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The Cold Cruelty of Ethics: Žižek, Kristof and Reflexive Subjectivization

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Introduction

Slavoj Žižek's conception that a truly political act does not merely modulate the Symbolic order, but bears upon the Real, has as its complement a cold, 'inhuman' and even 'immoral' ethics. (e.g. Žižek 2009, 3) For the humanistic notions of compassion, neighborliness and solidarity upon which a more 'human' ethics might rely typically are ideologically co-opted to support the functioning of the Symbolic order as a "big Other," that is, a consistent order of meaning. In particular, Žižek argues that such human qualities have proven necessary – as supplement and enigmatic quilting-point – to maintaining coherence within a putatively equal liberal democratic-capitalist system, in fact, built upon radical, structural inequalities. (Žižek 2003, 115) In this respect, Žižek has often cited the problematic status of modern charity as a response to poverty and inequality: though apparently imminently humanistic and humane, it tends to obscure the constitutive inequalities at the system's core, granting it ideological and practical support, even when presented as a critique of its failings. (Žižek 2003, 113-4) Indeed, following Lacan, Žižek can claim that such humanistic, "loving" endeavors all too often become "strategies to

avoid encountering the neighbor.” (Žižek and Daly 2004, 72) Nevertheless, it is difficult to articulate positively the ethos which would allow one do what a situation truly demands, to ‘naively’ see the Real in the neighbor and to act in fidelity to it, without compromise and without succumbing to ‘humane’ impulses, yet acting critically and reflexively.

Herein lies the value, for Žižek (in *The Monstrosity of Christ* (Žižek 2009, 301-303)), of Hungarian author and playwright Agota Kristof’s 1986 novel, *The Notebook* (Kristof 1997).¹ Centered on the impossible situation of World War II Hungary and, specifically, on the struggle for survival of twin children Claus and Lucas, the novel, first of all, powerfully dramatizes the impossibility of the situations in which human beings all too often find themselves. (The novel is the first installment of a trilogy, which additionally includes *The Proof* and *The Third Lie* (Kristof 1997) and which explores the impossible sequence of Hungary’s experience of war, communism, and post-1989 capitalism.)² And it would seem to exemplify remarkably precisely the kind of inhuman ethics Žižek considers such situations to demand – an exemplification intensified by having vulnerable children as its uncompromising agents. The novel grants this ethics remarkable ‘texture’ and ‘density,’ not shirking from displaying the personal cost of remaining faithful to it, but equally and persuasively demonstrating its existential logic, dynamics, and peculiar, uncanny force.

This article proposes, however, that Kristof is also sensitive to tensions within such an ethical stance, which she explores in the subsequent novels of the trilogy, and that these tensions and her approach to resolving them are of significance for Žižek’s work. Specifically, I will argue that where Žižek (arguably) has struggled to give substance to the idea that the seductive Beckettian ethos of ‘failing again, failing better’ (cf. Žižek 2008: 210) can be the locus of an effective political practice (his almost exclusive valorization of a decisive political act, which appears always yet ‘to come,’ ultimately tends to undermine the value of failing better), Kristof probes how failure in act can constitute a productive moment of a more complex reflexive subjectivization, which contributes to a praxis that remains committed to radical change. Moreover, I will argue that, in this way, Kristof’s writing engages with questions concerning the nature of act, which points to a way of negotiating certain persistent tensions in Žižek’s conception of political act.

Žižek's Reading of Kristof

Let us begin, then, by considering Žižek's reading of Kristof in more detail. Specifically, Žižek considers Kristof's twins, Claus and Lucas, to be exemplars of a simultaneously naive and coldly cruel stance crucial to ethics. Echoing his own 'inhuman' ethos, and reflecting Schiller's distinction between sentimental morality and naive ethics, each is an "ethical monster without empathy". (Žižek 2009: 301-3) That is, these children act utterly without sentiment, or personal consideration, responding solely and directly to what a situation demands, whatever the cost. Thus, though their own moral sentiments tell them the act is deplorable, especially for children, they blackmail the local priest for his sexual molestation of a girl known as Harelip, because "Harelip and her mother absolutely need money." (Kristof 1997: 70) When, however, they themselves earn sufficient money to support mother and daughter, they refuse any further payments from the priest and even subsequently befriend him. Again, they cause the disfigurement of the priest's housekeeper – who has been the single person to show them any consistent kindness – because she is cruel to a starving Jew being marched through the town to a camp with fellow Jews. When their seriously ill grandmother asks them to do so, they kill her by poisoning, despite the fact that this leaves them alone and vulnerable in the world. For Žižek, if such naivety leads to a certain "blind spontaneity", it is nonetheless also precisely that which facilitates "a monstrously cold reflexive distance", a distance which cuts through the misplaced personal concerns, sentiments, and even humanistic impulses which stymie truly doing what a situation demands. (Žižek 2009a: 303) Indeed, the twins actively cultivate such reflexive distance, for example, taking up begging solely in order to "find out what its effects are and to observe people's actions", and keeping a diary of their observations, while progressively honing their writing so as to arrive at an objective "description of facts", free of feeling. (Kristof 1997: 29, 33-34)

If Žižek thus discovers, in *The Notebook*, a striking instance of the unavoidable cold cruelty of his (materialist) ethics³ – and the novel offers a powerful image of such an ethical attitude – it is, nevertheless, difficult to avoid the sense that he has, perhaps, too quickly extracted the figures of Claus and Lucas from Kristof's trilogy. Symptomatic here is Žižek's somewhat awkward appraisal of the books as simultaneously postmodern and anti-postmodern, a reading which requires the subtraction of the trilogy's "clear simplicity" from its proliferation of narratives:

Although her universe is 'postmodern' (the three books are written in totally different styles, and they often contradict each other in talking about the same events, presenting different versions of a traumatic "thing" that must have happened), her writing is totally anti-postmodern in its clear simplicity, with sentences which recall elementary-school reports. (Žižek 2009a: 301)

This distinction enables the isolation of Kristof's simplicity of language, in a manner that supports extracting, from the trilogy's postmodern form, a corresponding naivety or spontaneity of act, uncontaminated by hesitations and equivocations. Nonetheless, this interpretation cannot but raise the problem of how the exemplariness of the twins' acts is to be reconciled with *The Notebook* as a moment of construction of the traumatic "thing" that must have happened, against the greater horror of a situation that appears to be beyond all meaning. (Žižek has, of course, come to recognize that the notion of such a traumatic "thing" involves a transcendentalization of the Real, which undermines the possibility of an effective act. (Žižek and Daly 2004: 66)) As such, if we accept Žižek's framework of interpretation, the question arises as to whether the twins' 'ethical' actions might not after all reflect children acting in a cold, detached manner, according to an inhuman calculus, in order to survive the horrors of their situation.

The deeper issue here – and that which warrants closer consideration of Žižek's reading of Kristof – is that a similar tension affects Žižek's own ethics, following upon his reframing of the Real in immanent terms, over the past decade. If a transcendental notion of the Real threatens to leave every immanent act incapable of producing significant change, it has the benefit of guaranteeing that an act, which effectively bears upon it, will fundamentally refigure the Symbolic order. By contrast, as Žižek acknowledges in *The Parallax View*, an immanent notion of the Real – a Real always encountered within the Symbolic order as its negative limit – requires faith that the Real upon which one acts is a dimension of the "presymbolic X" from which that Symbolic order emerges, so that one's act bears the potential of opening thought to a greater fullness of being. (Žižek 2006: 390 n. 21) The 'faith' that Žižek here terms a groundless "methodological idealism" goes beyond the Pauline faith that calls for acts without the support of any "big Other". This idealism is rather the faith, corroborated only fragmentarily and indirectly via practical experiment, that reality is structured in this manner – the condition of possibility of the specific Pauline faith-act that trusts this or that identification with the not-All to be significant. This blindness of act is redoubled insofar as Žižek additionally remains

committed to the possibility of a singular act yet-to-come upon the immanent Real, which will radically refigure the Symbolic order: for without such an act being performed, without successful instances of re-ordering of the Symbolic, there is no evidence that reality is so ordered. And, unless Žižek makes an appeal however implicitly to the kind of theological horizon of “Otherness” for which he criticizes Derridean messianicity (Žižek 2003: 140), he must accept a deep ‘blindness’ of act, which threatens to undermine its claim to be ethical no less than the naivety of the twins’ act threatens to undermine their ethical stance in *The Notebook*.⁴

In his recent exchange with Žižek, Adrian Johnston has sought to negotiate broadly similar tensions in Žižek’s commitment to the “big Act”, by proposing a “pre-evental discipline of time”, which would extend the focus of the latter’s thought beyond a singular, decisive act-to-come, to embrace a multiplicity of actual acts which, in its absence, might prepare the way for it. (Johnston 2009: 85ff) In a similar spirit, I wish to propose here that beyond the apparently postmodern/anti-postmodern surface of Kristof’s trilogy lie resources toward modeling an expanded Žižekian ethics capable of articulating a more complex subjective-reflexive relation to act, within the multiplicity of acts envisaged by Johnston – a modeling which would mitigate the problem of ethical ‘blindness’ without sacrificing Žižek’s conception of the cold spontaneity of act, nor his ultimate pursuit of a decisive “big Act”. One might say, to echo Žižek’s citation of Beckett, it is a question of elaborating an ethics of ‘failing again, failing better.’ (cf. Žižek 2008: 210)

Crucial to this enterprise is the viability of an alternative reading of Kristof which avoids positing a postmodern/anti-postmodern dichotomy within the trilogy. And, indeed, a reading is possible, which allows that postmodern narrative proliferation and construction of the traumatic “thing” – as a protection against the even more horrifying Real of the situation – is a tendency in these texts. However, this alternative reading posits that each successive novel can be considered, more basically, to perform a distinct dimension, or moment, of a (three-fold) reflexive subjectivization, which seeks to sustain the very possibility of the naive ethicality of the twin’s actions in the first novel, *precisely against this postmodern temptation*. And rather than provide an irreducibly different perspective to preceding novels, subsequent novels stand in relation to them as their condition of possibility. In the peculiar temporality of subjectivization, it is the reflexive acts and narrations within the later novels which retrospectively make the naivety of the ethical actions of the first novel possible. Deepening Žižek’s insight, reflexivity becomes the (paradoxical) condition of naivety. In making the case for such an expansion of Žižekian

ethics in light of Kristof's trilogy, this article will argue that a similar (if more problematically realized) structure of reflexive subjectivity can be discerned within Pauline subjectivity, which is directed to resolving precisely the instabilities of the naive act of faith. And insofar as Žižek does not attend to these reflexive dynamics of act, aspects of Paul's problematic construction of this reflexive stabilization of act tend to emerge in his own resolution of these difficulties.

Kristof's Reflexive Trilogy

Let us turn, then, to the narrative structure of Kristof's trilogy. As seen, the opening novel of the trilogy narrates the war-time life of twins Lucas and Claus with their grandmother (their mother leaves them with her for their safety). It details their uncompromising ethics and the ascetic practices, including their writing in a manner stripped of feeling in the eponymous notebook, which prepares them for the hardship of both life and their ethical path. The novel culminates in one of them crossing the border to freedom, while the other returns to their grandmother's house. The second novel, *The Proof*, reveals that it is Lucas who remains behind and details a life lived with the same naivety as previously, but under the dark cloud cast by separation from his brother. Indeed, this novel casts doubt on the existence of Claus (there are no records of him and no one remembers a second child), a suspicion deepened by hints that the notebooks may have, in fact, been written by Lucas over many years after the supposed departure of Claus, as a record for him – should he return – of their earlier life together. The idea that the content of the first novel is a retrospective fiction (and idealization) is compounded by the fact that Lucas' continued practice of their earlier ethics now appears to have rather more ambiguous motivations as well as more ambiguous consequences for himself and others. The second novel places us in a (post-war communist) world of all-too-human traumatized individuals, striving to survive and doubtful of the possibility of love and happiness. Suspicions about the first novel appear to be confirmed when, many years after Lucas leaves the area, Claus returns, except that it is evident to his friends that it is, in fact, Lucas posing as his brother (he appears to confirm this himself to his former lover, Clara). (Kristof 1997: 332) Indeed, on examination by magistrates, the manuscript, which 'Claus' claims was largely written by his brother Lucas, over many years, and completed by him (Claus), is determined to be

in the same handwriting from beginning to end, and the sheets of paper show no signs of age. The entire text was written in one sequence, by the same person, over a period of time not exceeding six months, that is by Claus T. himself, during his stay in our town. (Kristof 1997: 338)

The Third Lie takes up the story of a returning Claus, who has written this same manuscript, but in exile, and who now, seriously ill, seeks out his brother. This novel reveals that as a child of four (named Lucas) he had been hospitalized, apparently with polio, and was later presumed dead, by his family, after his hospital was bombed. He was subsequently taken in by an old woman, who he came to call 'Grandmother'. On crossing the border, he changed his name to Claus in memory of the brother, who he sometimes could not be sure he had not invented to make life in the hospital and, then, with 'Grandmother' more bearable. Shifting to the perspective of his brother, a writer who, in turn, has taken on the penname Klaus Lucas in memory of his twin, the novel further reveals that, in fact, the young Lucas was hospitalized because wounded by a ricocheting bullet, intended by his mother for her cheating husband. Klaus refuses to acknowledge him even though it is evident that he is his brother, for fear of the impact on their guilt-ridden, heart-broken mother, who, unknown to Claus, is still alive. Claus dies by suicide shortly after his rejection by Klaus and the latter takes on to complete his brother's manuscript, as he had requested, and accedes to his dying wish to be buried with his parents (burying him alongside his father).

This basic outline suggests that the first two novels might well, following Žižek's reading, be considered to be differing postmodern perspectives that circle about a traumatic thing that must have happened. The first might be taken as an idealization of a horrific childhood experience, corresponding approximately to the notebooks that the twins write (or rather Lucas writes); the second, which parallels the almost completed manuscript written by Lucas/Claus, constructs a narrative of himself as the twin brother who remains at home and thus anchors a lonely, isolated existence in a foreign land, displacing his pain onto this 'brother' and keeping hope alive of a return home to a meaningful existence. The third novel, however, disrupts this pattern, enabling the reader to situate *The Notebook* and *The Proof* as constructed fictions (in relation to the 'reality' of the trilogy's universe) and, thus, to bypass their many contradictions to arrive at a more or less coherent linear narrative of 'what really happened'. Certainly, given the title of the third novel, its narrative cannot be straightforwardly relied upon either, but here the lie appears

to be of a different order. Klaus lies, not in an unconscious construction of the impossibly traumatic thing that must have happened, but, deliberately and reflexively, to keep at bay a rather more mundane, remembered traumatic event that did happen. With Klaus' refusal to accept Lucas/Claus as his brother, this novel poses the rather different question of whether we remain incapable of facing our traumas and moving beyond our lies, even when the opportunity for some healing and reconciliation presents itself. Indeed, this is a key question running through the trilogy: are there only lies?

Kristof's ultimate answer, via Claus, is that, yes, "[i]t's all lies", but lies need not simply be falsehoods. They can instead be "[s]tories that aren't true but might be". (Kristof 1997: 410) With echoes of Foucault, they are "fictions", that is, possibilities at the limit of the prevailing order of things which might be made to become true in their narration – even if they threaten to dissolve into 'mere fictions.' (Kristof 1997: 338) Equally, he refers to his writings as "meaningless", in a manner redolent of the Lacanian idea that truth must rupture prevailing orders of knowledge (and thus is strictly 'meaningless' vis-à-vis them). Again, however, this significant meaninglessness threatens to be swamped by trauma that demands meaningless evasion of truth. (Kristof 1997: 345) If the characters struggle with lure of a protective 'postmodern' multiplication of narratives, *The Third Lie's* rupturing of the postmodern surface of the earlier novels decisively shifts the focus from the trauma(s) about which the first two novels partially circulate and toward the question of the function of these narratives: what, if any, is the productive, subjective purpose of these lies? And it invites reconstruction of that purpose from its vantage point, a vantage point from which the significance of each incarnation of the notebook (and its corresponding novel) can be discerned only retrospectively, in relation to those that succeed it.

Without denying the postmodern temptation operative within its narrative, *The Notebook* (mirroring the notebook in which the twins write), then, can be considered to be the reflexive description/construction of naively ethical acts within the more 'realistically' ambiguous ethical world presented especially in the second novel. It is not merely a delusionary fantasy – *The Third Lie* briefly corroborates the basics of Lucas's life with 'Grandmother' and that, in fact, he regularly purchased the material for his notebooks. Rather, *The Notebook* is the reflexive imagining of the cold cruelty of an uncompromising ethics and of naive acts, which would be capable of negotiating and unraveling this world's complexities and ambiguities. In Lacanian fashion, it articulates, as it were, the *point de capiton* which would make this ethics possible. Lucas need not be supposed merely to imagine such acts, but this imagined ethics can be taken to be the basis of his actions

(however, imperfectly he might live up to its uncompromising ideals, or however resistant the world might prove to his attempts to cut through its ambiguities). Neither need Lucas' imagining of the presence of his twin brother undermine this interpretation. Rather, as the symbol of a lost fullness of being, the presence of Claus enables Lucas to construct his would-be actions as those of a fully subjectivized individual. As Žižek himself puts it, the twins "are more than one and less than two. The twins are $1 + a$: a subject and what is in him more than himself." (Žižek 2009a: 301)

If Lucas' reflexive elaboration and practice of his ethics need not be taken as delusionary, the ethically-ambiguous world of the second novel strikingly foregrounds its fragility. Lucas' actions in *The Proof* have a similar "blind spontaneity" as those of *The Notebook*, but his actions seem less sure, his motivations more contaminated by his personal history and psychology, and the outcomes of his actions rather more ambiguous. This is true of his relationship with Yasmine and her disabled son Matthias, whom he takes into his home and for whom he provides. Even as his 'cold', 'impersonal' approach to life enables him to cut through conventional morality to care for them, this same coldness profoundly skews his capacity to relate adequately to them. (It seems that he ultimately murders Yasmine, when she threatens to leave and take Matthias with her.) As such, *The Proof* views Lucas' naive ethical acts from the 'realistic' perspective of the world. Hence, within the context of this second installment in the trilogy, the 'blind spontaneity' of his acts takes on the further connotation of a radical uncertainty about the ethicality of such naivety. In an ethically ambiguous world, or a world, at least, where ethics is skewed by individual limitations and neediness, the blindness of one's actions places them in question. The departure at the end of *The Notebook* of Lucas' twin – his " $+ a$ ", that which "is in him more than himself" – symbolizes that the twins ethical stance cannot readily be maintained before the ambiguities of human actors and human history.

In this context, Lucas' desperate hope that his brother will return and his concern to produce a narrative, which will enable his brother to be at one with him once more, reflects his need to have his acts affirmed as those of a fully subjectivized individual and thus as ethically adequate. The notebooks Lucas writes in *The Proof* aim to be this proof. They seek to justify his actions retrospectively, by locating them as meaningful within the framework of the 'real' world within which he intervenes and which he would transform. They seek to affirm that the *point de capiton* established by his ethics, succeeds in generating the conditions that justify his acts. In typical Lacanian terms, this is not simply to justify his acts within a pre-existing framework but to articulate the new, transformed

context to which these acts give rise. If *The Notebook* constitutes the ‘immediate’ reflexivity necessary to any act, *The Proof* is that further reflexivity which retrospectively mediates and would establish the meaningfulness of decisive but uncertain acts, thus ‘stabilizing’ their ethicality (i.e. granting them consistency and significance). If one acts ‘naively’ – indeed, *in order to act ‘naively’* – one must retrospectively reflexively interrogate one’s naivety in order to establish the validity of one’s act.

Lucas’ attempt, however, ultimately proves a failure, symbolized by the fact that the brother who returns is not his “+ a”, but merely himself in disguise – a fantasy, in Lacan’s sense, that allows him to obscure his sense of subjective lack. This is not to suggest that his attempt is without meaning or a mere failure, but that it alone is insufficient. Certainly, Lucas can contextualize his acts, but his articulation of this context is again within the same individual-subjective locus as his original acts. In Žižekian terms, he cannot establish whether the putative *point de capiton* which his ethical actions construct is universalizing, or merely the expression of a subjective desire, whose origin and locus lies in the “big Other”, and thus promises merely the re-affirmation of the status quo. (The question of desire and its distortion of both the world and human action is never far from the surface in *The Proof*.) Hence, when the third novel foregrounds the failure of Lucas to establish the meaningfulness of his ethics, by revealing the extent of the gap between his fictions and ‘what really happened’, Kristof’s question re-asserts itself: has it all been lies? Is Lucas’ construction of an ethical world mere dissimulation? Is his ascription of an ethical attitude to his inhuman coldness mere dissembling?

When he hands over his manuscript to his brother Klaus and asks him to complete it, Lucas (as Claus) poses precisely this question. He effectively asks the brother, who knows best ‘what really happened,’ whether he has acted adequately to that reality. More precisely, since Lucas has clearly failed to achieve the subjectivization and ethical efficacy which would reunite him with his family, he asks whether, in his failure, he has done enough. Is it a history worth completing, or worth building upon ethically? Is it, as Žižek might put it, a suitable point from which to start again (as distinct from a peak from which to continue)? (Žižek 2010: 210) Has he simply failed ethically, or is his failure the lot of ethics in a finite, ambiguous world? Crucially, *The Third Lie* suggests that it is in exposing one’s ethics to critique from genuinely other perspectives, which is to say, only in recognizing the failure of one’s ethics to generate the conditions which would ground it, that one is exposed to the otherness of the world. Only then can one hope for affirmation (in failure) of one’s ethical stance. That is, the ethico-political act which would establish the

conditions of its own justification paradoxically is thoroughly subjective: its very success eliminates any worldly 'otherness' resistant to it. It is only in recognizing that one's failure cannot be recuperated – that there is an 'otherness' resistant to one's subjective ordering of the world, that it becomes possible to break out of the subjective circuit of one's reflexivity. (Žižek makes this the condition of subjectivization at what might now be called the 'naive' level of the *objet petit a*, in his reading of Fichte on the *Anstoss*. The implication of Kristof's trilogy, is that it is (paradoxically) only the ultimate failure of one's act that allows one to know that this *Anstoss* was truly other and not itself merely a subjective construction. (Žižek 1999: 44-6)) In failure, then, there is the possibility of having the relative quality of failure interrogated. One's act is opened to the socio-political 'other' and 'others', which are not amenable to the ordering force of one's act. Here the 'other' is not justified by any embodiment of a trace of theological 'Otherness'. There is no guarantee that attending to this other as Other supports an effective act of socio-political change. Rather, the failure of one's subjective act demands and allows that one be open to the judgment of the 'other', or rather more precisely, to judgment of the judgment of the 'other', exercised in tension between self and other.

The final novel of the trilogy thus completes the elaboration of an ethics that not only orients the subject toward 'naive' political acts, but situates and supports that ethical stance within a world in which human beings may not be able to sustain the impossible demands of such ethics or, even if they can, in which such acts may not effectively bear upon that world's complexities and ambiguities. It suggests that if blind, naive actions arise from reflexive construction of the world as if a thoroughgoing, 'naive' ethics were possible, a further reflexive moment is required to establish or stabilize the meaningfulness of one's blind acts. However, in the absence of a Žižekian "big Act", which succeeds in generating the conditions of its own justification, this attempt ultimately fails: it is not possible to achieve such subjective certainty. Hence, a final moment of reflexivity involves opening one's acts, in an acknowledgement of this failure, to a judgment by others and an interrogation of that judgment, informed ultimately by a complex interplay of attention to a situation, passion and pathos, rather than any 'theological' privileging of otherness as such.

It should also be noted that Kristof's implication of the reader in this reflexive struggle, as she or he grapples with the trilogy's divergent narratives, causes these moments to function within the trilogy both sequentially and simultaneously. Even as there is a temporal logic to these distinct moments of subjectivity, each bleeds into and always

already informs the others. By the trilogy's end, one cannot think about ethics in the cold uncompromising sense pursued by Claus and Lucas in *The Notebook*, without this possibility already being reflexively permeated by the issues raised by the later novels. In other words, to model ethics after Kristof's trilogy is to suggest that one can act coldly, blindly, and naively, only while already in that moment acknowledging the uncertainty of one's actions and accepting the gap that will typically be shown to have existed between the world one's acts would construct and 'reality'. This retrospective temporality is possible only within a history of such reflexivity, where each act, moreover, is performed within the shadow of others and an awareness of their failures. Ethics modeled after Kristof does not only require the considerable fortitude of the twins of *The Notebook*, but the courage to act thusly from within the ambiguous historical world and subjective reflexivity of *The Proof* and *The Third Lie*, in full knowledge of these ambiguities and the practical probabilities of failure.

Reflexive Subjectivization and the Pauline Act

As indicated at the beginning of this article, the parallels between the twins acts and Žižek's Pauline act are not simply restricted to a certain, common ethical 'blindness' of act. Rather, as will be shown in what follows, this 'blindness' of Paul's act, in its original formulation and realization within his letters, demands a three-fold reflexivity which structurally parallels that elaborated across Kristof's trilogy, if it is instantiated in a significantly different and more problematic manner – and largely without Žižek attending to this dimension of Paul's act. Hence, to bring Žižek into dialogue with Kristof's trilogy is not a random imposition of the latter's ethics upon Žižek's thought. Rather, it is a foregrounding of a reflexive structure of ethics in Paul, which Žižek may inadvertently assume, and of suggesting an alternative that enables him to circumvent those aspects of Paul's thought that are problematic for a contemporary politics. To establish these points, a closer examination of the Pauline act is necessary.

The immediate/naive Pauline act is constituted by what might be termed a 'blind' following of the law (or more precisely, specific laws), which refuses all appeal to "the Law" – that is, to the body of laws together with that superego supplement, which would render it a meaningful "All". Žižek highlights how this parallels Lacan's notion of feminine subjectivization, whose constitutive jouissance arises from identification with elements of

the Symbolic order, taken as not-All. In both cases, attending to an element of the Symbolic order or law as a limited and fragmentary bearer of meaning, both exposes the ideological construction and maintenance of meaning (the “big Other”), and suspends its influence. As noted earlier, however, the problem, for Žižek, is not simply that faith is required to perform an act that has, thus, no support from any “big Other”. As for Lucas/Claus, the deeper issue is that, if one makes this leap of faith, how can one ascertain that one’s act has significance? Sensitive to the need for genuine and effective politics acts, Žižek’s solution to this problem has been to assert that only acts which radically transform the political order, that is, “big Acts”, which effectively act upon the Real and generate the conditions of their own legitimacy, are properly acts. By definition, when one succeeds in performing a “big Act”, then, the situation will radically have changed. However, two problems arise. First, what counts as genuine, radical change and how might one recognize it? Second, in the continued absence of such a “big Act”, in the all or nothing, as it were, of radical change, how can one know that reality is so ordered? When one cannot identify successful instances of such acts of faith, the fundamental faith required is transposed into faith that such acts of faith are effective – a move that risks reinscribing a would-be immanent act within the minimal, but problematic onto-theological horizon that Žižek detects within the messianicity of Jacques Derrida.

It would be wrong, however, to conclude simply that these tensions result from Žižek’s reticence about what constitutes an effective political act – rather, it is most fundamentally a consequence of the deep ‘blindness’ of the Pauline act as such. This point is confirmed by the Christian community founded by Paul in Corinth, whose members pursued the alternative strategy of eagerly engaging in a multiplicity of such acts of identification. Paul’s first letter to that community details the problems arising (1 Cor 1:10-17) when some, for instance, took the equality of all in Christ naively and thus sought a straightforward, if divisive equality of women in community leadership and liturgical roles, (11:2-16) while others ‘blindly’ embraced the notion of the eucharist as eschatological feast, in a manner that excluded the poor liturgically and socially, and reinforced their marginalization. (11:17-22) Others again took the eschatological import of the ‘time that remains’ to be that we are already beyond history, leading to the emergence of a range of problematically divergent attitudes to everyday life, to worldly affairs, and to ethics. (5:1ff) The problem is that the messianic negation operative in these acts cuts both ways: to negate radically any order of meaning is equally to refuse any means of differentiating between acts, when no act succeeds in establishing a new *point de capiton*. And, for Paul,

the Christ-event will only have established such a *point de capiton* eschatologically, with the completion of history. Within history itself, it is not clear how this event re-orders the world. As Paul acknowledges, Christians now see only as “in a mirror darkly”, with much hidden until God’s judgment reveals the truth of things. (4:5, 13:12) Equally, Paul acknowledges that there are areas where he can give no direction on the appropriate form of Christian life. (e.g. 7:25) At other points, he argues for compromise positions, more practical than principled. (10:15: “I speak to you as sensible people...”)

Paul’s solution, not unlike Lucas in *The Proof*, is to construct an interpretative framework, corresponding to the transformed world which the act would bring about, within which individual acts might be located and evaluated. In 1 Corinthians, this framework might be said to centre on the hymn to love. (Chapter 13) The Christian gospel reveals that the essence of the Judaic tradition is that “God is love”. And by applying this principle, it is possible to discern what remains valid within that tradition, such that this tradition, now refined, becomes anew the interpretative framework within which to assess the legitimacy of any would-be Christian act. (See, for example, chapter 10) (As Jacob Taubes details, one finds something similar in Romans, when Paul locates the Jewish rejection of Jesus as the Messiah within God’s plan of salvation, and then can locate the Christian faith in relation to the Judaism from which it diverges. (Taubes 2004: 23ff)) As in the case of Lucas’ narrative, this framework – while it provides a framework within which to stabilize the instability of a purely naive, unsupported act – strictly fails to resolve the problem. For the sophisticated circularity of this hermeneutics is ultimately open to diverse interpretations. A balance of Jewish tradition and Christian novelty quickly threatens to break down into a multiplicity of assessments of the appropriate weight granted to each. Paul, well aware of this difficulty, explicitly appeals (again not unlike Claus/Lucas in his appeal to Klaus at the end of *The Third Lie*) to a further necessary level of judgment, throughout his letter to the Corinthians, to close the gap between action and its justification: that is, he appeals to his apostolic authority. Even though he is careful to circumscribe the scope of this authority – strictly, it relates to proclamation of the gospel – he calls on the community to accept it in arbitrating between their diverging conceptions of the Christian life. Indeed, his very delimitation of the scope of his authority, and his appeal to argument and to his Judaeo-Christian interpretative framework where possible, all reinforce that this authority is not grounded, but can only be accepted. (See, for example, Dunn 2006: 571ff)

It might be noted that such a reading offers an alternative perspective upon the

disjunction discerned by Giorgio Agamben between the messianic elements of Paul's letter to the Romans and its thirteenth chapter, at least as this text has typically been interpreted within the Christian churches. (Agamben 2006: 33) Against the pure messianism that Agamben ascribes to Paul, this chapter appears to call for obedience to social authorities as appointed by God, as long as they do not clash with Christian teaching, some commentators going so far as to suggest that it must (therefore) be a later interpolation. The reflexive structure of subjectivation in Kristof's trilogy suggests, however, that Paul's 'accommodations' to the worldly authorities may belong rather to the reflexive mediation of the 'naivety' of Christian love. No less than religiously, Christian action on a social level gains its stability from both interpreting and being interpreted by the social understanding of the relation of religion and society. More importantly, such a reading allows a two-fold difficulty in Paul's reading (from a contemporary political point of view) to be identified.

First, in the unstable construction of the Christian relation to Judaism and to society, Paul risks collapsing the interpretative circle that he constructs between Jesus Christ and the Judaic tradition and inscribing Christian practice excessively within the latter – not least, he tends toward what are arguably conservative positions on a range of issues such as the place of women within the community and apparently of the Christian within the world. (This collapse might equally occur in the other direction – something, which in fact, took place within the evolution of early Christianity, with 'heretical' interpretations of the novelty of Christ frequently asserting themselves over the Jewish and subsequently-established orthodox framework of Christian interpretation. In either case, the inherent instability of the hermeneutic circle is at issue.) Second, and more problematically, in appealing to an extended form of his apostolic authority, to resolve the tensions in this hermeneutic strategy, Paul acts as Antigone does (according to Žižek's reading in *On Belief*). (Žižek 2001b: 158 n.24) That is, he acts apparently without recourse to the support of a Symbolic order, while in fact appealing to a truer, hidden/as-yet-unrealized order. He assumes the existence of a divine order or ordering, against which instantiations of would-be messianic negations can be judged. If he allows that Christian community might take different forms, he nonetheless supposes that there is at least a dynamic ordering to which such forms conform. And if his authority is circumscribed and his knowledge limited, he suggests that his position as apostle offers the best guide to that order. As such, where messianism inaugurates a time in which order is ruptured, Paul's appeal tends to circumscribe and recuperate that negation of order for the sake of the emergence of another order, rather than opening upon the undetermined spaces of determinate

negation. Hence, where recent political readers have tended to take his messianism to be in opposition to any 'order' of politics, Paul, in fact, tends to resolve the tensions within his messianic conception of act by inscribing the former within the latter. Hence, if Paul situates his act as the first moment of a three-fold reflexivity of act, he tends to do so in a manner at some distance from Kristof. Problematically, for a contemporary politics of the kind pursued by Žižek, he appeals to an order-restoring theological authority to stabilize his interpretative strategy.

Žižek and Pauline Reflexive Subjectivation

If it is conceivable that Paul's messianic act can be subtracted from his specific mode of 'stabilizing' it, it is significant that Žižek's evolving appropriation of this act in the past decade or so, nonetheless, bears a similar structure to Paul's. First, in response to the 'blindness' of the Pauline act, Žižek increasingly seeks to specify its significance in relation to a Hegelian articulation of difference, to the point that he can suggest that he is now pursuing a Hegelian re-reading of Lacan rather than the Lacanian re-reading of Hegel that might have been taken to structure his earlier work. (O'Hagan 2010: unpaginated) In *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, this specification of the Pauline act takes the form of a relatively loose juxtaposition of a conception of act and a conception of difference, each mutually interpreting and thus 'stabilizing' the other. (Žižek 2003: 139ff) Blind Pauline identification with an element of the law of the Symbolic order is contextualized within a world characterized by Hegelian dialectical movement of difference, thus qualifying the undetermined space of negation and adumbrating the effects one can expect from such an act. By *The Parallax View*, arguably under pressure to give the Pauline act of negation even more specific force (and mirroring Paul's difficulty in maintaining the dynamism of the Jewish-Christian interpretative circle), the dynamic interplay of this juxtaposition becomes fixed in an ontology, in which difference is systematized as 'parallax' difference and to act is to preserve parallax against its ideological elision. (Žižek 2006) As critiques of Žižek's identification of act with Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" suggest, the undetermined force of negation risks being all too circumscribed by a predetermined, interpretative system, leading to an act that falls short of the demands of radical political change. (e.g. Critchley 2008: xvi)

If Žižek repeatedly returns to Hegel, often with brilliant new interpretations, he does so because he holds that Hegel's is the only practice of thought which thoroughly

internalizes its self-difference. It is this recognition and internalization within its system of conceptualization of its own failure, which, he argues, saves Hegelian thought from metaphysical calcification. (Žižek 2003: 140) Nevertheless, Žižek's defense of Hegel would appear to mirror the logic of Derrida's messianic hauntology more closely than Žižek would wish, leaving him vulnerable to his own criticism of Derrida: that the latter's notion of messianism without messianicity subtly privileges a pure, divine difference beyond all actual differences. (Žižek 2003: 140) The problem is that insofar as Hegel becomes a horizon of contemporary thought, his articulation of (self-)difference gains a purity (it articulates the truth of difference), which equally risks abstract from the concrete matrix of actual difference. Both Derrida and Žižek depend upon the idea of a thought capable of impossibly internalizing self-difference, while remaining open to otherness. If one follows the logic of Žižek's critique of Derrida, difference surely cannot be formally anticipated even in this minimal manner. Instead, any articulation of self-difference must be radically self-negating. That is, its own internal logic must ultimately push it beyond its conceptual framework: messianism without messianicity, if it is to avoid invoking a theological trace of Otherness, must rupture the very language and concept of messianicity as a problematic limit upon difference; equally, Žižek's Hegelianism must ultimately reveal the limits of Hegel's concept of self-difference. In Deleuzian terms, immanent thought must always "lead somewhere else" if it is to avoid subtle dependence upon a renewed transcendentalism. (Thiele 2008: 35-6) Hence, however creatively he reinterprets Hegel, Žižek's commitment to Hegelianism seems to impose, however minimally, an ontotheological limitation upon difference and thus a framework which secures its meaningfulness.

Žižek thus risks a minimal but (on his own terms) highly significant circumscription of the Pauline act within a Hegelian framework of interpretation – his Hegelian-Pauline interpretative framework mirroring Paul's Jewish-Christian one. (Indeed, an important theme in Žižek's more recent writings concerns the manner in which Hegel subsumes the dialectical Jewish-Christian relation into his dialectics.) More than this, however, the themes of failure of such circumscription and the appeal to authority to compensate for this failure also surface in his work. Most notably, when Žižek goes on, after *The Parallax View*, to analyse Benjaminian 'divine violence' as a kind of pure violence that effects decisive change, he does not integrate this analysis with his Pauline-become-Bartlebyian act, but essentially asserts that Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" must be an act of divine violence. (Žižek 2008a, 180-3) Undoubtedly, Žižek here offers, in part, what Deleuze or Foucault

would term a “problematization” to generate new possibilities of thought rather than a solution to the problem of act. However, this very gesture points to the failure of Žižek’s Hegelian reformulation of Bartleby’s act to interpret and secure the political significance of his immanent ‘blind’ Pauline act. Moreover, insofar as this problem remains unsolved in Žižek’s thought (in general terms, how an immanent act without recourse to any All can be of universal significance), it tends to transform into an equation that must be accepted in a further act of faith (merely a deferral of the problem) or upon some kind of appeal to authority (perhaps the authority of the philosopher himself, or of the philosopher’s body of work, or of a given philosophical tradition). Thus insofar as he remains committed to the possibility of the Pauline act constituting a big Act (and to the idea that the immanent Real reflects the “presymbolic X”, Žižek remains entangled in a minimal form of Paul’s problematic reflexive relation to the messianic act. And if the sheer energy and creativity of his thought ensures its continued practical vitality for political practice, there is a danger that the emergent Hegelian ordering force of the theoretical core of his thought will circumscribe the negating force of the actions it prescribes, offering “diminishing returns” (to borrow Göran Therborn’s phrase) in his quest for a decisive big Act. (Therborn 2008: 170)

Kristof’s Reflexive Ethics

The point, evidenced by Kristof’s trilogy, is not that such a reflexive relation to one’s own act can be avoided. Instead, it suggests that an alternative to the Pauline form of such reflexivity is available – one that exploits the very failure of thought as the means of recognizing the limits of one’s articulation of difference and of the negating force of act and that, in turn, opens one’s thought to what is other than it. Against Paul’s appeal to tradition and authority, Claus/Lucas appeals to ‘nonsensical’ fictions that strive to articulate and effect the *point de capiton* of the new situation whose potential lies hidden in the present. Against Paul’s appeal to the divine Other of messianic negation, Claus/Lucas appeals only to what Michel de Certeau would term the “mundane other”, (Godzich 1986: vii) who may or may not be a locus of significant political difference, but whose otherness draws the actor beyond the subjective locus of his or her failure.

Perhaps, most crucially, for Žižek, Kristof’s trilogy delineates a complex, differentiated space of ‘failing better’. Žižek’s continued commitment, within an immanent economy of thought, to the possibility of the “big Act”, associated with Lacan’s

transcendental conception of the Real in the 1960s, tends to limit the significance of 'failed' acts. Since there has been no fundamental alteration to the Symbolic order, the possibility of act remains essentially the same. Kristof's trilogy – in the spirit of Johnston's extension of the concept of Žižekian act – instead points to the possibility of 'Real change' that fails to constitute a "big Act". (Claus/Lucas arguably brings about Real change even as he fails in his efforts at a big Act that will fundamentally heal his family's traumatized past). Hence, Kristof points to a both-and logic that can value (differently) big Acts and other acts. The latter are failed acts when the big Act is taken as the yardstick, but nonetheless act upon the Real partially and fragmentarily so as to reveal something of the Symbolic-Real limit of our society and to transform it sufficiently so as to modify what future acts are possible. Hence, Kristof allows for a becoming other, that is at minimum a mundane mix of mere change according to the structure of the Symbolic and Real change that however partially and fragmentarily radically refigures elements of the social order. In this context, the big-Act-to-come ceases to function as a minimal negative theological horizon which negates the difference of successive acts and forces what is substantially a repetition of the same. Rather, it is a political possibility and goal pursued within a historical horizon of acts and their 'mundane' effects, which one interrogates via the ongoing subjectivizing reflexive relation to one's acts.

Žižek, in his response to Johnston, has warned of the possible erosion of the notion of "big Act" in making such a move. (Žižek 2009b: unpaginated) However, Kristof's work suggests that reflexivity need not lead to a postmodern deconstruction of act, but can serve as the condition of its naivety. It allows for acknowledgement and negotiation of the ambiguities and complexities of the world and the self, while holding to the 'cold cruelty' of Žižek's ethical stance. (Indeed, it demands the courage of that ethical stance in spite of these ambiguities.) That is to say, it distinguishes between the politics of big Act and its ethical interrogation. The failure of the act before postmodern qualities of the world is, then, not a limit to the possibility of a political act, but rather the very terrain upon which one acts immanently upon the Real, refiguring and interrogating the possibilities of a decisive big Act. Even as it refuses to fetishize the big Act, it opens thought to the (ambiguous) other of an historical world, pushing thought beyond the limits of the subjective, thus supporting the very possibility of unanticipated and uncircumscribed difference and the very possibility of an actual, decisive political act. In this way, Kristof's broader trilogy calls for a radicalization of the ethical stance of the twins Claus and Lucas in *The Notebook* and allows Žižekian thought to confront the minimal theological trace it

assimilates in its turn to Pauline messianism.

Conclusion

The import, for Žižek's work, of these dimensions of Kristof's reflexive ethics can be illustrated concretely in relation to his central question of capitalism and how to act decisively against it. A crucial tension in Žižek's approach concerns the manner in which the very possibility of politics is grounded in granting (albeit not without certain qualifications and nuances) to capital the quasi-transcendental status of the Real. It is this framework which allows Žižek to argue for the possibility of a decisive political act beyond mere (Symbolic) postmodern plays of difference. The difficulty with this approach, however, is that the very condition of politics, then, becomes the limit of politics: how does one act upon a quasi-transcendental capital in ways that do not merely reinscribe it as transcendental? Even when Žižek reframes encounter with the Real in immanent terms, he must still presuppose singular transcendental relation of capital to the Symbolic order, if politics is to remain a distinctive sphere and task. It is only that human beings cannot access this transcendental realm directly. And crucially, as seen in the preceding analysis, the relation between the immanent and transcendental Real can be secured only through the assertion of a further transcendental-theological claim about the nature of (self-)difference, so that, in the move to an immanent conception of the Real, Žižek does not really escape the problem of how politics as act upon the Real, can be conceptualized – thus risking fetishization and mystification of the big Act.

In the first instance, in relation to these tensions, Kristof's elaboration of the reflexivity of ethics suggests that any act, whether it proves to be a big Act or not, is neither simply naïve nor direct. That is, even if their occurrence cannot be anticipated or programmed, acts occur within a complex, ongoing subjectivizing effort to act, make sense of actions, and assess them, in which a multi-level reflexivity is at play. Indeed, acts occur within the context of prior failures, and the attentiveness to the possibilities of act may be intensified by the ethics of failure – via what is revealed about a situation and by the encounter with the limits of one's position and the mundane otherness that exceeds it in failure. Moreover, while Žižek tends to strongly distinguish theory and practice, Kristof's writings – without collapsing these notions into one another – push for a notion of both as moments of an ongoing existential and socio-political practice. That is to say, the dialectic of theory and practice and its successes and failures is crucial to the possibility of act

(against capitalism) and must be integrated within theory, if theory is to adequately grasp the possibility of act. Indeed, Kristof firmly locates uncompromising political action within the ambiguity of the world and the frailties and limits of its agents, restoring to act its fullest historical, existential, socio-political character against any fetishization or mystification of act. Ultimately, she foregrounds the complex, lived reflexive subjectivation within which acts occur and by which agents stand in relation to their acts.

More profoundly, what supports such a reframing of act is that the notion of subjectivizing ethos emerging from Kristof's writings ruptures the relatively strict relation, in Žižek's work, between the possibility of politics and the (ultimate) transcendental of the Real. Although not terminology that she deploys, Kristof effectively demands that we take seriously the radical implications of Lacan's notion of the "not-All." If the capitalist Symbolic order is truly a "not-All", then capital is not unqualifiedly the singular Real of the contemporary situation, even if undoubtedly its dominant Real. Put differently, at least to a limited degree the Real is heterogeneous and fragmented, so that acts upon elements of the Real encountered immanently, which fail to radically transform the Real (and the socio-Symbolic order), can nonetheless significantly alter it and modulate the prevailing situation. And while politics still may be, and ought to be, directed to radical transformation by acting upon the dominant capitalistic Real, such action, even in ultimate failure, can (by also acting on heterogeneous elements of the Real) cause shifts within the prevailing order of things, uncover fault-lines in capitalist ideology, and suggest or make possible new trajectories of future action. In other words, to sum up, Kristof's work allows for a historicization of capital and our acts against it, which need abandon neither the notion of the centrality of capitalism to the structuring of contemporary society, nor the pursuit of radical change as the goal of politics proper, but which escapes from transcendental-theological paradoxes which 'guarantee' the centrality of capitalism and the significance of an act upon it, but hinder the realization of such acts in practice. As such, her reflexive ethics allows for the restoration of a historical-materialist praxis in its fullest sense. And it is perhaps a measure of the success of Žižek's critique of postmodernism that it may be possible, at this point, to give place to the full ambiguities of our historical attempts and failures, as the locus of a thoroughgoing practice of a politics of radical change, without subjecting that project to relativistic deconstruction.

Notes:

1Agota Kristof was born in Hungary, which she left during the revolution of 1956, settling in Switzerland where she still lives and writes.

2Part of the attraction of Kristof's work, for Žižek, is undoubtedly that in its tracing of the recent history of Hungary, it treats of the challenges of ethical action under communism and capitalism alike.

3Žižek has spoken of friendship in similar terms, for example, in the dedication to his book on Deleuze: "To Joan Copjec, with the coldness and cruelty of a true friendship." (Žižek 2001a, v)

4This argument has been made, if somewhat polemically, by McQuillan (2009).

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