badiou, *Being and Event*, 24.

²⁸Badiou, *Being and Event*, 29.

²⁹This is Badiou's verdict of Deleuze, whose 'vitalist doctrine of multiplicities', insufficiently rationalist, fails to grasp singularity: '[T]he attempt to subvert the 'vertical' transcendence of the One through the play of the closed and the open, which deploys multiplicity in the mobile interval between a set (inertia) and an effective multiplicity (line of flight), produces a 'horizontal' or virtual transcendence which, instead of grasping singularity, ignores the intrinsic resource of the multiple, presupposes the chaotic power of the One, and analogizes the modes of actualization. When all is said and done,

is precisely through what he understands as his meticulous resistance to the temptation of presence (which is coextensive with primordial oneness) that Badiou proclaims himself a Platonist. His proof is the most enigmatic of all Plato's dialogues. In the *Parmenides*, perhaps the singularly greatest condensation of the underlying questions that has guided the history of metaphysics, the figure of the One is repeatedly prohibited from being affirmed as one. The historical *Parmenides*' identification of Being with the terrain of harmonious unity, oblivious of the power of diversifying negativity, is critically scrutinised by Plato, which follows from the dialogue's autocritique of the theory of forms. Without prefacing his selective reading of the dialogue, Badiou makes a declaration which reveals his cards from the very outset. Unlike the sophists, he has nothing to hide: 'My entire discourse originates in an axiomatic decision; that of the non-being of the one.'³⁰ What is consequently for him the fundamental gesture of the *Parmenides* is precisely the verdict that the One is not. What Plato's (onto-)logical exercise provides for Badiou is the starting point, the "axiomatic decision", from which his own ontology proceeds. How can Badiou simply decide that the One is not, from which it follows that the Many are? Does it not make the question of the beginning of ontology arbitrary? Badiou's beginning would be open to such a criticism if it were the case, which it is not, that his decision is a 'marker of a philosophy of the will.'³¹ It would be

we are left with what could be defined as a natural mysticism.' (Alain Badiou, "One, Multiple, Multiplicities", in *Theoretical Writings*, 75, 80.) For the full critique of Deleuze as a philosopher of the One, see his *Deleuze: The Clamour of Being*, trans. Louise Burchill (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000 [1997]).

³⁰Badiou, *Being and Event*, 31.

³¹It is used here, however, in the sense automaton is interpreted along with its complement, *tuché*, by Lacan in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. For Aristotle, both notions refers to genuine forms of contingency (chance and spontaneity, respectively), while Lacan demonstrates that the automaton is in fact determined by the signifier and so is subject to the necessity of symbolic law. Only *tuché* coincides with genuine contingency, whose status in Lacanian parlance is on the level of the impossibility of the Real. See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (London and New York: Karnac, 2004), 53-67. The status of the voice in Plato's late dialogues is on the level of the automaton – completely self-

redundant to at this stage make the point that Schopenhauer (who is significantly Nietzsche's self-proclaimed "educator") is not one of Badiou's *maîtres*. What must be grasped is the specificity of the axiomatic nature of the decision. It is a banal commonplace that the mathematical notion of an axiom is an assumption, a given starting point, from which necessary conclusions are derived. What is often bypassed, however, is that an axiom, in its very relation to itself, signifies self-evidence. Axioms, if they rise to the "dignity of their notion", do not need to be proved in order to be taken aboard. As such, 'a choice for an axiom is never decisionistic.'³² That the One is not is thus for Badiou transparently self-evident. Badiou is therefore not guilty of arbitrary decisionism. This does not, however, automatically absolve him from the more general charge against the dubiousness of the claim that the One's inexistence requires no qualification at all. Is it not, after all, a claim which violates the underlying thrust of Plato's laborious effort in the *Parmenides*? It is not the guiding axiomatic decision of Badiou's reading of the *Parmenides* itself which is arbitrary but the selectiveness of his reading. The second part of the dialogue is divided into two halves, which depart from a positive and negative premise about the One respectively: a set of hypotheses predicated on the being of the One ("If the one is . . ."), followed by another set of hypotheses predicated on its non-being ("If the one is not . . ."). Only the latter fit the axiom of Badiou's ontology, which he accordingly handles meticulously. But as for the former, the positive set, there is inexplicable silence.³³

propelling. Gert-Jan van der Heiden, "Deciding on Plurality? Plato's *Parmenides* between Badiou and Agamben", in *Phenomenological Perspectives on Plurality*, ed. Gert-Jan van der Heiden (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015), 197. Society of the Materialist Friends of Plato

³²van der Heiden, "Deciding on Plurality?", 197.

³³Frank Ruda attempts to rationalise, in the proper Freudian sense of the term, Badiou's neglect of what can axiomatically be taken for granted, as it were, to be a significant portion of Plato's dialogue: 'One can only start with the second part of the dialogue, since it is precisely the relation between the first assumption (the one is) and the second one (the one is not) where the decision is located. This is a decided reading.' (Frank Ruda, "How to Repeat Plato? For a Platonism of a the Non-All", in *Repeating Žižek*, ed. Agon Hamza [Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015], 49.) Much can be said about which of the two halves of the *Parmenides*' ontological exercise constitutes its genuine starting point, and while Ruda's analysis is

Badiou's analysis of the negative hypotheses is nevertheless instructive. The first of these paradoxically affirm the ontological status of the One that is not. The non-being of the One is said to be. Simply by virtue of the fact that "the One that is not" is articulated at all, oneness latches onto being. The One is not, but this non-being can be delimited from its otherness and therefore is. As Parmenides puts it: 'Therefore, as it seems, the one is a not-being; for it is not to be a not-being, but is somehow to give up its being in relation to not-being, it will straightway be a being. [...] Then the one, if it is not, appears also to have a being.'³⁴

What Badiou perspicaciously argues is that both this hypothesis and the one which immediately follows it (the latter contrarily deals with the non-participation of the non-being of the One in being) have in fact less to do with the One itself than it deals with the ambiguous vacuum of nonbeing in general. The One that is not is reduced simply to non-being, 'and nothing is said of the concept of the one . . .'. This sets the scene for the others (what is other than one), 'such that the hypothesis 'the one is not' turns out to be the one which teaches us about the multiple.'³⁵ What thus plays out is the self-determination of the concept of otherness, otherness for itself, as what follows the negative hypothesis of the One. This is the specific region of the Platonism of the multiple. As if Badiou's interest in the Parmenides is not already narrow enough with his disregard for both the first part of the dialogue and the first half of the second part, there is a specific hypothesis of the latter which is singularly crucial for him. The penultimate deduction of the exercise posits the others in their radical autonomy from oneness. The others are not other in relation to the One but in relation to others. The others other themselves from others, but they can neither be said to other themselves from each other nor from one another. The question remains, then, how the others suc-

instructive, it simply bypasses the complexity of the issue. Badiou both starts and finishes with the second part, left unaddressed by Ruda. Yes, it is clearly a "decided reading", but in relation to the Parmenides the decision is not supported by a self-evident axiom, which is unwarranted if the dialogue is to be mobilised as an emblem of Badiou's avowed Platonism.

³⁴ Plato, *Parmenides*, trans. Mary-Louise-Gill and Paul Ryan (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1996), 162a-b.

³⁵ Badiou, *Being and Event*, 32. My emphasis.

cessfully establish themselves as others. Seemingly, there must exist a distinction between other and Other, between 'simple' and 'foundational alterity', without the allowing the latter to be subsumed by any notion of the One. The Other as foundational alterity must be grasped as 'the thought of pure difference, of the multiple as heterogenous dissemination, and as simple repetitive diversity.' In fact, all there is amounts to this foundational alterity, a foundation which is not in fact a foundation, since it does not found simple otherness. This is the vortex of the Platonism of the multiple:

What Plato is endeavoring to think here, in a magnificent, dense text, is evidently inconsistent multiplicity, which is to say, pure presentation, anterior to any one-effect, or to any structure . . . Since being-one is prohibited for the others, what presents itself is immediately, and entirely, infinite multiplicity deprived of any limit to its multiple-deployment. Plato thus formulates an essential ontological truth; that in absence of any being of the one, the multiple in-consists in the presentation of the multiple of multiples without any foundational stopping point.

The foundational Other, from this point onward "inconsistent multiplicity", is again formulated in terms of a paradoxical foundation, a psychotic lack-of-foundation which does not lay any ground at all but is simply the immanent presentation of the multiple as 'the coming-forth of being'.³⁶

And yet ontological presentation, although it makes its mark as it stumbles forward in the disarray of inconsistency, is not said to appear. How is Badiou's Platonism of the multiple, the presentation of inconsistent multiplicity, to be reconciled with a logic of appearance? What is the relation between presentation and appearance?³⁷

As Badiou approaches the ultimate hypothesis, which plays out the negative consequences for the others which are

³⁶Badiou, *Being and Event*, 33.

³⁷Plato turns to the question of appearance in the *Sophist*, arguably the sequel to the *Parmenides*, and Badiou's reading of the *Sophist* is given in *Logics of Worlds*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London and New York, 2009 [2006]), which is fittingly the explicit sequel to *Being and Event*.

predicated on the assumption of the non-being of the One, he expresses uncharacteristic, but ultimately merely rhetorical, hesitation. The fictional Parmenides brings the deduction to a halt on a nihilistic note: “‘Then if we were to say, to sum up, ‘if one is not, nothing is,’ wouldn’t we speak correctly?’”³⁸

The worry would be that, if sheer nothingness is what gets the final word under the assumption of the non-being of the One, the primordial alterity that is inconsistent multiplicity is precluded from the capacity of thought. But can the proclamation that “nothing is” be interpreted otherwise than, as Plato’s line seems to intuitively suggest, the impossible deadlock of being? Are we in fact dealing with a case of nihilism? It would presuppose that the accent of the syntagm “nothing is” is on the first term. But once this accent is reversed, what is at stake is a positively charged nothing, ‘the pure name of the void’,³⁹ which rather than posing an obstacle to the presentation of inconsistent multiplicity defines its very horizon. For as soon as presentation is named, it has been counted-as-one. To name something is to render it consistent. The minimal name of inconsistency is that which is no proper name in the traditional sense at all, the name of the void – the nothing that is in contrast to the positedness of nothing. While Badiou’s reading of the Parmenides clearly falls on the side of rationalist ontology and so in opposition to neo-Platonic mysticism (the latter seeks to preserve the being of the One as an ineffable transcendent category), the real question of divide concerns the distinctiveness of his rationalist allegiance. The underlying thrust of Badiou’s reading of the Parmenides ultimately seeks to claim it for the purity of mathematical or ontological presentation as opposed to not only sophisticated rhetoric but, more ambitiously, to the antagonisms of dialectical appearance. It is not simply a question of the primacy of mathematics in relation to both its serious and unserious rivals (poetry and sophistry, respectively). More significantly, it is a question of mathematic(s) contra dialectic.⁴⁰

³⁸ Plato, Parmenides, 166c.

³⁹ Badiou, *Being and Event*, 35.

⁴⁰ ‘Dialectics is a programme, or initiation, while mathematics is an existing, available procedure. Dialectical conversion is the eventual point at which the Platonic text touches the real. But the only point of external support for the break with doxa – in the form of something

The impulse of dialectic, as Badiou conceives of it, consists in the impulse of defining the multiple, indeed ‘to the extent that it establishes the normative power of the one within language itself.’ Badiou admits that dialectic proceeds by way of necessary differentiation, by way of the exposition of the multiple, but its definitional procedure, again, inevitably ties it to ‘the ambit of the metaphysical power of the one.’ Conversely, the mathematical presentation of the multiple is strictly non-definitional, which is what decisively distinguishes it from dialectic. Badiou’s Platonism of the multiple should in this way be qualified as the Platonism of the mathematical rather than dialectical multiple. Unsurprisingly, the latter, which Badiou perhaps too quickly dismisses as being incommensurable with the former, is the object of the positive hypotheses of the *Parmenides*. What is found there is a sophisticated affirmation of the One without necessarily subjugating the inconsistent dignity of the multiple to definitional subsumption. What, exactly, does it mean to dialectically define?

Parmenides and the Signifier The logistics which precedes the interpretation proper of the *Parmenides* (a dialogue whose object is arguably “logistics” itself) hinges on the question of how to count the hypotheses that make up the body of the second half of the dialogue. The temptation is to neatly divide the two halves of the exercise equally: four positive hypotheses based on the axiom that “the One is”, and four negative hypotheses based on the axiom that “the One is not” (Badiou’s axiom). This demands the qualification, however, that there exists an “appendix” between the second and third of the positive hypotheses which is not to be considered as a hypothesis proper. Instead of affirming that there are nine hypotheses in total and thus a structural asymmetry between the two halves, the first half is domesticated by downplaying the autonomy of what is in fact the third hypothesis, by making the case that it is merely an attempt to resolve the deadlock of the conclusions of the first two.⁴¹

The first hypothesis posits the One as one, and by virtue of its self-referential solipsism fails to be one. The closed

that already exists – is constituted by mathematics and mathematics alone.’ (Badiou, “Philosophy and Mathematics”, 29.)

⁴¹See, for example, Gill’s reconstruction on this point: “Introduction”, in Plato, *Parmenides*, 55.

loop of “one as one” prohibits predication tout court, which significantly includes the singularity of oneness itself. The second hypothesis, on the contrary, posits the One openly, simply as “one is . . .”, which not only anticipates the proliferation of predication but relentlessly demands it. Indeed, the actualisation of the diversity of predication in the second hypothesis is total. But the consequence is again that the One fails to establish itself as one. The third hypothesis, then, the alleged appendix, is meant to resolve the impasses of the previous two. But the structural asymmetry that follows the proper count, which affirms nine hypotheses (five in the first half, four in the second) is crucial for the internal logic of the exercise.⁴²

The third hypothesis plays a distinctively autonomous role. It is described in terms of a transitional “instant” in which the One neither is nor is not – a moment of pure suspension that is ‘in no time at all’ (Prm 156e). The instant is situated on the threshold which separates being from non-being. But rather than paradoxically signifying a heterogeneity of preconceptual transcendence (given its resistance to the grasp of intelligible comprehension), the instant must be grasped as the inscription of a logical impasse that does not, simply by virtue of being an impasse, suggest the necessity of an “elsewhere”. The impasse of the instant concludes the consequences for the one which follow from the axiom that “one is”, and the temptation which accompanies it, the affirmation of the mark of a purely heterogeneous transcendence – a transcendence of non-presence which exceeds presence – must be resisted. The fourth hypothesis accordingly introduces the consequences of the same axiom but now for the others (again, that which is other than one). It should be recalled at this point that the underlying status of the One throughout the logical exercise is that of the privileged exemplification of *eidos* as such. In this instance, that which is other than one is thus immediately posited as that which is not grasped by *eidos*, by form. This thought is not, however, taken to its true limit, as Parmenides makes sure to emphasise that ‘the others are not absolutely deprived of

⁴²Cf. Francois Regnault, “Dialectic of Epistemologies”, in *Concept and Form*, Volume 1: Selections from the *Cahier pour l'Analyse*, ed. Peter Hallward and Knox Peden (London and New York: Version, 2012), 119-151.

the one, but somehow partake of it.⁴³ In other words, that which is other from one, indeed the plurality of others, is not fully autonomous but still relies, to whatever extent, on its logic. Why? Because the possession of parts which define the others as others are parts precisely by virtue of their structural belonging to a unified whole. What is in focus is explicitly that which is other-than-one, but there is a subsistence of the thrust of the positivity of oneness, precisely its effect as the ' principle of structure for the entities it combines.'⁴⁴ The others find themselves on the threshold of breaking free from the grip of the One, but the latter refuses to let go.⁴⁵ The step into formlessness without compromise, perhaps the most significant step of the Parmenides as a whole (if the dialogue can indeed be said to constitute a "whole" at all), is saved for the ultimate hypothesis of the positive axiom. What is a more radical consequence of the axiom which posits the being of the One than a generation of an otherness which does not partake in it? The others of the fifth hypothesis are strictly the product of the One itself, yet they cannot be defined at all in terms of oneness. But they are not therefore a multiplicity of others (many) that follow the nonbeing of the One (the inconsistent multiplicity of the eighth hypothesis), since the axiom indeed posits the One's being. The others are neither one nor many, nor can they be predicated in any other way. This figure of otherness which resists formalisation was hinted at already in the first part of the dialogue, when Parmenides pushed Socrates on the question whether there is in fact a form for every kind

⁴³ Plato, Parmenides, 157c.

⁴⁴ Gill, "Introduction", 91.

⁴⁵ As Mladen Dolar puts it: 'This [the third] hypothesis can easily be seen as standing in symmetrical terms to the previous hypothesis: both of them are placed in a limit, or they embody a limit, but while with the third hypothesis it is the limit between being and nonbeing, with the fourth we have the limit between the one and the others beyond the one. The third hypothesis is ruled by the logic of "neither-nor", but the fourth by "one as well as the other." The former leads to the exclusion of the instant, while the latter leads to the inclusiveness of all properties of the others. The others are placed on the borderline between form and the amorphous, but in such a way that both sides pertain to them; the others live in both worlds.' (" In Parmenidem Parvi Comentarii", *Helios* 31, no. 1-2, 2004, 82.) I rely on Dolar's account in the initial Lacanian "cognitive mapping" of the remaining hypotheses that follow below.

of entity, even the lowest of entities: “And what about these, Socrates? Things that might seem absurd, like hair and mud and dirt, or anything else totally undignified and worthless? Are you doubtful whether you should say that a form is separate for each of these, too, which in turn is anything other than we touch with our hands?” It is a question from which Socrates dismissively retreats. But here, in the fifth hypothesis of the logical exercise, Parmenides puts it on the table again. The theory of forms has been pushed to the very edge of its periphery, toward a space which seemingly eludes *eidos*. However, if the status of this blind alley is, following the hint of Dolar, given ‘a little push in the Lacanian direction’, the paradoxical situation which Plato has presented can be productively accounted for in terms of designating ‘an object not covered by the signifier, a being not represented by the signifier.’⁴⁶ Plato’s theory of forms clearly constitutes a theory of ontological signification, but what becomes particularly clear in the Parmenides is that it contains the seeds of a specifically Lacanian theoretical matrix *avant la lettre*: it accounts not only for signification itself but emphasises more forcefully its immanent points of failure and subsequently accounts for these points. The failure of formal intelligibility of the fifth hypothesis provides the precise contours of the Lacanian theory of the object, the *objet petit a*. Indeed, the obstinacy of otherness which refuses the forms ‘does not simply coincide with materiality, sensuality and objectivity. What else can that be but precisely what Lacan calls the *objet a*?’⁴⁷

This is not an arbitrary homology limited to a passing moment in the Parmenides. There is a structural symmetry between the fifth and first hypotheses, and it must be recalled that the outcome of the latter, too, was a reckoning with the impasse of the impossibility of predication. Just as much as the others which do not partake in oneness, the autonomy of the One resists the signifier. But rather than representing otherness, the heterogeneous objectivity which is unseizable, what the tautology of the first hypothesis’ failure of articulation represents is a void – the pure non-relational lack of nothingness itself. This is not the excess of the signifier but its transcendental absence. The latter coin-

⁴⁶Dolar, “ In Parmenidem Parvi Comentariorum”, 69.

⁴⁷Dolar, “ In Parmenidem Parvi Comentariorum”. 85.

cides precisely with the Lacanian definition of the subject, the empty place from which signification springs forth.⁴⁸

This is one half of the signifier's composition: the ordinary lack of subjectivity, which is speculatively coincident with its excessive correlate. Its necessary complement is then conveniently provided by Plato in the immediately following hypothesis, which turns the page from the impossibility of predication to the immediacy of its "desire" for totalisation. The open-endedness of the One's being generates the question of the extent to which being is countable, since 'if one is, there must also be number.' And consequently that of plurality, since 'if there is number, there would be many, and an unlimited multitude of beings.'⁴⁹ The fluidity of the One of the second hypothesis morphs into the many. The being of One is many. Not only are there "an unlimited multitude of beings", but 'the one itself is unlimited in multitude since it has an unlimited number of parts.' How does this relate to the signifier? The One in question, of the second hypothesis, seems to unfold according to the logic of what Lacan, via Freud's essay on group psychology, refers to as the "unary trait", or more famously as the master signifier: the pure signifier without a signified on which a system of signification bases itself. It is precisely by virtue of its status as a "pure" signifier without a signified – a pure form – that it can be filled with any content, corresponding exactly to the unlimited multitude which Plato describes. The affirmation of the One does thus not result in a "metaphysics of presence" but rather demonstrates that any notion of oneness that directly pertains to the enabling of signification is inherently many. However, for the many to be apprehend as such (as many), the semblance of the One qua master signifier is inescapable. This allows for a first step toward the clarification of what is at stake in dialectical analysis in terms of the logic of the signifier: the dialectical regime of the One alludes

⁴⁸This point, however, must be qualified: 'This structural place can be isolated in Parmenides in its explicit and pure form, yet one should not be quick to draw from it too many conclusions. Plato produces it as a part of his deduction, but the idea never crosses his mind that this could be a place of subjectivity. The structure that he produces is not a structure with a subject; we will have to wait for Hegel for this.' (Dolar, "In Parmenidem Parvi Comentariorum", 84-85. My emphasis.)

⁴⁹Plato, Parmenides, 144a.

to a oneness of illusory semblance which masks the preponderance of the multiple. But it is for that reason not a One which can be recklessly dispensed with. The master signifier is a dialectical category not in that it coincides with the pulsating negativity of dialectical rhythm itself, but rather in that it anchors this rhythm in the sense of bestowing upon it substance. This, if anything, is the value of the first part of Plato's logical exercise, and it must be carefully waded through before approaching the elegance of the self-referential otherness – where Badiou begins – of the second part. It is a defence of the One as an inherently paradoxical category, and it is on such a paradox, the paradox of the signifier, that dialectic relies.

From *Traite Unaire* to *Sinthome* The particular direction of reading the *Parmenides* in terms of the logic of the signifier is determined by how one interprets the notion of oneness developed by the late Lacan, the Lacan for whom the absence of the sexual relationship stands as the fundamental pillar of psychoanalysis as such. More specifically, in the nineteenth instalment of his yearly seminar, . . . or Worse (1972-73), Lacan advances the axiom *Il Y a de l'Un* ("there is One"), which is famously contracted into *Yad'lun*. The articulation of the being of the One is boiled down into one unit. Lacan dwells at length on the implications of *Yad'lun*, and his point of departure is explicitly in relation to the first hypothesis of the *Parmenides* – the hypothesis which he significantly stays with and does not move on from. If, in this case, Lacan is to be followed to the letter, it is then questionable to draw a parallel, like Dolar does, between not the first but the second hypothesis of *Parmenides* and *Yad'lun*.⁵⁰ This is indeed Dolar's initial move before asserting

⁵⁰ 'If the first hypothesis, which considers the one in itself, produced a disjunction between the one and being (the one is not, then the second hypothesis starts from their conjunction. It proposes that "one is"; there is, as it were, an existential judgement. And where the first hypothesis proceeded analytically, merely unfolding the consequences of the "one in itself", or rather the impossibility of its consequences, here the second proceeds "synthetically" (to borrow the largely inappropriate diction of Jean Wahl's commentary on this.) It ascribed something to one that is not inherently contained in its concept, namely, being. Lacan's famous dictum "*Il Y a de l'Un*" can be read as a paraphrase of this second hypothesis.' (Dolar, "In *Parmenidem Parvi Comentarium*", 75.)

his conclusion that the second hypothesis is homologous to the master signifier, the unary trait. For Dolar, then, the unary trait coincides with *Yad'lun*. While the former point (the link between the second hypothesis and the unary trait) is fruitful, the latter is a misstep. Žižek, who in his reading of the Parmenides otherwise largely presupposes the legitimacy of Dolar's position, goes precisely in this direction. The One of the second hypothesis does not coincide with *Yad'lun* given the extent to which it is a one which necessarily implies the totality of predication, while *Yad'lun* implies the oneness as discrete:

The paradox is here a very elegant Hegelian one: although Plato is the philosopher of the One, what is unable to think (as opposed to just "represent") is precisely the One as a concept. To do this, one needs not only a self-relating reflexive predication (the One is a "one One", an *x* which partakes of the Idea of One with regard to Oneness itself) – which Plato possesses – but also the positive concept of zero (which Plato does not possess): to get a pure concept of the One, not just the notion of one thing, the *x* which "partakes of the idea of One with regard to Oneness itself" has to be zero, a void, devoid of all content. Or, to put it in a more descriptive way: being-a-One adds nothing to the content of an object; its only content is the form of self-identity with itself.⁵¹

This applies to but also extends beyond the second hypothesis. Lacking the "positive concept of zero", pure oneness evades Plato's horizon. But if he does at the very least approach the pure One, the candidate for such an attempt must necessarily be the first hypothesis, for the simple reason that it posits the being of One tautologically ("one is one"). What is at stake from this point onward is the specific way in which the One of the first hypothesis is accounted for in relation to Lacan's *Yad'lun*. Žižek first contrasts Dolar against the thesis that there is an inherent link between the first hypothesis and *Yad'lun*; the former rather elucidates the latter as the 'formula for the pure jouissance-One, that is, a jouissance not yet mediated by the Other, the symbolic order, not yet

⁵¹Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, 54-55.

“departmentalised,” accountable.⁵² In other words, it refers to a *jouissance* which precedes the emergence of the signifier, the mystic enjoyment that reigns before the beginning of the Word. It is thus an interpretation of the Parmenides’ first hypothesis which links it to Lacan via a certain flavour of Neoplatonism, compensating for the non-being of the One, its lack of existence, by promoting its ex-sistence; an affirmation of its presence not within being but beyond it. The *jouissance*-One is the One of negative theology which is ‘opposed to a *jouissance* developed *partes extra partes* that is consequentially accountable and numerable according to the measurements of the signifier.’⁵³ The push toward the Neoplatonic negative theological One, however, is a push away from the Lacanian direction. Lacan explicitly opposes other-worldly transcendence in the name of the One, deriding it as ‘the Plotinian confusion’. There are indeed limits of the reach of the signifier, but such limits cannot be inscribed on the basis of pre-ontological transcendence, which in fact would be to not inscribe them at all. How, then, is the first hypothesis to be understood in terms of *Yad’lun*? Though Žižek opposes the actuality of the link as one which precedes ontology, he nevertheless insists that the signifier of pure oneness precedes the emergence of the master signifier. Nor is it for him the One which renders possible counting, which would, like the master signifier, presuppose that the dialectical dynamism of signification is already active. Žižek’s solution to the paradox of the first hypothesis instead frames it in terms of the fixation that is characteristic of the incessance of the concept of drive (*Trieb*, pulsion). It is a flash of the One in its most discrete form, the hint of a pure drive that is not drive *qua* desire bent back onto itself. From this follows the crux of his position: ‘As such, this One is a “*sinthome*”, a kind of “atom of enjoyment”, the minimal synthesis of language

⁵²This position is ascribed by Žižek to Armand Zaloszcyc, whose contribution to the Congress of the World Association of Psychoanalysis (Rome, 2006) he bases his reading on. Since Zaloszcyc’s essay seems to not be published (I have not been able to track it down), I rely here on Žižek’s own remarks in addition to the two lengthy quotations he provides. For the latter, see Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 56-57.

⁵³Armand Zaloszcyc, “Y a d’l’Un”, intervention at the Congress of the World Association of Psychoanalysis, Rome, July 13-16, 2006. Quoted in Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 57.

and enjoyment, a unit of signs permeated with enjoyment (like a tic we compulsively repeat). Are such Ones not quanta of enjoyment, its smallest most elementary packages?⁵⁴

The One of the first hypothesis thus coincides for Žižek with *sinthome*, a speculative innovation of a the late Lacan in question. *Sinthome* marks the culmination of a gradual tarrying with the notion of symptom, from having been initially conceived in terms of something that needs to be linguistically deciphered in order to reveal its subterranean meaning to the realisation that it is a signifier recalcitrant to interpretation as such (hermeneutic or otherwise).⁵⁵ The *sinthome* is not simply that which symbolically resists analysis – resistances can always be sublated – but that which confronts analysis as realimpossibility. Advanced within the frame of his last obsession, topological knot theory, Lacan famously reads the writing of James Joyce as its emblematic paradigm. Via Joyce, it is demonstrated that the impossibility of *sinthome* (the “atom of enjoyment”) essentially functions as not an inhibition but a support: Joyce avoids the descent into psychosis – the undoing of, indeed, the knot of his psychic consistency – by resorting to the *sinthome* of his writing.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 58.

⁵⁵ As an indication of the point of departure of this process, in Freud’s *Papers on Technique*, the very first Seminar, Lacan quite literally says: ‘Revelation is the ultimate source of what we are searching for in the analytic experience.’ (Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I: Freud’s Papers on Technique, 1953-54*, trans. John Forrester, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller [London and New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988], 49.

⁵⁶ ‘After all, why shouldn’t Joyce have been mad? All the more so given that this is not a privilege, if it’s true that in most people the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real have become intertwined to the point that each forms the continuation of the other, for want of any operation that would set them apart as in the link of the Borromean knot – of what is claimed to be a Borromean knot, because the Borromean knot is not a knot, it’s a link. Why not grasp that each of these loops continues in the next in a way that is strictly indistinct? By the same token, being mad is no privilege. ‘What I am proposing here is that we consider that Joyce’s case corresponds to a way of making up for the knot’s coming undone.’ (Jacques Lacan, *The Sinthome: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XXIII*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. A.R. Price [Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity, 2016], 71.

Elsewhere, Žižek elaborates on the symptom-sinthome relation on the provoking basis that symptom is the Lacanian answer ('Lacan's final answer') 'to the eternal philosophical question 'Why is there something rather than nothing?'' The minimal positivity of something which is is posited by Žižek as symptom.⁵⁷ Again, Lacan's initial idea of symptom was developed within the parameters of the symbolic "formations of the unconscious", and the point of analysis was to dissolve the symptom in and through the labour of interpretation. The coming to the fore of the meaning of the symptom is within this paradigm supposed to coincide with the success of analysis, with the psychoanalytic cure. But as Freud himself was already perplexed by, the lifting of the repression which gives rise to the symptom does not necessarily do away with it. The repression of a traumatic memory may be dealt with by means of its mnemonic recovery, but its symptom may still subsist. The initial theoretical paradigm of the symptom therefore had to be rethought, and Žižek clarifies the Lacanian step of this rethinking by stressing the subject's *jouissance*. The paradigm-shifting thesis that the symptom does not dissolve itself consists in the insight that the suffering subject finds in it a paradoxical satisfaction.⁵⁸

The relation to the symptom is therefore always fantasmatically mediated. Indeed, the symptom must be understood in terms of the "logic of fantasy", which is structured by the subject's relation to its objectcause of desire (object *a*); analysis must gear itself toward not necessarily interpreting fantasy, but conjuring methods of coming out on the other side of it, or, what amounts to the same, reconfigure the relation to the symptom within it. In other words, the goal is to desire differently, so that the symptom is no longer a source of libidinal satisfaction and is allowed to dissipate. But even after such a fundamental reconfiguration, the symptom may still persist. The question then is: 'What do we do with a symptom, with this pathological formation which persists not only beyond its interpretation but even beyond fantasy?'⁵⁹ This is precisely when sinthome enters the scene, not in terms of another attempt to get rid of the symptom but as a reckoning with the symptom as an irreducible forma-

⁵⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London and New Yorks: Verso, 2008 [1989]), 77.

⁵⁸ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 80.

⁵⁹ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 81.

tion, one that must be granted transcendental status. The perspective must be structurally reversed: away from the teleology which eternally strives toward a point of getting rid of the symptom's discomfort and toward a reconciliation with its obstinacy, a position which affirms that the symptom constitutes 'the only positive support of our being, the only point that gives consistency to the subject.'⁶⁰ It is when the symptom is understood in terms of this "support" that it can be spoken of as *sinthome*. Notwithstanding the pertinence of the mobilisation of the notion of *sinthome* in the context of ideological analysis (Žižek's purpose in the *Sublime Object of Ideology*) – what does ideology concern if not libidinal fixation? – issues arise when it is superimposed onto philosophical ontology, which is the sphere of the *Parmenides*. As a development of the logic of the signifier, *sinthome* may indeed be formulated as an underlying mechanism of dialectical analysis. It clarifies that the relentlessness of dialectical negativity rests on minimally irreducible positive "One" that cannot be dissolved in the dialectical process, whose intransigence in fact triggers the process as such. But here the traditional Marxist two-level distinction between science and ideology must be recalled: *sinthome* is an indispensable resource for the dialectical critique of ideology, but precisely because it is essentially tied to the libidinal fixation that is at the core of *jouissance* it is erroneous to deploy it within the scientific framework of the "ontological question". This is consequently where Žižek goes awry and what is, moreover, symptomatic of his mature thought as a whole – the presupposition that the same conceptual artillery of *Ideologiekritik* can be deployed concerning the question of Being itself. Materialism of the Void It remains, however, that the *Parmenides* is the 'first exercise in dialectics proper'.⁶¹ What also remains is the question of *Yad'lun* and the One of the first hypothesis, the answer to which provides the key to the nature of dialectical thought in strictly ontological terms. The One of the first hypothesis cannot be a *sinthome*. It is neither a One of *jouissance* nor, in domesticated form, *jouis-sense* (the coincidence of enjoyment and sense). It is telling why, in his reading of *Parmenides*, once the axiom *Yad'lun* has been introduced, Lacan pursues a different path, one which Žižek either ignores or avoids. The fact of the matter

⁶⁰ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 81.

⁶¹ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 6.

is that, for Lacan, rather than a *sinthome*, the pure One of Plato's first hypothesis is a *mathème*. Žižek himself lucidly provides the contours of the clear discrepancy between the two neologisms. In a footnote hidden away in the depths of *Less Than Nothing* amid a discussion concerning the distinction between meaning and sense, he writes:

The *sinthome* should be opposed to the *mathème*: although they both belong to the enigmatic space "between nature and culture," between senseless data and meaning – they are both pre-semantic, outside the domain of meaning, and yet nonetheless are signifiers and as such irreducible to the meaningless texture of positive data . . . A *sinthome* is a formula which condenses the excess of *jouissance*, and this dimension is clearly missing in the *mathème*, whose exemplary cases are mathematically formalized scientific statements – *mathèmes* do not imply any libidinal investment, they are neutral, desubjectivized.⁶²

The *Parmenides* is indeed the decisive point at which the question of the One first arises as a problem in the history of metaphysics (as opposed to its dogmatic postulation by the Eleatics), whose purest articulation is the initial hypothesis posited by Plato. What is for Lacan no less decisive, however, is that this particular problematic, encapsulated by *Yad'lun*, is captured by the modern innovations of Cantorian set theory. 'There is the *Parmenides* and, then, set theory.'⁶³ Indeed, in direct reference to the latter, 'we first had to wait until rather late in the day, the end of the last century, not even a hundred years ago, before there was an attempt to account for the function of the One.'⁶⁴ The seed which renders possible the connection between the two, between Plato and Cantor, consists in the former's discovery that the outcome of the hypothesis "One is One" results in radical lack (in unequivocally non-libidinal terms), which the subsequent history of metaphysics – until German idealism and especially Hegel – can be viewed as having attempted to suture with different theories of non-lacking substantiality.

⁶² Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 698n64.

⁶³ Lacan, . . . or Worse, 176.

⁶⁴ Lacan, . . . or Worse, 137.

The One, then, which is radically lacking as One, is not accounted for until the formulation of the set-theoretical axiom of the void set, the empty set which contains no elements but which nevertheless counts as a set. With the Parmenides as a necessary backdrop, what set theory clarifies is that the void set constitutes ‘the gate that has to be gone through in order to constitute the birth of the One.’⁶⁵

It is important to stress that the present domain of mathematical formalization still operates within the horizon of the signifier.⁶⁶ The mathème remains a signifier insofar that it accounts for a particular direction of its logic. And it is precisely on the basis that the signifier “One” in Plato’s first hypothesis faces an impossibility to articulate itself by means of linguistic predication that it has to be accounted for in terms of signifier qua mathème. It is in this sense that the One of the first hypothesis, because it is a One that fails to be One – a One which precedes numericity as well as conceptual totality (which are in any case interdependent) – is ‘something that is posited as lying at the origin of the empty set.’⁶⁷ Nothing belongs to the One, not even itself, and it has to be written “mathème-atically” precisely in that it transmits the impasse of the emergence of the One. At the dawn of dialectical thought, then, coincident with the very first step of the exemplary exercise that sets out to demonstrate its logic, there is an impasse that cannot be accounted for by the mechanism of progression. There is no contradiction, neither simple nor overdetermined, which pushes thought forward and inaugurates its movement. This One therefore constitutes not the relational difference which the latter produces, but its complete absence of elements entails the ‘element of pure difference’. Or in a more precise formulation, ‘the sameness of this difference.’⁶⁸ This is the consequence that follows the establishment of the link between Plato’s first attempt to formulate the One and the void set. On such a basis, Fredric Jameson’s thesis that when dialectical thinking, ‘if pursued far enough, turns into

⁶⁵Lacan, . . . or Worse, 126.

⁶⁶Lacan, . . . or Worse, 128.

⁶⁷Lacan, . . . or Worse, 142.

⁶⁸Lacan, . . . or Worse, 144. Cf. Chiesa in-difference.

historical thinking'⁶⁹ needs to be complemented by the contention that dialectical thinking, if pursued far enough, turns into set-theoretical thinking, where it is forced to confront its ahistorical ontological ground. Žižek, however, evidently goes neither in the direction of radical historicity nor that of set-theoretical formalisation. In the second step of his reading of the first hypothesis of Parmenides, the latter is counterintuitively extricated from the henology of Eleatic idealism (of which the historical Parmenides is of course the paternal figure) and is instead directed toward Democritus' materialist atomism. That is, the shift of focus concerns a transition from a libidinal "atom of enjoyment" to the ground of the teaching of the atom itself. The latter (in fact originally developed by Leucippus and not Democritus) was effectively a reaction against the Eleatic paradigm, provoked by a fundamental disagreement concerning the status of what is not. As is well-known Parmenides' poem unequivocally prohibits non-being. The atomists, in turn, famously reject what they take to be the dogmatism of this postulate: what is not, indeed the void, deserves the same ontological status as being itself. This certainly places atomism on the very same terrain as the Parmenides, whose underlying impetus consists in Parmenides' (Plato's fictional character's) declaration that what is and what is not must be considered on equal terms.⁷⁰ A preliminary question can thus be posed: does the Parmenides present an opening for conceiving of Platonism in materialist terms? Or as Žižek campaigns: 'In the early 1920's, Lenin proposed that Marxist philosophers should form a "society of the materialist friends of Hegel – today, perhaps, the time has come for radical philosophers to form a "society of the materialist friends of Plato."'⁷¹

The elementary coordinates of Democritean atomism deserves a further contextualising gloss. Indeed, the fundamental thesis consists in the claim that the atom is the most minimal unit of the composition of being, as the Greek *atomos* refers to that which cannot be cut, the uncuttable (abstracting from *témnō*, to cut). However, it is crucial to immediately note that 'Democritus is not making the banal

⁶⁹Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*(Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971), 346.

⁷⁰Plato, *Parmenides*, 135e.

⁷¹Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 40.

claim that there are some things that are too hard to be crushed, or too small to be cut by any edge which we can manufacture. Limitations of that kind are merely technological. Rather, his argument is that if our picture of the world is not to collapse into incoherence, we must suppose that physical division has a theoretical limit.⁷² While this concerns the nature of the atom as an entity itself, it no less implies that the “theoretical limit” of phenomenal divisibility, embodied by the atom, posits the void as its necessary correlate. The void appears here for the first time in ancient Greek thought, as a means to simultaneously account for both the motion and discreteness of phenomenal multiplicity.⁷³ The void, however, cannot simply be accounted for in terms of the absence of phenomenal positivity, a naïve temptation which, significantly, Žižek recklessly succumbs to.⁷⁴

The referent of such absence must indeed be ‘that of a gap in space’ rather just empty space itself (which is in fact more in tune with the underlying thesis announced at the outset of *Less Than Nothing*, namely ‘that of a pre-transcendental gap/rupture, the Freudian name for which is the drive.’⁷⁵) If “void” coincided with latter, ‘it would then need to

⁷²C.C.W. Taylor, ed., *The Atomists: Democritus and Leucippus: Fragments: A Text and Translation with a Commentary* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1999), 165. Emphases mine.

⁷³Cf. *The Atomists*, 184: ‘The atomists seem to have been the earliest thinkers to ascribe a theoretical role to the concept of the void.’

⁷⁴‘. . . Eleatics argue from the logical impossibility of the void to the impossibility of motion; 181 *Society of the Materialist Friends of Plato*

⁷⁵Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 6-7. The full passage reads: There are four main position which, together, constitute today’s ideologico-philosophical field: first the two sides of what Badiou appropriately baptized “democratic materialism” (1) scientific naturalism (brain sciences, Darwinism . . .) and (2) discursive historicism (Foucault, deconstruction . . .); then, the two sides of the spiritualist reaction to it: (3) New Age “Western Buddhism” and (4) the thought of transcendental finitude (culminating in Heidegger). These four positions form a kind of Greimisian square along the two axes of ahistorical versus historical thought and of materialism versus spiritualism. The thesis of the present book is double: (1) there is a dimension missed by all four, that of a pre-transcendental gap/rupture, the Freudian name for which is the drive; (2) this dimension designates the very core of modern subjectivity. See also Robert Pippin, “Slavoj Žižek’s

be explained why the atomists spoke of atoms and the void, rather of atoms and space.⁷⁶ The void has to be accounted for otherwise. Žižek's recourse to Democritus does not directly mobilise the theoretical complexity of the notion of the atom itself. It rather appeals to Democritus' closely related neologism *den*, a notion which signifies neither the being of the atom nor the nothingness of the void. No more does *den* refer to some state in-between being and nothingness. What is in this context pertinent is the etymological, but not less conceptual, thread that can be traced from *hen*-ology to *den*: *hen* (one), is negated as either *mêden* or *ouden* (two words for "nothing"), and *den* is the result of a further negative operation. The latter is not, however, another negation: *den* is less than one, but it does not coincide with nothing. It is, in Žižek's formulation 'the less than nothing.'⁷⁷ *Den* does not negate nothing but decapitates it: 'a subtraction from non-being, as negativity effacing itself.'⁷⁸ As such, not no-thing but literally othing. It is therefore an innovatively justified move to frame *den* – not something, not nothing, but this othing – in terms of, once again, the Lacanian object *a*: 'The rise of *den* is thus strictly homologous to that of objet *a*. . . *den* is the "indivisible remainder" of the signifying process of double negation', which accordingly coincides with the malfunctioning of the dynamism of dialectical movement.⁷⁹ Is *den* the first notion in the history of metaphysics which genuinely resists the subsuming drive of dialectic? Problematic territory is broached, however, when Žižek takes a further step than he should. He initiates unwarranted specu-

Hegel", in *Interanimations: Receiving Modern Philosophy* [Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015], 94n3), who at the very least rightly complains, apropos of the relation to the enumeration of positions distinct from Žižek's own, that something like "Western Buddhism" (referring to the corporatist appropriation of Far Eastern spirituality) is too ridiculous to be considered as a serious theoretical paradigm.

⁷⁶Taylor, *The Atomists*, 185.

⁷⁷Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 58.

⁷⁸Dolar, "The Atom and the Void", 23.

⁷⁹Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 59. Dolar repeats the affirmation of this homology: 'So what is this entity, *den*? Not something, not nothing, not being, not one, not positively existing, not absent, not countable – is this not precisely the object we are after – the object *a*?' ("The Atom and the Void", 23.).

lation in the simultaneously posited tripartite claim that (1) 'den evokes density and thus points towards the primordial contraction', on the basis of which (2) 'den is, arguably, the first name for Lacan's *Y a d'l'Un*' and thus (3) 'there are ones, minimal points of contraction, of ens which is not yet the ontologically constituted One.'⁸⁰ First, as a notional offspring of the Democritean (and not Lucretian) atom, it points toward an essential weightlessness;⁸¹ in what way, then, can den be said to "evoke density"? However, reading the assertion generously, it can be granted that conceptual density does not necessarily imply physical weight, which is presumably the empirical quality Democritus dissociates from the atom. To connect den to Lacan's *Yad'lun*, however, which is the second point, is completely untenable. Indeed, den qua object *a* can only be "derived" on the basis of the positive hypotheses that "the One is . . .", but den does not correspond to the attempt of getting at the pure One, which is implied by *Yad'lun* – that is, the first hypothesis of the Parmenides. Mapped onto the grid of the latter, den qua object *a* rather coincides with the fifth hypothesis: the non-relational otherness of the positive One which eludes the grasp of *eidos*. Den is not the form of the One which fails to establish its oneness, but the otherness which the One attempts (but fails) to seize. Lastly, given that den already constitutes subtraction from negation, the proper site of an unsurpassable limit, what sense does it make to invoke yet another subtraction? The Hegelian logic of the negation of negation cannot be superimposed onto subtraction. Here, what would stop the results of the subtraction from den to en and from en to... n? And from n- to what? Again, the problem stems from the insertion of an odd presupposition which manifestly contradicts the immediately preceding connection made between den and object *a*; all of a sudden, the preontological "ens" are measured up against den as an "ontologically constituted One", which is as far away as possible from what the notion of den has been established to consist in by Žižek himself. What is rather needed than this mistaken step forward is a calculated step back to the question of the Democritean

⁸⁰ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 60.

⁸¹ It is a subject of controversy, however, whether Democritus' atom is in fact weightless: is weight one of the atom's its inherent properties, or is weight simply a function of its size? See Michael J. Augustin, "Weight in Greek Atomism", *Philosophia* 45(2015): 76-99.

void and its resonance to the Parmenides. If den ultimately resists the structural ground of dialectic, the underlying and logically preceding notion of the atom must still be conceived in terms of the latter's most sophisticated articulation, precisely because of the postulation of the void. How, ultimately, must the void be accounted for? In this instance, Dolar's account of the void is far superior to Žižek's, if only momentary, lapse into thoughtless empiricism. Decidedly, the void does not refer to empty space, but rather to the immanent selfdisparity of the atom with itself. The void is that which splits the atom qua One from within, that which introduces 'a crack into being' and indeed 'splits it into infinity and makes it non-totalizable.'⁸² The void extricates the One from Being, the signifier from the real. To shed additional light on this, Dolar gestures forward at Hegel's affirmation of Parmenidean monism (the unity of thought and being) as mediated precisely by his understanding of Democritean atomism. Hegel's notion of the dialectical "unity of opposites" is not immediate simple unity (nor, for that matter, the superficial unity of complex meditation) but crucially 'a unity split into itself and a void'. This is consequently indicative of a destabilisation of the traditional understanding of atomistic materialism, since what is taken to be the substantial materiality of atoms, their immunity to being cut, is idealised, which refers precisely to the idealisation of the materiality of the split in question.⁸³ A genuine materialism that successfully bypasses vulgarity needs to account for this split induced by the void; 'otherwise matter becomes just another name for traditional substantiality', which is always-already an ideal category.⁸⁴ Put

⁸²Dolar, "The Atom and the Void," 13

⁸³Dolar, "The Atom and the Void, 13, 14. Dolar's proof for this reading of Hegel resides in the latter's reflections on atomism in the greater *Logic*. See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. George di Giovanni (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 134-35.

⁸⁴It is of utmost significance that the nature of this split is "strictly homologous ", as Žižek himself would put it, to the Lacanian definition of signifier. In his reading of Parmenides, Dolar, asserts that 'signifier is the paradoxical entity split into itself and into its own absence as its own part.' ("In *Parmenidem Parvi Comentarii*", 85.) He explicitly relies on Žižek's rightly 'now classic formulation' ("In *Parmenidem Parvi Comentarii*", 97n14), which is worth quoting here too directly from its source: 'This paradox is founded in the differ-

differently, there is no materialism of substance. What is instead originally espoused is a Hegelian materialism of the void, which is clearly latently recognised already by Plato. What is the One of the first hypothesis of the Parmenides' if not the Democritean split of the void? Plato is the first dialectical materialist, and he must be treated as such.

The Sensuality of the Instant The very opening of Parmenides' logical exercise thus provides the minimal coordinates – the coordinates of the void – of a decidedly materialist ontology. When Democritus' den is subsequently presented as the void's necessary byproduct, the even less than minimal coordinates are laid bare. These are the respective outcomes of the crucial first and fifth hypotheses, which signify both the condition of possibility of dialectic and, perhaps more significantly, its limit. From the horizon of this purported materialist outlook, the third hypothesis, the transitional instant, must necessarily be re-accounted for. As that which is included in neither spatio-temporality nor falls on either side of the split between being and non-being, is the instant not the mark of idealist transcendence *par excellence*? For Žižek, the situation of the instant, the paradoxical place in which it fails to find itself, points toward a structurally Gramscian crisis: the pure contradiction in which neither the Old can die nor the New can be born.⁸⁵ Plato therefore has to recourse to a moment of a literally instant transition from one moment to the next, one which transcends the former and steps into the latter, because of a stuck-ness that is impossible to surmount immanently. The internal necessity of dialectical forwardmovement is again

ential character of the signifier's set: as soon as one is dealing with a differential set, one has to comprise in the network of difference the difference between an element and its own absence. In other words, one has to consider as a part of the signifier its own absence – one has to posit the existence of a signifier which positivizes, "represents", "gives body to" to the very lack of the signifier – that is to say, coincides with the place of inscription of the signifier. This difference is in a way "self-reflective": the paradoxical, "impossible" yet necessary point at which the signifier differs not only from another (positive) signifier but from signifier itself as signifier.' (Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* [London and New York: Verso, 2008] [1991]), 43.

⁸⁵ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 61. Gramsci's adage is, of course, from the *Prison Notebooks*: '[...]

nowhere to be found. In order to resolve this deadlock, Žižek appeals to Deleuze and his notion of the sense-event, which alleges to account for Plato's instant in immanent terms. But it is not so much a question of a "reading" of Deleuze as an uncritical appropriation of his position. In the *Logic of Sense*, which introduces the notion of sense as a 'non-existing entity' that 'maintains very special relations with nonsense',⁸⁶ Deleuze explicitly conceives of the instant of the third hypothesis in Parmenides through the temporal logic Aion. Contrasted against Chronos, the corporeality of the present Now, Aion is characterised by its autonomy from the latter in its simultaneous predominance of the past and future. Indeed, Deleuze describes the distinction between these two modes of temporality as 'almost the second and third hypotheses of Parmenides – that of the "now and that of the "instant."'" As the attempt to seize the present and future, 'Aion stretches out in a straight line, limitless in either direction. Always already passed and eternally yet to come, Aion is the eternal truth of time: pure empty form of time, which has freed itself of its present corporeal content and has thereby unwound its own circle, stretching itself out in a straight line.'⁸⁷ Rather than affirming the instant as a flash of lightning (as something which presents itself and withdraws in the same "instant") and therefore cannot be made sense of, the instant is for Deleuze, on the contrary, pure sense. Not that which is outside of time, but that which realises its truth.⁸⁸

⁸⁶Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990 [1969]), xiii.

⁸⁷Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, 165. Payam Masarrat

⁸⁸'The most general operation of sense is this: it brings that which expresses it into existence; and from that point on, as pure inherence, it brings itself to exist within that which expresses it. It rests therefore with the Aion, as the milieu of surface effects or events, to trace a frontier between things and propositions; and the Aion traces it with its entire straight line. Without it, sounds would fall back on bodies, and propositions themselves would not be "possible." Language is rendered possible by the frontier which separates it from things and from bodies (including those which speak). We can thus take up again the account of the surface organization as it is determined by the Aion.' (Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, 166.)

If the first hypothesis of the Parmenides can only be grasped in light of the conceptual tools of atomism, then this subsequent turn to Deleuze notion of sense as the immateriality of “pure becoming” coincides with the latter’s Stoic reading of Plato. Against the traditional notion of the Platonic Idea as the site of a transcendent beyond on which corporeal beings are subsequently modelled upon, ideality is rendered immanent to corporeality and conceived as the effects of bodily causes.⁸⁹ And though these effects are incorporeal, they do not transcend the *corpo real*. At this juncture, Deleuze – usually thought of as an “anti-dialectician” – explicitly describes dialectic in terms of the logic of eventual surface events: ‘Dialectics is precisely this science of incorporeal events as they are expressed in propositions, and of the connections between events as they are expressed in relation between propositions.’ It is precisely Deleuze-the-dialectician who appeals to Žižek. The Stoic Deleuze of the surface-event conceives of dialectic as a science of surface rather than depth. Deleuze’s *Logic of Sense* is accordingly no less Lacanian: perhaps the most distinctive feature of the specificity of Lacan’s development of psychoanalysis is that the unconscious is to be found strictly on the surface. The topological figure of the Möbius strip, the paradigmatic exemplar, is invoked to illustrate that the spatial configuration of the unconscious appears to be multi-dimensional, but is in truth comprised by the singularity of a continuous surface – indeed, a “plane of immanence”. It is in this sense that the Stoic dualism set up by Deleuze, between corporeal-bodily cause and incorporeal-ideational effect, marks the materialism of that Platonic dualism between ideas and their phenomenal copies – ‘and it is against this background that one should envisage a return to Plato.’⁹⁰ Plato himself failed to recognise this dimension and instead succumbed to the ‘ontologization of Ideas’, that is, the positing of Ideas as an extra-phenomenal substantial Real.⁹¹ What Deleuze’s reading of Plato clarifies is the (immanent) immateriality of the ideal. As such, in relation to the signifier, what is at stake in instant of the third hypothesis of the Parmenides is a particular face of the Lacanian Real: ‘the Real of pure virtual

⁸⁹ ‘The Stoics discovered surface effects.’ (Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 7.)

⁹⁰ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 35/36.

⁹¹ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 35/36.

surface', or better, 'the Real of pure appearance which is the truth of the Platonic Idea.'⁹²

Žižek's wager consists in the thesis that there is a Platonic materialism of the immaterial to be developed via Deleuze's notion of the senseevent. But to what extent does Žižek's self-proclaimed orthodox Lacanian commitments – essentially rationalist – conflict with the empiricism of the corporeal base of the pure becoming of Deleuzian sense?⁹³ Žižek's relation to Deleuze dates further back than the instrumental appeal in *Less Than Nothing*. In *Organs Without Bodies*, which indeed provides at least the contours of a reading, the notion of transcendental empiricism is lauded as the 'genius of Deleuze', as Deleuze's empiricist notion of the transcendental, rather than designating the 'formal conceptual network that structures the rich flow of reality' (orthodox Kantianism) stands for 'the infinite potential field of virtualities out of which reality is actualised.'⁹⁴ The underlying categories which regulate Žižek's reading of Deleuze are thus the actual and the virtual. And matters become increasingly transparent if it is made clear that that the materialism of Deleuze belongs to the lineage inaugurated by Schelling – the "middle period" Schelling of the *Freiheitsschrift* and more significantly the *Weltalter* drafts. Schelling is the thinker who provides the opposition between actuality and virtuality: 'the space of the actual (real acts in the present, experienced reality, and persons as formed individuals), accompanied by its virtual shadow (the field of proto-reality, of multiple singularities, impersonal elements later synthesized in our experience of reality).'95

More digestibly, Deleuze – notably, for Žižek, the earlier Deleuze of *Difference and Repetition* and *The Logic of Sense* (who later messianically returns in the *Cinema* books), and not the later "Guattarized" Deleuze of *Capitalism of Schizophrenia* – is a "Schellingian" in the sense that he is a

⁹² Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 62.

⁹³ 'The logic of sense is inspired in its entirety by empiricism. Only empiricism knows how to transcend the experiential dimensions of the visible without falling into Ideas, and how to track down, invoke, and perhaps produce a phantom at the limit of a lengthened or unfolded experience.' (Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 20.)

⁹⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 4.

⁹⁵ Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies*, 19.

thinker of real genesis. In contrast to the idealism of formal (or transcendental idealist) genesis, in which pure becoming precedes the emergence of corporeality, the alleged materialism of real genesis accounts for the crystallisation of the sense-event out of the corporeal.⁹⁶

This is precisely the position of the middle-period Schelling, for whom there is a primordially of positive Being in 'the abyss of the preontological Real in God, the blind rotary movement of "irrational" passions', indeed 'a shadowy realm of obscene ghosts that return again and again as "living dead" because they failed to actualize themselves in full reality.'⁹⁷

Žižek proves here to share with Deleuze the seeds of an empiricist vitalism. Platonic ideality can be described in terms of an immaterial surface-events, but is the Platonic idea truly grounded by pre-ontological corporeality? This would amount to a reification of the Lacanian notion of Real, a positive theory of which seems to coincide with the "irrationality of passions". Ironically, Žižek's enthusiasm apropos of the notion of real genesis seems to place him on the ground of Anti-Oedipus, which he otherwise dismisses as 'Deleuze's worst book'.⁹⁸

It should be emphasised that while Anti-Oedipus is explicitly against mainstream psychoanalysis, it is not explicitly anti-Lacan. On the contrary, 'Deleuze and Guattari explicitly characterize Anti-Oedipus as being, from start to finish, a theory of the Real.'⁹⁹ The Lacanian Real is appropriated by Deleuze and Guattari and conceived in terms of the famous figures of intensities, partial objects, etc. It is once again Žižek himself, however, who gives an indication that he is not to be buried in the grave he has inadvertently dug for himself. In opposition to the positive notion of the "Deleuzian-Schellingian" Real – a vitalist force – the point of the Lacanian Real is that it is 'the name for the gap of a radical

⁹⁶ Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies*, 22.

⁹⁷ Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies*, 23. Žižek exhaustively pursues this interpretation of Schelling, which is symptomatic of his thought as a whole, in *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matter* (London and New York: Verso, 1996.)

⁹⁸ Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies*, 23.

⁹⁹ Daniel W. Smith, "The Inverse Side of Structure: Žižek on Deleuze on Lacan," in *Essays on Deleuze* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 317.

“negativity,” it stands for a paradoxical (non)entity that has no ontological consistency in itself but can only be discerned retroactively, from its effects, as their absent Cause.’¹⁰⁰

This is indeed symptomatic of the fundamental tension of Žižek’s thinking in general: a hysterical oscillation between the Real as a concept of positive production (which allows for the fantasy of thinking drive without desire) and as a concept which designates the absolute purity of dialectical selfrelating negativity. Indeed, any serious materialism must grant ideal surfaceevents a certain degree of autonomy from their material ground, which Žižek finds a sophisticated elaboration of in Deleuze; but the immediately following question concerns how this material ground itself is accounted for, and here the Deleuzian direction, which Žižek shares on the basis of his ambiguous allegiance to Schelling, is not to be followed. Ultimately, the materiality of materialism cannot be grounded by the life-force of the corporeal, which is an abstractly ideal category. As for the specificity of the Deleuzian interpretation of Plato, the pressing question concerns whether the surface-event of the Idea, which is on exemplary display in the third hypothesis of the *Parmenides*, can be retained without the presupposition of an underlying corporeality while at the same time avoiding a relapse into idealism. Instead of spending all his resources lauding the notion of the sense-event – the event of the ideal positivity of the material-corporeal ground of sense – Žižek’s Lacanian Hegelianism would find more fruit to reap in the ingenuity of Deleuze’s “reversal” of Platonism. At this juncture, should it not be brought to attention that the category of reversal is integral to dialectical thinking, which occurs at the extreme points of the nodes of contradiction? But perhaps this is the *differentia specifica* of Hegelian dialectic; as Deleuze points out in “Plato and the Simulacrum”, initially published separately from the *Logic of Sense* but later added to it as an appendix, ‘Platonism is neither a dialectic of contradiction nor of contrariety, but a dialectic of rivalry (*amphibetesis*), a dialectic of rivals and suitors.’ There are not simply forms and copies, but true copies must be distinguished from false ones. Phenomenal entities which do in fact participate in the order of forms or ideas must be delimited from those that do not. Platonic dialectic entails ‘to screen the claims

¹⁰⁰Slavoj Žižek, “Notes on a Debate from ‘Within the People,’” 661.

(pretensions) and to distinguish the true pretender from the false one.’¹⁰¹

Deleuze subsequently introduces the notion of the simulacrum, the Platonic false copy whose dignity he defends. Indeed, this is the negativity of the true “positive” copy. ‘Copies are secondary possessors. They are well-founded pretenders, guaranteed by resemblance; simulacra are like false pretenders, built upon dissimilarity, implying an essential perversion or a deviation.’¹⁰² Platonism, then, is the exorcism of the simulacrum at the behest of the idealisation of the copy (which coincides with the notion of the copy tout court), and the subsequent reversal of this order comes out in valiant defense of the simulacrum. The repressed tension which Deleuze identifies in the Platonic theory of ideality is that between the copy and the simulacrum. The simulacrum is the spectral other half of the copy qua participant. Crucially, in the same way that the Democritean void is posited as the necessary but insubstantial other half of the atom, so too the simulacrum clings on to the copy. There is thus something quintessentially materialist about the concept of the simulacrum in the way that it posits the truth about the Platonic dialectic of rivalry. But it is apparently the Sophist, rather than Parmenides, which ‘contains the most extraordinary adventure of Platonism’. The most remarkable moment of the Sophist is the point at which Socrates, the iconic copy of the philosopher-model, appears to be indistinguishable from the sophist, his otherwise non-dialectical opposite. A speculative identity between philosophy and sophistry is posited, placing the latter at the very heart of the former. This traumatic presence is that of the simulacrum. In relation to the philosopher, the sophist is the embodiment of the simulacrum, the spectral phantasm which haunts the purity of the icon. This is the great fear of orthodox Platonism: that the distinction between philosophy and sophistry, between iconic copies and phantasmatic simulacra, is not at all clear-cut. And so it is all the more remarkable that, in the Sophist, Plato directly confronts this fear. Thus Deleuze asks: ‘Was it not Plato himself who pointed out the direction for the reversal of Platonism?’ In singling out privileged ontic entities and naming them copies, the Platonic dialectical process relies, in Deleuze’s judgement, on a notion of external difference.

¹⁰¹ Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 253.

¹⁰² Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 256.

The stability of internal identity is presupposed – is this not, however, precisely the presupposition which the *Parmenides* puts into question? – and difference arises in the external relation of such identities. The thrust of the reversal of Platonism, the affirmative step toward the world of simulacra rather than copies, internalises difference. Difference must be thought of as a cut from within. It is a question of a ‘constitutive disparity’.¹⁰³ The Platonic illusion of identity, which is rendered illusory by Plato himself in *Parmenides* and *Sophist*, is thus “decentred”, and the name of the resultant absence of the self-identical centre is Difference as such. As profound as this insight may be – indeed, it is only this Deleuze, reconcilable with Lacanian rationalism as it does not fall back on the mysticism of vitalist corporeality, that Žižek should follow – Deleuze nevertheless proceeds into regrettable territory. Not content with the conclusion that the “simulacrum-phantasm” marks the negativity of the immanent disparity of positively appearing being, it is affirmatively mobilised as a substantial “power of the false”. As an intimation of what is to come in Capitalism and Schizophrenia, the simulacrum (though later substituted for the concept of assemblage)¹⁰⁴ ‘establishes the world of nomadic distributions and crowned anarchies.’¹⁰⁵ The simulacrum thus becomes the literally powerful basis on which to think a new positive order. In other words, the affirmation of the simulacra lets go of the concept of truth. As a dialectical notion, whether it be Platonic or Hegelian, the simulacra would bring to the fore that truth is immanently cut by the false, but all the same without giving up on truth itself. It would demonstrate that Socrates, the philosophical figure of the big Other, the guarantor of truthful

¹⁰³ Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 261/62.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Daniel Smith, “The Concept of the Simulacrum: Deleuze and the Overturning of Platonism”, in *Essays On Deleuze*, 26: ‘After the publication of *Difference and Repetition* (1968), the concept of the simulacrum more or less disappears from Deleuze’s work in favor of the concept of the agencement or “assemblage”. “It seems to me that I have completely abandoned the notion of the simulacrum,” Deleuze noted in 1993. [...] Within Deleuze’s own work, the concept of the simulacrum is ultimately replaced by the concept of the assemblage [agencement], and the process of simulation is more properly characterized as the process of actualization (or even more precisely, the complex process of “differentiation”).’

¹⁰⁵ Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 263.

speech, is himself “barred” and inconsistent; Socrates can and should serve as a figure of authority, but it must be emphasised that he, too, precisely as a figure of authority, is lacking. As soon as the simulacrum is substantialised, however, Plato has been both reversed and left behind. In such a universe, there can be no shade of authority at all, no structure from which a figure like Socrates may arise. It constitutes the affirmation of an order based on the fetishization of the positive Real which has freed itself from the anchoring tyranny of the signifier. If anything, having with this move mounted an irrevocable opposition between himself and the Freudo-Lacanian lineage, Deleuze (and later together with Guattari) is a Jungian: ‘Remember that for Jung also, the Freudian unconscious was not yet the deeper “real” unconscious, the impersonal domain of collective archetypes; it remained caught in the superficial social and familial web. No wonder, then, that an admiration of Jung is Deleuze’s corpse in the closet: the fact that Deleuze borrowed a key term (rhizome) from Jung is not a mere insignificant accident – rather, it points toward a deeper link.’ Appearance as Appearance What Žižek ultimately appropriates from Deleuze is the notion that the Platonic Idea “exists” only virtually. Ideas are strictly virtual entities that ‘do not have ontological reality of their own’. The consequence of this is not that the real is the virtual, but on the contrary that the virtual is the real: ‘Virtual Reality in itself is a rather miserable idea: that of imitating reality, of reproducing experience in an artificial medium. The reality of the Virtual, on the other hand, stands for the reality of the Virtual as such, for its real effects and consequences.’¹⁰⁶

The problem of vitalist corporeality that emerges from the opposition between bodily causation and ideational effectivity arises structurally from the commitment to the empiricism of sense as such. The “pure appearance” of ideality, therefore, is affirmed as pure while at the same time stressing that its underlying cause is bodily-corporeal. And so an alleged materialism of the immaterial is ensured. But in this very move the bodily-corporeal ground is idealised, as a primordial “source of life”. Žižek should rather wholeheartedly commit to the second line of thought which he, unbeknownst to himself, develops in conflictual parallel (and

¹⁰⁶ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 69. This passage is reproduced verbatim from *Organs Without Bodies*, 3, where it appears originally.

not continuous with) the Deleuzian logic of sense. This is the reading of Plato which Žižek advances in terms of the Hegelian logic of appearance, which does not contrast ideational appearance with bodily essence, but affirms the self-reference of appearance as its own insubstantial ground. In a passage of the notorious section on “Force and Understanding” from the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which Žižek aptly refers to, Hegel discusses the other-worldly beyond as the emanating mediation of appearance. Appearance is posited as the essence of the supersensible. If the merely sensible is made sense of in terms of appearance, the supersensible is not therefore an extra-worldly essence, but this essence is simply ‘appearance as appearance.’¹⁰⁷ The fleeting appearance of sensuous reality is redoubled instead of provided a firm ground to stand on. This is a materialist point because it dispends with the illusion of the latter and instead courageously commits to an essence without recourse to a foundational idealised Ground. Žižek draws further attention to Lacan who remarkably makes a homologous point as he tells the ancient anecdote of the contest between Zeuxis and Parrhasius which meant to determine the true master of naturalist painting. Zeuxis eagerly presented a depiction of grapes so realistic that it attracted birds who flew down from the sky to peck on it. Parrhasius’ contribution, on the other hand, appeared to be covered by a veil, and as Zeuxis asks for the veil to be removed, it is made clear that the veil itself is the painting. Parrhasius’ painting is thus literally “appearance as appearance”. In Lacan’s words: ‘A triumph of the gaze over the eye’. The materialism of the gaze, the idealism of the eye? Platonism does not need to be dramatically reversed from the terrain of copies to that of simulacra, but rather pushed in a direction where copies are nothing but copies of copies. Žižek’s Hegelian claim that ‘the distinction between appearance and essence has to be inscribed into appearance itself’¹⁰⁸ means, in Platonic terms, that the difference between the copy and the Idea is immanent to the copy. This is the “constitutive disparity” of which Deleuze speaks. What, then, belies appearance and ensures the avoidance of the pitfall of idealism? The answer is nothingness itself, whose proper name, as Badiou stresses,

¹⁰⁷ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Terry Pinkard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 89.

¹⁰⁸ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 37.

is the void. It is no accident that Parmenides concludes with the affirmation of nothingness. 'Is not Parmenides, even more than Plato's Sophist, the dialogue on the corrosive all-pervasive force of nothingness?'¹⁰⁹ In other words, it is Parmenides, after all, which is "the most extraordinary adventure of Platonism". Clearly. But since you can't distinguish between the fact that a world has changed BADIOU and the nature of the change in the world, we fall back on the eventual. So I'll ask you why the world changed at that very moment.

And I'm going to tell you. NANCY

You're going to tell me... BADIOU

Because the gods departed. (Badiou and Nancy, German Philosophy, 42.) NANCY

Nancy's diagnosis should not be read as an affirmation of a kind of secular enlightenment of the ancient world which allowed for the breakthrough of philosophy, but rather in a way that frames his position, at least in this particular instance, as differing from Badiou's in the way that its theoretical angle is that of an "inverted theology". There is for him a tangible difference of the life-worlds of the Babylonians, for example, and the Greeks. Philosophy is born because of the death of (the) God(s). Consequently, 'it's not Nietzsche, nor Jean-Paul, nor Luther who invented that: there were already Greeks who said "The Gods have departed."' Philosophy is therefore a reaction to this loss: not a compensation for it, but an effort to 'habituate humanity as a whole to the fact that its creative constitution lies in the element of this loss' (Badiou and Nancy, German Philosophy, 46, 47). For lucid "anthropological speculations" on this theme, see chapter nine ("The Axial Age (800 BC – 600 AD)") in David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (Brooklyn and New York: Melville House Publishing, 2014), 223-251. Democritean atomists seem to reason in reverse, deducing from the fact that motion exists the necessity that the void (empty space) exists.' (Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 60. My italics.)

Bibliography

¹⁰⁹ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 39. 183 Society of the Materialist Friends of Plato