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LESS THAN NOTHING IS MORE THAN SOMETHING (PART I)

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It is appropriate that on pages 279-80 of *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* Slavoj Žižek refers to Pierre Bayard's *How to Talk about Books You Haven't Read*. Appropriate because, by the time we get to page 280, there are still some 730 pages to go and it feels like *Less than Nothing* will be a book we will never read, or – the book is so long – by the time we get to the end we will not remember whether we have read it or not, or – such is the size of the book – it is not really a book that can be read or is even meant to be read. And let us not begin to make jokes about a book 1010 pages long being called *Less than Nothing!* (Indeed, in a first Hegelian touch – insofar as for Hegel it is always a matter of the “subject’s position of enunciation having to be included” (553), and everything in the book, again as in Hegel, is a staging of itself – we wonder whether Žižek, given his previous famous admissions that he never saw the end of *Spartacus* before writing about it and did not see any of *Avatar* before writing about it, has actually read Bayard’s book before putting it to such good use here.) And we might put all of this another way, which is to suggest that, such is its length, the fact that we will never get to the end of reading *Less than Nothing* is the strict correlate of the fact that, even from the beginning, we can only ever *re-read* it.

That is, we can only ever re-read the book in the sense that Žižek can only ever re-write it: we read it only as the *failure* to read it, just as – it seems absurd to say this with regard to someone so prolific – Žižek writes it only as the *failure* to write it. Žižek at a certain point in *Less than Nothing* alludes to the well-known lines from Beckett’s

Worstward Ho, “Fail again, fail better” (392). And this is connected with the distinction – implicit in criticisms made of Hegel – between repeating and merely feigning to repeat, between true and false repetition. As Žižek says apropos Hegel, a true repetition passes through a “starting point” (473), in which everything is wiped clean to begin again, as opposed to a false repetition, in which something of the previous order is held back and sought to be preserved. And here we have *in nuce* the essential structure of *Less than Nothing*. For a book so long we undoubtedly do not have the feeling of a long sustained argument or much progressive logical development. Rather, no matter what the apparent topic – and Žižek covers a selection of such old and new subjects there as quantum mechanics, cognitivism, the work of Quentin Meillassoux and Fichte, as well, of course, as including the standard final chapter on politics or the political “consequences” of the previous “abstract” or “philosophical” argument – the “same” thing is being said over and over. How frequently we return to discussions of such things as the dialectical relationship between form and content – at least three times (25-6, 167, 305-7) – necessity and chance – at least four times (106-11, 223-7, 460-71, 658) – and noumenal and phenomenal – at least five times (148-9, 154, 283, 608-9, 740) – along with the new topic “less than nothing” and its relationship to both nothing and something (59-60, 304, 495).¹

But already there is a complex question raised here – again, part of the meaning of the book staging itself, reflecting upon itself, indeed, existing from the beginning as the staging of or reflection upon itself – insofar as we speak of the “division” of the book into chapters, each of which is a repetition of the others. For, we might say, each chapter divides *Less than Nothing* up into the smallest elements of representation, each defined by saying the “same” thing. Žižek in *Less than Nothing* makes the contrast – in undeniably a “self-conscious” or “self-reflexive” way – between idealism and materialism (he is notionally speaking of Hegel). If the idealist always requires more examples, insofar as each example falls short, the materialist always returns to the “same” example, insofar as the example contains too much (364). However, at a number of other points in the book, Žižek also recalls Zeno’s paradox to make the argument that it is not a matter of an infinite division in which we keep on getting smaller and smaller parts, but that at a certain point we reach a smallest part and a nothing, or even a One and what Žižek calls its *teleiosis* or “blurred virtual supplement” (599). And thus we would say that we have this repetition, this reduction to each chapter saying the same thing or corresponding to the same subject, only because something always eludes him, because his argument

always remains in motion or is to be found impossibly between its chapters. As Žižek writes at the very beginning of the book, quoting the great astronomer Galileo Galilee – and this phrase is also meant to stand for something that is undeniably true, even though it cannot be admitted – “Eppur si muove [And yet it moves]” (3).

In fact, there is another book by Bayard that Žižek repeatedly refers to in *Less than Nothing, Plagiarizing from the Future* (555-62). Žižek describes it as thinking through the consequences of how, within the symbolic order, “all will have been” (558), and elaborates it (admittedly, earlier in the book, before speaking of *Plagiarising from the Future*) in terms of Borges’ short text ‘Kafka and His Precursors’, which in a well-known line, borrowed from T.S. Eliot’s earlier ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, describes the way in which with certain authors it is not that they are influenced by those who come before them but that they “create their own precursors” (209). (Of course, the point here would be that today we are able to read Eliot only through Borges’ appropriation of him. We are unable any more to know what Eliot originally meant, for we can read his essay only as though it were written by Borges.) And Bayard’s contention is that in the symbolic order we *do* write knowing that the meaning of what we write will be given to it in the future. We write with a certain freedom – or indifference – knowing that the meaning of what we write will be given to it not by us but by its reader (563-4). Exactly in an analogous manner to *How to Talk about Books You Haven’t Read*, it does not matter what the writer writes, others will make of it what they will. It will always seem in retrospect that this is what the author said – although there is the complex status of what they have said before this occurs – even though in some sense this cannot be thought. (And we will come back to all of this in a moment with the question of Hegel’s “restricted economy” (489), in that this might be to suggest that in a similar way everything is always reconciled in Hegel, that any excess in the present will eventually be redeemed in the future.)

And in Žižek’s own theorising we have exactly the same sense of precipitation, of borrowing or plagiarising from the future, with the assurance that events will later come to confirm or support him. He does not so much describe as *prescribe* the world. It is Hegel’s aphorism “If theory does not fit the facts, then so much the worse for the facts” (461) that he also sees as describing his own practice. That is, in theory – this is what makes it theory or a theory – it is always a question of the master-signifier. It (or the theorist) always says “I will it so” (367). Theory does not gradually accumulate evidence, weigh up arguments and counter-arguments, but produces a sudden shift in which negative is positive, in which what previously counted against

now counts for. In a manner we will return to, theory is what makes “appear”: what it speaks of does not exist before it. On the contrary, part of its function is to isolate or cut out from the surrounding field that which was previously indistinguishable from it. It is exactly in this sense that Rebecca Comay can speak with regard to Hegel of philosophy distinguishing “grey from grey” (322-33) (and this is, therefore, why the worst accusation we can make against a thinker, as Hegel was to allege of Schelling, is that they only see black cows in “a night in which all cows are black”: not that they are wrong, but that they fail to make a difference). And this means that what theory points out or makes visible for the first time is not just another thing amongst others, but that for which all of those others stand in: the very conditions for appearance as such. It is this “transcendental” that theorists try to identify each time: not just something appearing in the phenomenal field, but what allows all things, including itself, to appear. It would be appearance as such or the very “appearance of appearance” (37): Baudrillard’s simulation, Deleuze’s pure difference, Derrida’s *différance*, Lacan’s *objet a*, Boris Groys’ metanoia... After all of these, we notice for the first time what was already there.

And it is in this sense – to return to Bayard – that we might say that theory always plagiarises from the future. Or even that its identification is always precipitous. At a certain point in *Less than Nothing* – of course, because like Borges’ Library of Babel it contains “all that it is given to express” (Borges 115) and even, like the Library, its own refutation (Borges 115) – Žižek alludes to Lacan’s essay from *Écrits*, ‘Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty’ (364). As we know, that essay is Lacan’s celebrated analysis of the game of the three prisoners and the five hats, in which, as opposed to any measured calculation of their respective standing vis-à-vis the others, one prisoner wins only by acting before they know the truth. It is not here, Lacan insists, a matter of the imaginary but rather of the symbolic. His point is that the conclusion to the game ultimately comes about not through any reciprocal recognition of the other on the level of the imaginary, but only through an “assertive” (Lacan 170) acting before this identification on the level of the symbolic, after which imaginary identification will follow. But, in a profound twist, Lacan equally insists that this precipitous identification, in which the one who acts necessarily makes the situation follow or reflect them, in which there is no chance (on the level of either the imaginary or the symbolic) of the strategy going wrong, is always driven by the sense that it is too late, that they must act now or be pre-empted.² (It is exactly in this sense that we do not, *pace* Althusser, simply reproduce ideology, but act before ideology forces us to act, thus bringing ideology about.) And we have exactly this same

uncanny temporality when we read Žižek – and Žižek has when reading Hegel. At once, Žižek points out to us things that we have never noticed, let alone thought about, before, things that in effect do not exist before he points them out; and yet he does this – and this is a much-noted aspect of his work, from his first commentators on – only ever as an attempt to pre-empt and counteract a kind of presumed common sense or assumption; an assumption, of course (this is why it is an assumption), that we never had or knew we had.

In other words, Žižek's thought – for all of the sense that it produces a master-signifier that “keeps different elements together” (661) – is profoundly split, and it produces a split in what it speaks of. For all of its making-over of the world – indeed, it necessarily has something of that “reconciliation” (204) Hegel speaks of in terms of Christ – we can never actually catch it do this. It is always either too soon or too late. It is always either a plagiarising from the future that relies on a form of belief (an essentially – it is true – mistaken belief in or interpellation onto Žižek), or it merely repeats what is obvious, reproduces either itself or the world it previously allowed us to see for the first time. And, on the other hand, for all of the necessary self-positing or auto-poetic aspect of theory (“auto-poetic” a word used to describe the practice of philosophy in Deleuze and Guattari's *What is Philosophy?*) (467), for all of his denial of dialogue, Žižek's work is necessarily antithetical, dialectical, contestational. It is always directed against a pre-existing understanding or expectation – all of Žižek's “But it is against this”, “In a first approach”, “Here in a commonplace reading”. Commentators are always keen to point out Žižek's contradictions and changes of mind – the switch from democracy to anti-democracy, from the Real as something that comes before the symbolic to something that can be seen only within the symbolic to something that exists both before and after the symbolic – but these are a function of, or at least indistinguishable from, a kind of *self-splitting* or *self-dividing*, part of that “diffraction down to the most elementary” (270) that he speaks of in *Less than Nothing* (and we will come to what accompanies this 1 + 1 in a moment).³

And we must understand this literally. What exactly does it mean when Žižek says that materialism as opposed to idealism returns again and again to the same example because it is so “rich” (396)? It is not that it is so empirically rich that there is an excess of content over form. It is just this conception that Žižek rejects on several occasions in *Less than Nothing*, insisting on the contrary that the relationship between form and content, we might say between say between theory and example, needs to be understood dialectically. As he writes, the gap between form and content

has to be reflected back into the content itself, with the result that this content is not-all, that something is repressed or excluded precisely to have this content (602). And we can see this in Žižek's own use of examples. What exactly happens when Žižek returns to the same examples in his work? We would want to say – we could not exactly show or demonstrate this, but would insist that it is true in principle; that Žižek does not always accomplish this, but this is his intention – that each time it is to reveal what was excluded to allow his previous position to be put, what (in the example) was left out to allow the example to become an example. In other words, each time Žižek returns to the same example there is not an overturning based on new evidence, but a kind of splitting, a separation of the “facts” from themselves to make clear that which allowed the facts to be put. This is our undoubted sense that each time Žižek returns to the “same” argument, he pushes, or attempts to push, it a little further, giving it an extra twist. (His entire argument is, of course, in some sense merely an example.) It is what we have when Žižek writes “And now we come to the real point”, “It is here that we notice” and “Against our first reading”. And it is in this manner that we must understand Žižek's self-corrections and apparently unexplained changes of mind. The anti-democracy of *For They Know Not What They Do*, for example, is not a simple reversal of the democracy argued for in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* or even a reconsideration based on recent events in the then-fracturing former Yugoslavia (how philosophically uninteresting!), but precisely what allowed (Žižek now realises in retrospect) the democratic position of *Sublime Object* to be put in the first place.

It is in this sense that we must understand that Zeno-esque search for the constitutive elements of the world in *Less than Nothing*, which we would argue are also those that make up his work. (Again, we would contend that every element in Žižek's work is self-referential, that he does nothing else but speak about his own method. However, the point here is that the extraordinary encyclopaedism of his theory – all of the different things it speaks about, the celebrated opening of the floodgates to include popular culture, dirty jokes, personal revelations, political musings, in short, everything in the world – is possible only because at the same time Žižek is doing nothing else but staging his own activity of theorising.) It appears that each time he returns to his subject, each time he returns to himself, he further divides it, splits it from itself. He keeps on separating the form from the content of the work, in effect seeking that place from where it is spoken, which is also to say its hidden ideological assumption. For Žižek, ideological analysis is the process of dividing what is from itself, not necessarily to reveal its truth or to free us, but simply because this is what

theory does. This division – but, again, it is hard to achieve, not every statement manages it – is what theory does, even to itself. It is, we might say, its *drive*, its drive as opposed to its *desire* (which is, of course, to tell the truth, propose a solution, reconcile the world to itself). Think here of the “progression” from philosophy to anti-philosophy to the current anti-anti-philosophy. Or aesthetics to anti-aesthetics to Badiou’s inaesthetics. Each time theory seeks to propose the “transcendental” conditions of what is; but it is a transcendental that we can see only in this division, insofar as what each division reveals is that each previous transcendental was empirical (and all of this is very close – insofar as all theories are ultimately the same – to that quasi-transcendental or chiasmatic crossing of the empirical and the transcendental that Rodolphe Gasché and Geoffrey Bennington theorise with regard to Derrida). (Gasché 152-63; Bennington 267-84)

And the profound question *Less than Nothing* asks – appropriate insofar as the book is both the summa and in a way the end-point of Žižek’s thinking (paradoxically, we might say that he has never written bigger and never written smaller) – is how long this division performed by theory can continue? How long can we, or better Žižek, carry on thinking? How long can this separating of things from themselves thanks to a new master-signifier persist? When will it reach its end? Will philosophy ever lose its drive? These are all questions, needless to say, put to Hegel, insofar as it was claimed he had brought thinking to an end. And this end can perhaps take two forms, both of which Žižek considers in *Less than Nothing*. (And again, importantly, for all of the challenge this poses to theory – and specifically to Žižek’s own theory – it is never for Žižek a matter of rejecting this model of thought as division, which as he shows goes all the way back to Plato’s *Parmenides*.) The first is the possibility – it is already proposed by Hegel, and is an accusation frequently made of him at the time – that this division is not actually *enacted* but only as it were *performed*, that it is remarked upon from somewhere finally unaffected by it, that it takes place only as allegory and not as fact. That is to say – and this is the ambiguity for Žižek of Hegel’s Absolute Knowledge – if we can know in advance that there is to be a split, a permanent imbalance in our relation to the world, why can this not simply be grasped as such? Of course, as always, this “knowledge” would also be the fetishist denial of it – this uninvolved acceptance, of course, being what the fetish enables – a kind of meta-position that merely comments on the split without being subject to it. And Hegel’s Absolute Knowledge can, indeed, be seen as a kind of taking into account of negativity, even of its own negativity, but without truly being troubled by it (199). (It is something like this false Absolute Knowledge or assumed meta-position that Žižek

accuses Derrida of in *Less than Nothing* and elsewhere: an untouched position outside of what he speaks of, for all of his assertion that this is not the case (127.) This is how Žižek expresses this first “end of thought” in *Less than Nothing*:

[Paraphrasing Marx and Lukács] in reconciliation, the subject recognises itself in the alienated substance (substantial content); that is, it recognises in it the reified product of its own work, and thereby re-appropriates it, transforms it into a transparent medium of its self-expression (260).

But there is a second way in which Žižek thinks the possible end of theory in *Less than Nothing*. It is again to raise the question of what are the basic constituents of the world, that is, of thought. What is the fundamental element below or beneath which we can no longer divide? It is this question that connects all of the apparently disparate materials Žižek takes up in *Less than Nothing*: Plato’s consideration in *Parmenides* of the individual or indivisible that makes up the world or what Lacan calls the “One” (54) in the chapter ‘Vacillating the Semblances’; the philosopher Gilbert Ryle’s solution to Zeno’s famous paradoxes of motion, which involves a “part and nothingness” (599), in the chapter ‘Suture and Pure Difference’; the contemporary ideology of coffee without sugar and coffee without cream and even coffee without coffee (768) in the chapter ‘The Non-All, or the Ontology of Sexual Difference’; Alain Badiou’s notion of “subtraction”, by which he seeks to get down to that essential zero or void for which the count-for-one stands in (811) in the chapter ‘The Foursome of Terror, Anxiety, Courage... and Enthusiasm’; and, finally, the fluctuating “compact particle” (917) that quantum mechanics discovers at the origin of the universe in the chapter ‘The Ontology of Quantum Physics’. And, extra finally, in the chapter ‘The Political Suspension of the Ethical’, after the end, when he has finished thinking, Žižek asks the question, in the context of contemporary capitalism, of whether theory is any more possible, whether a new master-signifier or “purely formal minimal difference” (1007) that divides the world from itself can any longer be proposed in a world in which there is no longer any symbolic authority or, put otherwise, negativity is entirely co-opted or sublated.

But perhaps all of this should be subject to a shift of perspective, and the proper way of looking at theory is not to ask from one end whether we can get down to an indivisible element that can no longer be divided, but from the other end whether we can ever actually grasp that “nothing” of which Žižek speaks, that fundamental “nothing to say” that constitutes theory. However, this attempt to think nothing is complicated by the fact that there are at least three nothings in *Less than Nothing*: a

nothing, a less than nothing and a more than nothing, each tied to the others like the elements in a Hegelian triad or, indeed, a Lacanian Borromean knot. In other words, although we might attempt to separate these “nothings”, they are all connected, and we cannot, for example, have a nothing without a less than nothing and a nothing without a more than nothing. Indeed, in a kind of Kantian infinite judgement, we might say that the ultimate equivalence *Less than Nothing* aims at is that less than nothing is more than nothing, although this equivalence can take place only across a certain nothing and in the form of two nothings. Everything equals nothing – and not one equals one – is perhaps the fundamental formula of the symbolic order, in which everything stands in for or is exchanged through a certain nothing. It is nothing, of course, as Marx well knew through his study of Democritus, that is the true medium of exchange (945). Or, as Žižek puts it in *Less than Nothing*, we come “from nothing through nothing to nothing” (38).

This essay was originally written as a paper for the 2104 International Žižek Studies Conference at the University of Cincinnati, which accounts for its informal and introductory tone. My thanks to Antonio Garcia for inviting me to present at the Conference.

Notes

¹ There is thus something to what Jonathan Rée says in his review of *Less than Nothing*: “[Žižek’s] talent for brief intellectual entertainments does not carry over into longer literary forms – let alone this ‘mega-book’, as he calls it, which goes on considerably longer than *War and Peace*. He does not seem to realise that the purpose of a long book is to build steadily to a culminating revelation, rather than to go on and on until it stops, leaving the argument exactly where it was at the beginning”, ‘*Less than Nothing* by Slavoj Žižek – A Review’, *Guardian*, 27 June 2012. But Rée fails to consider the meaning of this “stuckness” (885), the way it opens up the possibility of the new, indeed, in some ways already *is* the new.

² Lacan writes on this relationship of the symbolic to the imaginary: “The truth of the sophism thus only comes to be verified through its presumption, so to speak, in the assertion it constitutes... Truth thus manifests itself in this form as preceding error and advancing only in the act that engenders its certainty... But to what sort of relation does such a logical form correspond? To a form of objectification engendered by the logical form in its movement – namely, the reference of an ‘I’ to a common measure of the reciprocal subject” (Lacan 173).

³ Žižek is therefore absolutely correct when he describes himself as an “imbecile” (1) in the opening pages of *Less than Nothing*. The imbecile, for Žižek, is that category of intelligence that falls between the “idiot”, who just does not “get it”, and the “moron”, who identifies too much with “common sense” (1). In other words, the imbecile is split between the unilateral (the idiot) and the dialogical (the moron). Their way of thinking involves both the acephalic drive of the idiot, who does not know when to stop, and the timid over-cautiousness of the moron, who can think only in relation to the Other.

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