

Is God Dead, Unconscious, Evil, Impotent, Stupid ... Or Just Counterfactual?

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On Divine Inexistence

The first paradox of the materialist critique of religion is that, sometimes, it is much more subversive to undermine religion from within, accepting its basic premise and then bringing out its unexpected consequences, than to deny outright the existence of god. There is a popular New Age short story about a diehard atheist who, after dying in an unexpected traffic accident, reawakens after death and discovers that, basically, the spiritualist worldview was right: there is god or some higher power (which is indifferent to the plight of the souls), our souls survive our earthly death and dwell in a weird limbo-state where they can communicate with other souls as well as observe life on earth, and so forth. The atheist is extremely displeased by this outcome, his narcissism is deeply wounded—his atheist view was so perfect and convincing, how could he have been so wrong? Gradually, however, after getting over the first shock, he starts to carefully observe his new reality and adapts his

materialism to new conditions: he was basically right, his existence after his death also has its own materiality, he can feel and touch objects, etc., it is just that this materiality is composed of totally different subatomic particles. But then he stumbles upon the true unpleasant surprise: in this new reality, conscious beings do not have sexual organs or orientation, there is friendship and sympathy but no sexuality, no sexual love, and also no ethics and morality except the most basic utilitarian stance of not hurting others too much. Getting desperate, he kills himself, but he is reawakened into the same boring reality, so what to do? Talking to other souls, he discovers that almost all of them are caught in the same despair, and that a kind of weird religion is emerging among them based on obscure rumors that, if you kill yourself in a very specific way, you are not reawakened but. . . There are two schools of thought among undead souls: according to one of them, you really and forever die, disappearing into nothingness, while according to the other school, it is only after this second death that you reach true eternity and blessing.

This story fits perfectly the materialist procedure of the immanent self-undermining of a religious edifice—the claim that god is evil or stupid can be much more unsettling than the claim that there is no god since the first claim destroys the very notion of divinity. Let's take another example, *The Rapture* (1991, written and directed by Michael Tolkin who also wrote the scenario for Altman's *Player*) in which Mimi Rogers superbly plays Sharon, a young LA woman who works during the day as a phone operator endlessly repeating the same questions in a small cubicle among dozens of others, while in the evenings she engages in swinging orgies. (It can even be said that the film is ultimately “about Mimi Rogers’ face. Its transformations, its naked pain, its fearless openness.”)¹ Bored and dissatisfied at leading such an empty life, Sharon becomes a member of a sect which preaches that the end of times and the Rapture are imminent; turning into a passionate believer, she begins to practice a new, pious lifestyle, gets married to Randy, one of her previous swinging partners, and has a daughter Mary with him. Six years later, when Randy, now also a devoted Christian, is shot to death by a madman, this senseless catastrophe makes her and her daughter even more convinced that the Rapture is soon approaching. Sharon believes god told her to go with Mary to a

¹ Sheila O'Malley, “Underrated Movies #16: *The Rapture* (1991),” *The Sheila Variations*, March 30, 2011, <http://www.sheilaomalley.com/?p=7958>.

nearby desert camping place and wait there until the two are taken into heaven where they will be united with Randy. Foster, a well-meaning, nonbelieving patrol officer, takes care of them there during their long wait when they run out of food. Mary gets impatient and proposes to her mother that they simply kill themselves in order to go to heaven and join Randy immediately. After a couple of weeks, Sharon also loses patience, decides to do the unspeakable and follows Mary's advice to stop her suffering; however, after shooting Mary, she is unable to take her own life afterwards, knowing that suicides are not allowed into heaven. She confesses her act to Foster who arrests her and takes her to a local jail.

Till this point, the story moves along "realist" lines, and one one can easily imagine a possible "atheist" ending: bitter and alone, deprived of her faith, Sharon realizes the horror of what she had committed, and is maybe saved by the good policeman. . . Here, however, events take a totally unexpected turn: in the jail cell, Rapture happens, literally, in all naivety, including bad special effects. First, deep in the night, Mary appears with two angels, and then, early in the morning, while Sharon sits in her cell, a loud trumpet blast is heard all around and announces a series of supranatural events—prison bars fall down, etc. Escaping from the jail, Sharon and Foster drive out into the desert, where signs of Rapture multiply, from dust storms up to the horsemen of the apocalypse running after and around the car. The message of god is something like: "Look, man, you read the Bible, you think I didn't mean what I said in it? I *told* you it would be like this, so don't whine about it now. You *knew* what you were getting into. Pay up."² So it is the exact opposite of the common idea that we should not take divine declarations too literally, that we should learn to discern in them their deeper metaphoric meaning. Ordinary people mostly believe at this level: when asked if they really think that two thousand years ago a son of god was walking around Palestine, they would say that while this is of course in all probability not literally true, there is for sure some higher power which softly takes care of us. . . The lesson of *The Rapture* is that this very metaphoric approach, the search for some deeper meaning, is a trap.

Next, Sharon and Foster are both "raptured," transported to a purgatory-like landscape where Mary approaches them from heaven and pleads with Sharon to

² Ibid.

accept god, to declare that she loves god—by just doing this she will be able to join Mary and Randy in heaven. Foster, although till now an atheist, quickly seizes the opportunity, says that he loves god and is allowed entrance to heaven, but Sharon refuses, saying that she cannot declare her love for a god who acted so cruelly towards her family for no reason at all. When Mary asks her if she knows for how long she will be confined to the purgatory, condemned to be there alone, Sharon replies: “Forever.” In short, Sharon realizes that she “wasted her life appeasing someone who is only toying with her feelings; this would be easier to dismiss if we discovered that God did not exist,”³ i.e., that Sharon was just caught into her own delirious imagination. But she persists in renouncing a god who is real and really

A narcissist, giving us life for the sole purpose of demanding unconditional love in return, no matter how much damage his demands have inflicted on human lives. The film posits the theory that God is undeserving of our love even if he does exist, that he is in no way any less fallible to pettiness and power trips than the human beings he created. Like many humans, God lives by a set of rules and laws that he applies arbitrarily at his own moral convenience. Tolkin illustrates this by showing the non-believing cop immediately being accepted into heaven by declaring his love for God in a last ditch effort to be saved. He’s merely saying what God wants to hear to save his own skin.⁴

God obviously doesn’t care if you really mean it when you declare that you love him—as the case of Foster demonstrates, you just have to say it. (On a closer look, we can see that things are here more ambiguous: maybe Foster deserves to be taken into heaven more than Sharon since he demonstrated love and care for his neighbors.) Such an indifferent and narcissistic god is part of the Christian tradition: for Nicolas Malebranche, in the same way that the saintly person uses the suffering of others to bring about his own narcissistic satisfaction in helping those in distress, God also ultimately *loves only himself*, and merely uses man to promulgate his own glory. Malebranche here draws a consequence worthy of Lacan’s reversal of Dostoyevsky (“*If God doesn’t exist, then nothing is permitted*”): it is not true that, if Christ had not come to earth to deliver humanity, everyone would have been lost—quite the contrary, *nobody* would have been lost, i.e., *every* human being had to fall so that Christ could come and deliver *some* of them. Malebranche’s conclusion here is properly perverse: since the death of Christ is a key step in realizing the goal of

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

creation, at no time was God (the Father) happier than when he was observing His son suffering and dying on the Cross.

Sharon's resistance to God, her refusal to declare her love for him, is thus an authentic ethical act. It would be totally wrong to say that she rejects the *false* god and that, in an authentically Christian version of the film, the true Christ should appear at the end, proclaim her a true believer precisely because she refused to declare that she loves the false god. (Along the lines from the New Testament, in which Christ explains that whenever there is love between his followers, he will be there—god should not be loved, he *is* love.) The true temptation to be resisted is thus to declare our love for a god who doesn't deserve it *even if he is real*. For a vulgar materialist, all this cannot but appear as a pseudotopic, an empty mental experiment; however, for a true materialist, it is only in this way that we really renounce god—by way of renouncing him not only insofar as he doesn't really exist, but even if he is real. In short, the true formula of atheism is not “god doesn't exist” but “god not only doesn't exist, he is also stupid, indifferent, and maybe outright evil”—if we do not destroy the very fiction of god from within, it is easy for this fiction to prolong its hold over us in the form of disavowal (“I know there is no god, but he is nonetheless a noble and uplifting illusion”).

For Gnostics, the God of the Old Testament is somewhat of a cosmic clown, neither ultimate nor good (many Gnostic documents invert the meaning of Old Testament stories in order to ridicule him). This lesser evil god, the demiurge of our material world, created the universe in order to keep the mortals in bondage in material matter and prevent the pure spirit souls from ascending back to the one true god after the death of the physical bodies. Deliverance from this entrapment in the material form is attainable only through special knowledge, and Christ was the divine redeemer who descended from the spiritual realm to reveal the knowledge necessary for this redemption. In standard Christianity the problem of Evil is ethical and concerns the pure Spirit itself: Evil is a category of spirit, it designates an egotist spirit which has sinned against the good Creator, turned itself against creation and is focused only on itself; there is nothing immanently evil in the material world, nature in itself can even be beautiful in an innocent way, only the Spirit brings evil into it. In Gnosticism, on the contrary, the problem is one of knowledge, and Evil is the material world as such which keeps the spirit in chains.

From such a perspective, bad guys systematically turn out to be good guys: the snake in paradise who tempts the first couple to eat the apple from the tree of knowledge is interpreted as the agent of wisdom who tries to awaken the couple from their ignorance and slavery to the evil Creator; the doubtful Thomas makes it clear that human knowledge is not a fixed dogma but a continuous process of search; the prostitute Mary Magdalene who reigns in bed stands for the unification of man and god; up to Judas himself who, by “betraying” Jesus, enables him to free himself from the prison of his earthly/bodily existence. This means that the whole view of Crucifixion changes: it is no longer the unbearably painful spectacle of the Son of God paying for our sins but a comedy staged for the ignorant, a spectacle observed by the mocking Christ from above, from a safe distance: “Never have I suffered in any way, nor have I been distressed. And this people has done me no harm.” “I did not die in reality, but in appearance.” Those “in error and blindness. . . saw me; they punished me. It was another, their father, who drank the gall and vinegar; it was not I. They struck me with the reed; it was another, Simon, who bore the cross on his shoulder. I was rejoicing in the height over all. . . . And I was laughing at their ignorance.”

The further consequence of this view of Christ (which we find also in contemporary New Age teaching) is that one has to separate Jesus from the Christ: for Valentinus, for example, Christ, an immaterial spiritual agent, descended on Jesus, a material human person, at his baptism, and left Jesus’s body before his death on the Cross. . . . No wonder that Irenaeus, in his *Against Heresies*, insists that Jesus was, is, and always will be the Christ.

As for the feminist potentials of Gnosticism, it is sufficient to recall the concluding lines from the *Gospel of Thomas*: “Simon Peter said to them, ‘Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life.’ Jesus said, ‘I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.’” Male thus remains the standard, only a woman who makes herself male will be redeemed—these lines effectively sound as an ironic reversal of Paul’s famous claim that, in Christ, there are no Jews and Greeks, no men and women: yes, there are no men and women since the only women allowed in have to be remade into men. . . . The counterfactual notion of god that we should oppose to

Gnosticism is the evil Demiurge, with no other, higher, god at his side—it's simply that our Creator is evil, period.

So what does the idea that god has to die in itself, not just for us, effectively amount to? For decades now, a classic joke has been circulating among Lacanian psychoanalysts: a man who believes himself to be a grain of seed is taken to the mental institution where the doctors do their best to finally convince him that he is not a grain but a man; however, when he is cured (convinced that he is not a grain of seed but a man) and allowed to leave the hospital, he immediately comes back trembling with fright—there is a chicken outside the door and he is afraid that it will eat him. “Dear fellow,” says his doctor, “you know very well that you are not a grain of seed but a man.” “Of course / know that,” replies the patient, “but does the chicken know it?” Therein resides the true stake of psychoanalytic treatment: it is not enough to convince the patient about the unconscious truth of his symptoms, the Unconscious itself must be brought to assume this truth. And does exactly the same not hold for the Marxian commodity fetishism? Here is the very beginning of the famous subdivision 4 of chapter 1 of *Capital*, on “The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret”: “A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.”⁵ These lines should surprise us, since they invert the standard procedure of demystifying a theological myth, of reducing it to its terrestrial base: Marx does not claim, in the usual way of Enlightenment critique, that the critical analysis should demonstrate how what appears a mysterious theological entity emerged out of the “ordinary” real-life process; he claims, on the contrary, that the task of critical analysis is to unearth the “metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” in what appears at first sight just an ordinary object. In other words, when a critical Marxist encounters a bourgeois subject immersed in commodity fetishism, the Marxist’s reproach to him is not “The commodity may seem to you to be a magical object endowed with special powers, but it really is just a reified expression of relations between people.” The Marxist’s actual reproach is, rather, “You may think that the commodity appears to you as a simple embodiment of social relations (that, for example, money is just a kind of voucher entitling you to a part of the social product), but this is not how things really

⁵ Marx, *Capital*, 1:163.

seem to you—in your social reality, by means of your participation in social exchange, you bear witness to the uncanny fact that a commodity really appears to you as a magical object endowed with special powers.” Alenka Zupančič goes here to the end and imagines a brilliant example that refers to God himself:

In the enlightened society of, say, revolutionary terror, a man is put in prison because he believes in God. By various means, but above all by means of an enlightened explanation, he is brought to the knowledge that God does not exist. When he is freed, the man comes running back and explains how scared he is of being punished by God. Of course he knows that God does not exist, but does God know too?⁶

It is in this precise sense that the current era is perhaps less atheist than any prior one: we are all ready to indulge in utter scepticism, cynical distance, exploitation of others “without any illusions,” violations of all ethical constraints, extreme sexual practices, etc. etc.—protected by the silent awareness that the big Other is ignorant about it.

Counterfactuals

This paradox can be perfectly formulated in terms of counterfactuals. Dupuy returns again and again to the distinction between the two types of conditional proposition, counterfactual and indicative: “If Shakespeare did not write *Hamlet*, someone else did it” is an indicative proposition, while “If Shakespeare had not written *Hamlet*, someone else would have done it” is counterfactual. The first one is obviously true since it starts from the fact that *Hamlet* is here, was written, and someone had to write it. The second one is much more problematic since it presupposes that there was a deeper historical tendency/necessity pushing towards a play like *Hamlet*, so even if Shakespeare were not to write it, another writer would have done it.⁷ In this case, we are dealing with a rather crude historical determinism reminding us of what Georgi Plekhanov, in his classic text on the role of individuals in world history, said about Napoleon: there was a deeper historical necessity of the passage from Republic to Empire, so if, owing to some accident, Napoleon were not to have

⁶ Alenka Zupančič, “The ‘Concrete Universal’ and What Comedy Can Tell Us about It,” in *Lacan: The Silent Partners*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso Books, 2006), 173.

⁷ See Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *Economy and the Future*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2014), 24.

become the Emperor, another individual would have played his role. Is exactly the same distinction not at work in how we consider Stalinism? For many, the rise of Stalinism was necessary, so that even without Stalin or in the case of his early accidental death, another leader would have played his role, maybe even Trotsky, his great opponent. For Trotskyites, but also many others like Kotkin, the role of Stalin's contingent person was crucial: no Stalinism without Stalin, i.e., if Stalin were to have disappeared from the historical scene in the early or mid-1920s, things like the forced collectivization and the practice of the "construction of Socialism in one country" would not have taken place.

Was then the rise of Stalinism a simple accident, the actualization of one of the historical possibilities that were laying dormant within the situation after the victory of the October Revolution? Dupuy proposes here a more complex logic, the logic of retroactively transforming an accidental act into the expression of a necessity: "necessity is retrospective: before I act, it was not necessary that I act as I do; once I have acted, *it will always have been true* that I could not have acted otherwise than I did."⁸ Stalin could have died or he could have been deposed, but once he won, his victory retroactively became necessary. It is the same with Julius Caesar crossing the Rubicon: he could have acted otherwise, but once he did it, crossing the Rubicon became his fate, he retroactively became (pre)destined to do it. This properly dialectical relationship between necessity and contingency is radically different from Plekhanov's determinism: the point is not that, if Caesar were not to accomplish the fateful first step from the Republic to the Empire, there would have been another person to serve as the vehicle of this historical necessity—Caesar made a contingent choice which retroactively became necessary. That is to say, we, of course, cannot change the past causally, at the level of facts, we cannot retroactively undo what actually happened, but we can change it counterfactually. In Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, the past is also changed in this way. What Scottie first experiences is the loss of Madeleine, his fatal love; when he recreates Madeleine in Judy and then realizes that the Madeleine he knew already was Judy pretending to be Madeleine, what he discovers is not simply that Judy is a fake (he knew that she is not the true Madeleine, since he recreated a copy of Madeleine out of her), but that, *because she is not a fake—she is Madeleine—Madeleine herself was already a*

⁸ Ibid., 110.

fake. His discovery thus changes the past: he discovers that what he lost (Madeleine) never existed.

Especially today, in our Politically Correct times, a seduction process always involves the risky move of “making a pass”—at this potentially dangerous moment, one exposes oneself, one intrudes into another person’s intimate space. The danger resides in the fact that, if my pass is rejected, it will appear as a Politically Incorrect act of harassment; so there is an obstacle I have to overcome. Here, however, a subtle asymmetry enters: if my pass is accepted, it is not that I have successfully overcome the obstacle—what happens is that, retroactively, I learn that *there never was an obstacle to be overcome*.⁹ —Do we not find a homologous paradox of asymmetrical choice in the Gospel according to John, when Christ says he did not come to judge but to save, rejection of judgment—don’t judge (others) for you will yourself be judged? The text then goes on: “Whoever believes in him is not judged [*ou krinetai*], but whoever does not believe is judged [*kekritai*] already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil” (John 3:18–19 ESV). The temporality is here crucial: there is no present moment of judgment when you are judged—you either are not judged or you have already been judged. What is excluded is to be judged innocent, the same as in Dupuy’s example of seduction: either you fail and the obstacle remains in force (you are rejected as a harrassing intruder) or there was no obstacle—what is excluded is to successfully overcome/force the obstacle. And, incidentally, exactly the same asymmetry is at work in the Hegelian dialectical process: the subject either stumbles upon an insurmountable obstacle or he realizes that there is no obstacle at all, that what appeared to him as an obstacle is the very condition of his success.

⁹ Another case of such asymmetry: in an apparently “irrational” way, economic and financial agents, when confronted with the possibility of a catastrophic outcome, choose to ignore it: “They eliminate it from their calculations, on the ground that it is too horrible to bear close scrutiny. But it is precisely in removing it that they give it a place; in fact, a quite considerable place” (ibid., 86). If the 50/50 alternative is either that our stocks will further grow or that a total collapse of the market will render them worthless, it may appear “rational” to diminish their value for half—but the truly rational strategy is to retain their full price, since, in this way, we win if things turn out OK, and if they turn out bad it doesn’t matter what we did.

There is another, tragic version of changing the past. When we learn that a flight we planned to take but postponed the trip at the last minute (or simply missed the flight) has crashed, killing all passengers, we cannot but experience a dreadful feeling of “My god, if I had taken that flight, I would have died!”. . . Dupuy mentions a wonderful case of his own daughter who took the AF flight 447 from Rio de Janeiro to Paris on May 31, 2009, one day before the plane on the same flight crashed into the Atlantic; after hearing of the crash, his reaction was: “Had she delayed the flight by a day she would have been counted among the victims. . .” Seeking to relieve his anxiety, his daughter told him: “But Dad, if I’d flown the next day the crash wouldn’t have occurred!”¹⁰ However, there is a dark obverse of Dupuy’s case. On September 2, 1998, the Swissair flight 111 from JFK to Geneva crashed into the Atlantic Ocean southwest of Halifax, and all 229 people on board died. The investigation took over four years, and it disclosed that the inflammable material used in the aircraft’s structure allowed a fire to spread beyond the control of the crew, resulting in a loss of control and the crash of the aircraft. After bringing out a series of wrong moves by the pilots and the ground control, a report in the National Geographic Air Crash Investigation series ends by raising the question: if the pilots had avoided all mistakes, what then? The sad answer is: the flight was doomed from the beginning, no correct moves would have made a difference. So it is not that “if the pilots had acted differently, the tragedy would have been avoided”—the counterfactual past possibility is retroactively canceled. This is how past can be changed counterfactually: when we learn that the flight was doomed from the beginning, nothing changes at the level of (past) facts, what changes is just counterfactual possibilities.

The Hegelian repetition which sublates a contingency into universal necessity thereby changes the past (not factually, of course, but in its symbolic status). The French Revolution became a world-historical event with a universal significance only through its repetition in Haiti where the black slaves led a successful rebellion with the goal to establish a free republic like the French one; without this repetition, the French Revolution would have remained a local, idiosyncratic event. The same holds today for the Syriza government in Greece: it will become a universal event only if it triggers a process of its “repetitions,” of similar movements taking over in other

¹⁰ Ibid., 27.

countries; otherwise, it will just remain a local Greek idiosyncrasy. What this means is that, in both cases, a repetition did (or will) retroactively change the event from a particular idiosyncrasy into a universal truth-event.

The past thus retroactively becomes what it was “in itself”: retroactivity is not a simple illusion; the true illusion, the true retroactive projection, is rather the notion of an indifferent “most real” with no opening towards the future. In other words, our point is not that reality is in-itself open/undecidable, and that its closure is a mere retroactive projection. Let us take J. B. Priestley’s *Time and the Conways*, a play from 1937. Its first act is set in the Conway house in 1919 on the night of the birthday of one of the daughters, Kay; act 2 moves to the same night in 1937 and is set in the same room in the house; act 3 then returns to 1919 seconds after act 1 left off. In the first act we meet the Conway family, the atmosphere is one of festivity as the family celebrates the end of the War and look forward to a great future of fame, prosperity, and fulfilled dreams. Act 2 plunges us into the shattered lives of the Conways exactly eighteen years later. Gathering in the same room where they were celebrating in act 1 we see how their lives have failed in different ways. As the act unfolds resentments and tensions explode and the Conways are split apart by misery and grief. Act 3 returns us to the continuation of the same evening of 1919 and owing to the fact that we see how the seeds of the downfall of the Conways were being sown even then, their enthusiasm appears all the more desolate. . . . The past is thus “in itself” pregnant with future and as such undecidable, open—it is only in its future, retroactively, that it becomes the past it “always-already was” (i.e., that, in our example, the fate of the Conways appears as doomed).

The same sad lesson is rendered in Roland Suso Richter’s *The I Inside* (2004, based on Michael Cooney’s play *Point of Death*). Simon Cable, the survivor of a near-fatal car accident, wakes up in a hospital bed with no memory of the last two years. Determined to figure out how and why he got there, he soon discovers that his brother Peter has been killed and that he’s married to a woman named Anna whom he doesn’t recognize and who seems to know more than she’s letting on about Cable’s situation. He’s also haunted by Peter’s girlfriend Claire who claims she’s his lover. As Simon tries to unravel the mystery of his brother’s death, he switches back and forth between the present—2002—and the accident which took place two years earlier. In the last scene, Simon visits Peter who reveals to him the secret: all three

of them (Simon, Peter, and Claire) died in the car accident, and all we have seen till now, the dying Simon's confused visions, were actually his desperate attempts to avoid accepting the unavoidable fact that he is dead. We then jump to the scene of the accident and see how doctors who were trying to reanimate Simon finally decide to cut short their endeavor—a sign that Simon finally accepted his death. With this final revelation, all different versions of what went on which form the bulk of the film are denounced as counterfactual possibilities and are thus retroactively canceled.

Retroactivity, Omnipotence, and Impotence

Predestination (2014, based on Robert Heinlein's short story "All You Zombies," written and directed by Michael and Peter Spierig) explores the paradox of time travel: the story's tragic hero is gradually revealed to be a self-created entity trapped within a closed loop in time; his three main embodiments are a nameless temporal agent (played by Ethan Hawke) whose mission is to stop crimes before they happen, Jane (an androgynous writer known as "The Unmarried Mother"), and the Fizzle Bomber (who explodes bombs which kill thousands to prevent even greater catastrophes); plus there is Mr. Robertson, the Temporal Bureau's mysterious boss.¹¹ This story instantiates the so-called predestination paradox, in which a time traveler (entity, object, or information) exists within a closed loop in time where the chain of cause-effect events runs in a continuously repeating circular pattern: in the guise of John, the temporal agent is the cause of his own birth and has to travel back in time and have sex with himself (as Jane) from the past, giving birth to a child who travels back in time and grows up to become them. This loop is closed in the same way in which the Oedipus story and the story about the "appointment in Samarra" are closed: any attempt by the time traveler to change events in the past would subsequently result in that person playing a role in creating the event they are trying to prevent, not changing it. Events are thus predestined to happen the same way over and over again: John wants to save Jane from all the heartache caused by her mysterious lover, only for John to fall in love with Jane and cause the same situation he tried to prevent. John's very future depends upon him traveling back to the past, ensuring he gets his younger female self, Jane, pregnant, and then (as temporal

¹¹ In my description of the film, I rely heavily on "*Predestination* (2014) Explained," *Astronomy Trek*, <http://www.astronomytrek.com/predestination-2014-explained/>.

agent) stealing her child, travelling with her back to 1945 and dropping her off at an orphanage where she will grow up to become them. She is forced to repeat the process over and over again inside an endless loop, or else cease to exist.

Therefore, Jane, John, the temporal agent, and the Fizzle Bomber all turn out to be the same person caught inside a closed time loop, with temporal agent becoming the Fizzle Bomber after his decommission in the 1970s.

It is not clear, at the end of the movie, if the time loop continues or whether Hawke manages to break the loop and split it into alternative timelines (as in the many-worlds theory of the collapse of quantum oscillations)—both versions can be supported. On the one hand a predestination paradox states that if time travel were possible, it would be impossible to change the past, and any attempt to do so would become the precipitating event for the change we are trying to make (imagine a time traveler going back in time to save a friend from being hit by a car, only to discover he is the man driving the car that killed his friend). (The reverse also holds: the event can happen only if we try to avoid it—only in this way does Oedipus kill his father or the servant meet Death.) The Bomber in the film sharpens this paradox: he commits crimes (explosions triggered by him kill people, to prevent greater crimes), and ends up doing what he is trying to prevent, like Pétainists in France who were arresting Jews and delivering them to Nazis to prevent Nazis doing this more brutally, and at the end doing all the job for them. (Or like the obsessive subject who never directly performs sex as such but just engages in sex to train himself for the real sex; or like writers who write endless preparatory versions of a story, never the story itself. The shocking discovery to be made is that this preparatory activity—sex, writing—is already the thing itself. Perhaps, we, humans, cannot ever do directly the thing itself.) The film ends with this paradox: the temporal agent confronts the Bomber, his future self, and kills him to prevent him killing thousands; however, as the Bomber warns him, in this way the agent just makes it certain that he will become the Bomber—the only way to really cut the loop would have been for the agent to let the Bomber live, become friendly with him, and convince him of the futility of his murderous acts. So already at a purely formal level, in killing the Bomber, the agent obeys the latter's logic—he kills in order to prevent a greater killing.

The extreme version of the temporal loop is the craziest theory in atomic physics: according to it, our entire universe consists of only one atom which travels

back in time infinitely, encountering and interacting with itself in its previous versions. On the other hand, the many-worlds theory would claim that every time we travel back in time and actually manage to change events, we are only ever managing to create a new, alternate timeline. So how are we to choose between these two options? The first thing to do is to note how sexual difference overdetermines the opposition between temporal loop and linear time: the loop is feminine and the linear time masculine. This is why, if one takes a closer look at the story line of *Predestination*, it immediately becomes clear that the focal point of the story, the agent of the series of metamorphoses, is not the temporal agent but Jane. Jane is extraordinary, a strong, ultraintelligent hermaphrodite, and her change of sex from female to male after she gives birth is a real transformation in real linear time. It is thus Jane who will keep impregnating herself and then stealing her own baby and sending it back in time to become her forever. After she becomes a man she will get her face blown off; then, with her face repaired, she will look like the temporal agent (Hawke) and eventually go crazy from time traveling too much and become the bomber.

One should nonetheless note that this maternal loop is not complete, wholly self-enclosed—Mr. Robertson, the mysterious Boss of the Temporal Bureau, is external to it, he is not just another version of the same person. The Boss stands for science, for the invention of time travel in 1981, which only rendered possible Jane's self-impregnating circular movement. But is then the temporal loop really eternal, without beginning and end? Is it not that, in our linear time, Jane couldn't have been sent back before 1981 when time travel was invented, so she had to exist in 1981 in order to be sent back? But what if even in her existence before 1981 she was sent there from the future? What one should bear in mind is that if the temporal loop is broken it is retroactively undone, i.e., *it was never operative*. (Such a temporal causality loop exists separate from ordinary space-time: while time repeats itself within the closed loop, for those people outside the loop time continues in a normal, linear manner. This does not mean that linear time is the only reality, and that temporal loops are just imagined circles which don't exist in "actual" reality: the continuous flow of actual reality itself is an illusion since it can sustain itself only through temporal loops.)

Since, however, there is no time travel in our world, we should raise a simple question: is there a phenomenon in our reality which echoes the temporal loop? A phenomenon which allows us, in some qualified sense, to change the past, a phenomenon whose basic principle is that of retroactivity? The answer is no surprise: the symbolic order which has no outside (once we dwell within it) since it always presupposes itself. (One should add the Hegelian Spirit which is the result of itself, of its own activity.) Recall the structuralist idea that one cannot think the genesis of the symbolic (order)—one should note here, as a curiosity, that in 1866, the Société linguistique de Paris formally prohibited to its members any research into the origins of language, claiming that it exceeds the cognitive capacities of men: “The society will not admit any communication which concerns the origins of language.”¹² The symbolic order is, once it is here, always-already here, one cannot step outside it, all one can do is to tell myths about its genesis (which Lacan engages in occasionally). Recall the wonderful title of Alexei Yurchak’s book about the last Soviet generation: *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*—the point we are looking for is its exact inversion of this rupture: nothing of it (the symbolic order) was here, until all of it was all of a sudden *always-already* here. The problem here is the emergence of a self-relating “closed” system which has no outside: it cannot be explained from outside because its constitutive act is self-relating, that is, the system fully emerges once it starts to cause itself, to posit its presuppositions in a closed loop. So it’s not just that the symbolic order is all of a sudden fully here—there was nothing, and a moment later it is all here—but that there is nothing and then, all of a sudden, it is as if the symbolic order was *always already here*, as if there was never a time without it. Language has no externality because there is no metalanguage: we cannot step outside of language and draw a line of separation between language and reality external to it since our approach to reality is always-already mediated through language, this self-relating totality. But the other side of this circularity of the symbolic order, of the fact that it has no outside, is that reality is totally indifferent towards it, unaffected by it, with no relation towards it. Magic is precisely the illusion of words directly affecting things—it is only with science that language touches the real: scientific inventions enable us to generate new entities that previously did not exist in reality. Therein resides the monstrosity of science: it

¹² Quoted from Étienne Klein, *Discours sur l’origine de l’univers* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010), 157.

enables us to construct new “unnatural” (inhuman) objects which cannot but appear to our experience as freaks of nature (gadgets, genetically modified organisms, cyborgs, etc.). The power of human culture is not only to build an autonomous symbolic universe beyond what we experience as nature, but to produce new, “unnatural” natural objects which materialize human knowledge. We not only “symbolize nature,” we as it were denaturalize it from within. Such moments when “the word becomes flesh” are truly terrifying.

How far does the power of retroactivity reach? In his essay on the Ratman case (“Notes upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis,” 1909), Freud describes a wonderful compulsive act of his patient:

One day, when he was out with her [his lady] in a boat and there was a stiff breeze blowing, he was obliged to make her put on his cap, because a command had been formulated in his mind that *nothing must happen to her*. This was a kind of obsession for protecting, and it bore other fruit besides this. . . . On the day of her departure he knocked his foot against a stone lying in the road, because the idea struck him that her carriage would be driving along the same road in a few hours’ time and might come to grief against this stone. But a few minutes later it occurred to him that this was absurd, and he was obliged to go back and replace the stone in the original position in the middle of the road.¹³

When he “spontaneously” kicked the stone to the middle of the road, Ratman thereby articulated his aggressivity towards the lady. The reason he immediately afterwards returns the stone to its previous place is not simply the insight into the exaggerated, absurd even, nature of his fear, but a deeper suspicion that his kicking the stone displays his aggressivity towards the lady; so he puts the stone back to erase the trace of his desire. In short, we can understand Ratman’s meaningless double gesture only if we include the level of desire: the point of putting back the stone is to “correct” a disturbance in reality into which his desire inscribed itself. And, as is always the case with obsessional rituals, this erasure spectacularly fails: after it occurred to Ratman that his fear that his lady might come to grief against this stone is absurd, *why did he feel obliged to go back and replace it to the original position?* Why didn’t he simply leave the stone where it landed when he kicked it, off the road, and just laugh at the absurdity of his act? Isn’t this compulsion to put the stone back

¹³ *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Vintage Books, 1999), 10:189–90.

to its original position a proof of the libidinal investment in it, a monument to Ratman's desire to hurt his lady? In short, isn't his act of putting the stone back, i.e., his effort to erase the traces of his desire, the only proof of this desire?

This mechanism of undoing is characteristic of obsessional neurosis, along with isolation. It involves a process of "negative magic" that tends to undo what has been done: when an action is undone by a second action, it is as if neither had occurred, whereas in reality both have taken place. In "Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety" (1926), Freud points out the difference between undoing and repression: repression merely obfuscates a traumatic event which remains there, while the obsessive ceremony strives not only to prevent the appearance of a traumatic event but to undo it, which is "irrational" and magical. How does this obsessive undoing relate to so-called empty gestures, offers which are rejected, proclaimed superfluous, but which precisely as such fulfill their function?

Recall the paradox of the process of apologizing: if I hurt someone with a rude remark, the proper thing for me to do is to offer him a sincere apology, and the proper thing for him to do is to say something like "Thanks, I appreciate it, but I wasn't offended, I knew you didn't mean it, so you really owe me no apology!" The point is, of course, that although the final result is that no apology is needed, one has to go through the entire process of offering it: "you owe me no apology" can only be said after I *do* offer an apology, so that, although, formally, "nothing happens," the offer of apology is proclaimed unnecessary, there is a gain at the end of the process (perhaps, even, the friendship is saved)—an apology succeeds precisely through being proclaimed superfluous. Similarly, when, after being engaged in a fierce competition for a job promotion with my closest friend, I win, the proper thing to do is to offer to retract, so that he will get the promotion, and the proper thing for him to do is to reject my offer—this way, perhaps, our friendship can be saved. What we have here is symbolic exchange at its purest: a gesture made to be rejected. The magic of symbolic exchange is that, although at the end we are where we were at the beginning, there is a distinct gain for both parties in their pact of solidarity. This paradox is brought to a climax in a scene from the English working class drama *Brassed Off* in which the hero accompanies home a pretty young woman who, at the entrance to her flat, asks him: "Would you like to come in for a coffee?" To his answer—"There is a problem—I don't drink coffee"—she retorts with a smile: "No

problem—I don't have any. . .” The immense, direct erotic power of her reply resides in how, through a double negation, she articulates an embarrassingly direct sexual invitation without ever mentioning sex: when she first invites the guy in for a coffee and then admits she has no coffee, she does not cancel her invitation, she just makes it clear that the first invitation for a coffee was a stand-in (or pretext), indifferent in itself, for the invitation to sex.

Although there is a purely formal similarity between these cases of “offers meant to be rejected” and the obsessional undoing of the past (in both cases, the first gesture is undone or rejected, so that the final result is zero), there is a basic difference between the two series. In the first series the past is not undone, the whole procedure—making the offer and rejecting it—is fully admitted since it “makes sense,” the sense of asserting basic benevolence of both partners, while in the case of obsessional undoing, there is a magic component at work, the second gesture tries literally to undo the first one, to bring things back to the state prior to it. We are thereby in the midst of a theological problematic: how far does divine omnipotence reach? Can god not only perform miracles in the present but also undo factual past, can he make it that what effectively happened in the past never happened? In his Seminar X, on anxiety (1962–63), Lacan tackles this topic by way of providing one of the clearest definitions of what atheism means from the psychoanalytic standpoint; he begins with

A question which was raised in what I could call the heated circles of analysis, the ones in which there still lives the movement of a primary inspiration, namely whether the analyst ought or ought not to be an atheist and if the subject, at the end of analysis, can consider his analysis terminated if he still believes in God. . . . Whatever an obsessional testifies to you in his remarks, if he has not been routed out of his obsessional structure, you can be quite persuaded that qua obsessional he still believes in God, I mean that he believes in the God that everybody or almost everybody in our cultural arena, in the God that everybody believes in without believing in him, namely this universal eye that is brought to bear on all our actions. . . . Such is the veritable dimension of atheism: the one which is supposed to have succeeded in eliminating the phantasy of the Omnipotent. . . . The existence therefore of the atheist in the true sense can only be conceived of in effect at the limit of an ascesis, which indeed, as it appears to us, can only be a psychoanalytic

asceticism, I mean the asceticism of an atheism conceived of as a negation of this dimension of presence, at the basis of the world of omnipotence.¹⁴

The “eliminating the phantasy of the Omnipotent” is what will become, a year later (in Seminar XI), “traversing the fantasy”; how? It is not enough to simply assume that there is no omnipotent/omnivoyant Other? The inner link between omnipotence and impotence is a much more twisted one: the specter of omnipotence arises out of the very experience of impotence, and this paradoxical reversal of omnipotence in impotence is what characterizes the phallic signifier, the instrument of potency, of vitality, and simultaneously the signifier of castration, which is why the phallus

Never appears except as lack, and this is its link with anxiety. And all of this means that the phallus is called on to function as an instrument of potency. Now potency, I mean what we are speaking about when we speak about potency, when we speak about it in a fashion which vacillates about what is involved—for it is always to omnipotence that we refer ourselves; now that is not what is involved, omnipotence is already the slippage, the evasion with respect to this point at which all potency fails—one does not demand potency to be everywhere, one demands it to be where it is present. It is precisely because it fails where it is expected that we begin to foment omnipotence. In other words: the phallus is present, it is present everywhere where it is not up to it.¹⁵

In short, the specter of omnipotence arises when we stumble upon the limitation of the Other’s potency: *toute-puissance* (omnipotence) is *toute-en-puissance* (all-in-potentiality), the actualization of its power/potency is always constrained:

Omnipotency is for Lacan not a kind of maximum, apex, or even infinitization of potency—to what one often reduces it in order to deny its actual existence—but a beyond of potency which only appears in the latter’s failure. It does not appear on the slope of impotence but on the slope of what remains “all in potency,” without ever passing over into the dimension of an act which belongs to the domain of some determinate potency/power.¹⁶

In every field of normativity there is a blind spot of facticity, a point at which the opposition of factuality and normativity breaks down and factuality pops up in the

¹⁴ *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X: Anxiety*, seminar 23 (June 19, 1963), trans. Cormac Gallagher, quoted from http://www.valas.fr/IMG/pdf/THE-SEMINAR-OF-JACQUES-LACAN-X_1_angoisse.pdf.

¹⁵ Lacan, *Seminar X: Anxiety*, seminar 21 (June 5, 1963), quoted from http://www.valas.fr/IMG/pdf/THE-SEMINAR-OF-JACQUES-LACAN-X_1_angoisse.pdf.

¹⁶ Guy Le Gaufey, *Une archéologie de la toute-puissance* (Paris: Epel, 2014), 20.

midst of a normative order (even in Kantian ethics, this facticity arises in the guise of what Kant calls the inexplicable “fact of reason”). In theology, this blind spot appears as the abyss of the divine omnipotent will which is not bound by any laws, not even the (natural and moral) laws he himself imposed on the created world; in psychoanalysis, it appears in the guise of the capricious “primordial (pre-Oedipal) mother” to whose whims the small child is exposed without any protective screen of laws; in the legal social order, it is the capriciousness of sovereign power noted, among others, by Jean Bodin, who wrote that “the sovereign prince cannot bind himself, even if he wishes. For this reason edicts and ordinances conclude with the formula ‘for such is our good pleasure,’ thus intimating that the laws of a sovereign prince, even when founded on truth and right reason, proceed simply from his own free will.”¹⁷ Every legal power, no matter how “democratic” it appears, no matter how much it is constrained by laws and regulations, has to be sustained by an underground echo of “But ultimately, they can do whatever they want with us!”—without this echo, power simply loses its authority. Does the same not hold for the divine Predestination? God’s decision to save some of us and to condemn others for eternity is not “founded on truth and right reason” (how could it be when we were not even created when this decision was made?), it was made simply *for such was His good pleasure*. . . Such experience of omnipotence is rooted in the small child’s dependency on his/her mother, the first love object which has the inexplicable power of arbitrarily providing or withdrawing pleasure and objects which satisfy the child’s needs. Insofar as the child cannot guess why mother decided to do this and not that when his very survival depends on such impenetrable decisions, s/he cannot but experience her as an omnipotent agent. In the same way, the protestant God of Predetermination is an agent of pure caprice, with his omnipotence the mode of appearance of the fact that he himself doesn’t know what he is doing. Already towards the end of his Seminar V, Formations of the Unconscious, which was delivered five years earlier (1957–58), Lacan outlined the contours of this link between omnipotence and impotence, describing how such a total dependency on the omnipotent mother which cannot but cause anxiety is overcome when the child notices that this omnipotent (M)Other is itself “symbolized,” subordinated to an “Other of the Other,” that it itself obeys a Law:

¹⁷ Jean Bodin, *Six Books of the Commonwealth*, ed. M. J. Tooley (Oxford: Blackwell, 1955), bk. 1, chap. 8, quoted from http://www.constitution.org/bodin/bodin_1.htm.

No mental life could be organized, which corresponds to what we are given in experience, to what experience articulates in analysis, if there is not a beyond of this Other primordially placed in the position of omnipotence. . . with the ambiguity of promise and of refusal that is contained in this term. That there is I might say, the Other of this Other, namely what permits this other locus of the word, which the subject perceives it as itself symbolised, namely that there is this Other of the Other.¹⁸

For those who know Lacan it is impossible to miss the irony of the last sentence: the “Other of the Other” designates exactly what later becomes “there is no Other of the Other.” In both cases, the point is that the Other is in itself “castrated,” incomplete, thwarted, far from a perfectly organized symbolic network or machine:

Only the Other is not that. It is precisely not purely and simply the locus which is this something perfectly organised, fixed, rigid. It is an Other which is itself symbolised. This is what gives it its appearance of liberty. It is a fact that it is symbolised, and that what happens at this level of the Other of the Other, namely of the father in this instance, of the locus where the law is articulated from the point of the perspective of the one who depends on an Other; this Other is itself subjected to signifying articulation, more than subjected to signifying articulation, marked by something which is the denaturing effect—let us strongly underline it—of our thinking, of this presence of the signifier. . . of this effect of the signifier on the Other as such, of this mark of it that it was subjected to at this level. It is this mark that represents castration as such.¹⁹

Is Lacan’s target here not his own elevation of the Symbolic into a perfect machine which regulates the entire space of subjective experience, the elevation which provides the tonality of the Seminars II and III? Exemplary here is the true hymn to structural overdetermination from the beginning of his “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’” which opens his *Écrits*:

I am, of course, aware of the importance of imaginary impregnations in the partializations of the symbolic alternative that give the signifying chain its appearance. Nevertheless, I posit that it is the law specific to this chain which governs the psychoanalytic effects that are determinant for the subject—effects such as foreclosure (*Verwerfung*), repression (*Verdraengung*), and negation (*Verneinung*) itself—and I add with the appropriate emphasis that these effects follow the displacement (*Entstellung*) of the signifier so faithfully

¹⁸ *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book V: The Formations of the Unconscious*, trans. Cormac Gallagher, seminar 26 (June 18, 1958), quoted from http://www.valas.fr/IMG/pdf/THE-SEMINAR-OF-JACQUES-LACAN-V_formation_de_1_in.pdf.

¹⁹ Ibid.

that imaginary factors, despite their inertia, figure only as shadows and reflections therein.²⁰

Le Gaufey's formula is "*la toute-puissance sans tout-puissant*":²¹ omnipotency is a fact of the symbolic universe in which we can retroactively change the past, and the proper atheist/materialist position is not to deny omnipotence but to assert it without an agent that sustains it (God or another omnipotent Entity)—but is this enough? Do we not have to take a further step and assert the thwarted (inconsistent, constrained) character of the big Other qua depersonalized structure? And it is precisely this inconsistency/limitation of the big Other that resubjectivizes it in the sense of raising the question: "But what does the Other want?" And, of course, in a Hegelian way, this enigma of the Other's desire is an enigma for the Other itself. Only at this level do we reach "symbolic castration" which does not stand for the subject's "castration," for his/her being at the mercy of the big Other, for his/her depending on its whims, but for the "castration" of this Other itself. The barred Other is thus not just the depersonalized Other but also the bar which cracks this depersonalized Other itself.²²

The Twelfth Camel as One of the Names of God

Does the same counterfactual logic not sustain the famous joke from Lubitsch's *Ninotchka*: "Waiter! Get me a cup of coffee without cream! 'I'm sorry, sir, we have no cream, only milk, so can it be a coffee without milk?'"? At the factual level, coffee remains the same coffee, but what we can change is to make the coffee without cream into a coffee without milk—or, more simply even, to add the implied negation and to make the plain coffee into a coffee without milk, as in Robert Schumann's *Humoreske* with its famous "inner voice" (*innere Stimme*) added by Schumann (in the written score) as a third line between the two piano lines, higher and lower: as the vocal melodic line which remains a nonvocalized "inner voice" (which exists only as *Augenmusik*, music for the eyes only, in the guise of written notes). This absent melody is to be reconstructed on the basis of the fact that the first and third levels (the right- and the left-hand piano lines) do not relate to each other directly; that is,

²⁰ Lacan, *Écrits*, 11.

²¹ Le Gaufey, *Une archéologie*, 111.

²² For a more detailed account of symbolic castration, see Chapter VII in the present book.

their relationship is not that of an immediate mirroring: in order to account for their interconnection, one is thus compelled to (re)construct a third, “virtual” intermediate level (melodic line) which, for structural reasons, cannot be played. Schumann takes this use of the absent melody to an apparently absurd level of self-reference when, later in the same fragment of *Humoreske*, he repeats the same two actually played melodic lines, yet this time the score contains no third absent melodic line, no inner voice—so that what is absent here is the absent melody, absence itself. How are we to play these notes when, at the level of what is actually to be played, they repeat the previous notes exactly? The actually played notes are deprived only of what is not there, of their constitutive lack. Consequently, when we suspend the symbolic efficiency of the inexistent “third melody,” we do not simply return to the explicit line; what we get is a double negation—in terms of the Lubitsch joke, we do not get straight coffee, but a no-no-milk coffee; in terms of Schumann’s piece, we do not get a straight melody, but a melody which lacks the lack itself, in which the lacking “third line” is itself lacking. We thus pass from the counterfactual statement “If we were to have cream (but we do not have it) I would have served you coffee without cream” to the factual statement “If you ask for coffee without milk (but you did not) I can serve it to you.”

This is how we can change the counterfactual past: the same plain coffee changes from “without cream” to “without milk,” and the “without” functions here in the precise mode of what Hegel calls “determinate negation”: it concerns what is negated in “plain coffee,” cream or milk. The political implications are far-reaching here: “determinate negation” in a political process means that it is not enough to directly assert universality against particular identity—the specific path to universality matters: *which* particularity is negated in a new universality? If, in a conflict between universality of human rights and black identity, the universality is directly the white liberal one, then blacks are called to join it, to sacrifice part of themselves. The white-liberal universality is therefore falsely universal, which is why universality had to proceed as growing out of the Black Power process. The paradox is thus that the overcoming of black identity politics has to proceed as a double negation: yes, one should negate exclusive black particularity, but one should simultaneously negate the hegemonic white universality which secretly privileges whites. Say, in France today, the true representative of *égalité/liberté* is not a pure Frenchman, a

Frenchman *sans phrase*, advocating universal citizenship and exerting pressure on African immigrants to abandon their local customs and integrate themselves into the French way of life, but precisely those immigrants who want to be part of French society as equals and reject anti-immigrant populists—they are literally more French than Frenchmen themselves. —What this means at a more general level is that the missed opportunities of our life, what we failed to do, are part of the identity of our life: to “know myself” is not only knowing about what I did, it includes what I failed to do. Commenting on Randall Jarrell’s line “The ways we miss our lives are life,” Adam Phillips said:

What’s painful about it? It could be extremely comforting, couldn’t it? It could be a way of saying, Actually, that’s what life is, it’s the lives you don’t have. As if to say, Don’t worry, because that’s what a life is. Or just that missing all our supposed other lives is something modern people are keen to do. We are just addicted to alternatives, fascinated by what we can never do. As if we all had the wrong parents, or the wrong bodies, or the wrong luck.²³

Maybe we should redefine a “rich life” along these lines: it is not the life I actually live but my actual life together with all alternate lives that I miss while I live this one life, it’s the panoply of all possible lives which defines my situation. Vladimir Sharov’s novel *Before and During* deploys crazy variations on the Russian history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: Leo Tolstoy’s twin brother is eaten by the writer in his mother’s womb and is then reborn as Leo’s son; a self-replicating Madame de Staël becomes the lover of the philosopher-hermit Nikolai Fyodorov, who claims the task of humanity is physical resurrection; and so on. Sharov is totally justified in emphasizing that we are not dealing here with alternate histories but with additional layers of the actual history itself: “I write the entirely real history of thoughts, intentions and beliefs. This is the country that existed. This is our own madness, our own absurd.”²⁴

A person’s actual life is thus a kind of two-dimensional surface on which the three-dimensional multiplicity of what might have happened to him/her is superposed over his/her actuality. In a similar vein, relying on the Kaballah notion of created reality as a “broken vessel” that needs to be put together by believers, Walter

²³ Phillips, “Art of Nonfiction No. 7,” 46.

²⁴ Vladimir Sharov, *Before and During*, trans. Oliver Ready (Sawtry: Dedalus Books, 2014), 5.

Benjamin, in his early essay “The Task of the Translator,” used it to discern the inner working of the process of translation:

Just as fragments of a vessel, in order to be articulated together, must follow one another in the smallest detail but need not resemble one another, so, instead of making itself similar to the meaning of the original, the translation must rather, lovingly and in detail, in its own language, form itself according to the way of signifying [*Art des Meinens*] of the original, to make both recognizable as the broken parts of a greater language, just as fragments are the broken parts of a vessel.²⁵

The movement described here by Benjamin is a kind of transposition of metaphor into metonymy: instead of conceiving translation as a metaphoric substitute of the original, as something that should render as faithfully as possible the meaning of the original, both original and its translation are posited as belonging to the same level, parts of the same field (in the same way that Claude Lévi-Strauss claimed that the main interpretations of the Oedipus myth are themselves new versions of the myth). The gap that, in the traditional view, separates the original from its (always imperfect) translation is thus transposed back into the original itself: the original itself is already the fragment of a broken vessel, so that the goal of the translation is not to achieve fidelity to the original but to supplement the original, to treat the original as a broken fragment of the “broken vessel” and to produce another fragment which will not imitate the original but will fit it as one fragment of a broken Whole may fit another. What this means is that a good translation destroys the myth of the original’s organic Wholeness, it renders this Wholeness visible as a fake. One can even say that, far from being an attempt to restore the broken vessel, translation is the very act of breaking: once the translation sets in, the original organic vessel appears as a fragment that has to be supplemented—breaking the vessel *is* its opening to its restoration.

In the domain of telling stories, a gesture homologous to translation would have been a change in the plot of the original narrative which makes us think “it is only now that we really understand what the story is about.” Zachary Mason’s *The*

²⁵ Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” in *Illuminations* (London: Collins, 1973), 69–82.

*Lost Books of the Odyssey*²⁶ contains a series of variations on Homer's "official" story presented as fragments from the (recently discovered) vast chaotic mess of legends out of which Homer cut out and refashioned his epic poem: Odysseus returns home to Ithaca and finds that, following the ancient custom, Penelope married another man who is a good king; Polyphemus really was a quiet farmer who found Odysseus and his men in his cave, stuffing their faces with his provisions; the old Odysseus visits again the ruins of Troy and finds it has become a market town, where there are vendors and actors working the crowd, "aping famous Greeks and Trojans"; and so forth. These (imagined) variations should not be read as distortions of some lost primordial original, but as fragments of a totality which would have consisted in the matrix of all possible (in the sense in which Lévi-Strauss claims that interpretations of the Oedipus myth, including that of Freud, are part of the myth). Should we then endeavor to reconstruct the full matrix? What we should do is rather to locate the traumatic point, the antagonism, which remains untold and around which all variations and fragments circulate.

Raymond Khoury's *The Templar Salvation* (2010) presents an interesting variation on the basic motif of religious thrillers: the secret document that threatens to destroy Christianity if rendered public is here the collection of all texts—gospels, letters, ruminations, and other fragments—which were not included in the Bible when the emperor Constantine established Christian orthodoxy. The hypothesis of the novel is that Constantine ordered all these excluded documents to be burned, fearing that such an inconsistent mess would fuel endless quarrels of interpretation, but Constantine's advisor Hosius refused to carry out his order and stashed them in a safe, secret place where they are discovered by Templars. . . . Even in fictional terms, one should not overestimate such a discovery: *The Templar Salvation* can be read as an exemplary case of restoring the "broken vessel," of re-locating the Bible into the complex and inconsistent network of variations out of which it was selected, so that the truth does not reside in any single version but in the very superposition of incompatible versions. (This, of course, has nothing to do with any kind of postmodern relativism and plurality of truths: the superposition of incompatible versions always points towards a singular oppressed/excluded traumatic truth.) However, as for the

²⁶ Zachary Mason, *The Lost Books of the Odyssey* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2010).

predominant tendency of the rediscovered documents, we get the standard mess of gnostic inner spirituality (god is deep in your soul, etc.—the line which later culminates in the Cathar movement) and of social-revolutionary messianism (Christ wanted to establish the Kingdom of God—a Jewish state freed from Roman domination—on this earth), the two extremes that the church tried to repress. (Incidentally, what about a much more dark version in which the hidden manuscripts demonstrate that Christ was a brutal egotist prone to violent outbursts, something like an ancient Rasputin displaying a mixture of sanctity and obscenity, or that he was a puppet secretly supported by Romans in their effort to undermine Jewish institutions?) One is almost tempted to say that the church was basically right in this choice: the two rejected choices stand for the alternative of gnostic universalism limited to inner life, and of radical social transformation limited to one's own ethnic group. What about a universalism which is asserted at the level of actual social life, as the emancipation of humankind in its entirety, not just of a particular ethnic group? The true distinction takes place here: between the universality of a hierarchic social institution (church), and the no-hierarchic universality whose model is the rejects.

But is the supreme case of a “broken vessel” not the Seven Last Words of Christ? (1) *Father forgive them, for they know not what they do* (Luke 23:34); (2) *Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise* (Luke 23:43); (3) *Woman, behold your son: behold your mother* (John 19:26–27); (4) *My God, My God, why have you forsaken me* (Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34); (5) *I thirst* (John 19:28); (6) *It is finished* (John 19:30); (7) *Father, into your hands I commit my spirit* (Luke 23:46). The most stupid thing imaginable one can do with them is what Franco Zeffirelli and Mel Gibson did in their kitsch cinematic versions: they use all of them, with Christ pronouncing one after the other while dying on the Cross—the effect is one of a ridiculous and suffocating excess, there is too much of it, as in some Hollywood films or classic operas where the dying hero miraculously goes on talking, delivering his message in its entirety although he should have dropped dead a long time ago. Instead of striving for this kind of unification, one should treat the seven last words as what they call in quantum physics the superposition of multiple quantum states, as synchronous alternate versions which are in a way “all true”—their truth does not reside in a single narrative or in conceiving the seven versions as fragmentary remainders of a consistent single original; it resides in the way the

seven versions resonate among themselves, interpreting each other. This, perhaps, is also the ultimate lesson of Christianity: Judaism conceives our universe as a broken vessel, that is, as the result of a cosmic catastrophe, with the endless task to gather the broken pieces and reconstruct the universe as a harmonious Whole, while Christianity, at its most radical, conceives the act of breaking itself as the outburst of divine creativity. As is often the case, it was G. K. Chesterton who made this point clearly and with a direct reference to broken vessel: "It is the instinct of Christianity to be glad that God has broken the universe into little pieces. . . . All modern philosophies are chains which connect and fetter; Christianity is a sword which separates and sets free. No other philosophy makes God actually rejoice in the separation of the universe into living souls."²⁷

So what if we apply Benjamin's notion of translation to the very relationship between god and man, to the notion that man was made in the likeness of god? Instead of making himself similar to god, man must rather, lovingly and in detail, in his own way, form himself according to the way of god, to make both recognizable as the broken parts of a greater vessel. The gap that, in the traditional view, separates the perfect god from his (always imperfect) human image is thus transposed back into god itself: god himself is imperfect, already the fragment of a broken vessel, so that he needs man to supplement his imperfection, and the goal of humanity is not to achieve fidelity or likeness to god but to supplement god, to treat god as a fragment of the "broken vessel" and to make itself into another fragment which will not imitate god's perfection but will fit it as one fragment of a broken Whole may fit another. The topic of the divine Trinity, of Christ's doubt on the Cross, and other similar motifs, clearly indicate that in Christianity, the "broken vessel" is not only the created reality which fell from god and lost its perfection—*the ultimate broken vessel is god himself*. Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit should thus be conceived as three fragments of the vessel whose unity is forever lost.

Furthermore, it is crucial to link this specific notion of the counterfactual to Lacan's distinction, developed in his Seminar XX, Encore, between phallic jouissance and the other (feminine) jouissance: only phallic enjoyment is (f)actual, actually existing, while the other (feminine) jouissance is counterfactual:

²⁷ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1995), 139.

It is the enjoyment which is not required / doesn't fail [*il ne faut pas*] that I believed I could call conditional. This suggests to us, for it to be used, the protasis, and the apodosis. It is: if it were not for that, things would have gone better—conditional in the second part. Material implication, which the Stoics realized was perhaps what was most solid in logic.

Enjoyment then. How are we going to express what is not required / does not fail in its regard, if not by the following. If there were an enjoyment other than phallic. . . if there were another one, it would not be required / it would be false that it should be this one. . . . The first part—if there were another of them—designates something false: there is no other of them than phallic enjoyment. It is then false that there is another. Which does not prevent what follows—namely, that it must not be that one—from being true. You know that it is quite correct, that when the true is deduced from the false, it is valid, the implication works. The only thing that cannot be admitted is that from the true there follows the false. . . . Suppose that there is another one, but precisely there is not, and, at the same time, it is not because there is not and that it is from this that there depends the *it is not required*.²⁸

(It is easy for a careful reader to discern here the paradoxical prohibition of something which is already in itself impossible: *jouissance féminine* doesn't exist, and nonetheless it is not required.) Do Lacan's formulas of sexuation also not point in the same direction? "There is no x which is not subordinated to the phallic function," i.e., there is no exception at the factual level, all positively existing enjoyment is phallic. What makes the situation "feminine" is just the non-all of its (actual) elements, i.e., the fact that they cannot be totalized, that they are never "all"—why? Because they are always supplemented by the superposition of counterfactuals, of what may have been if it were. . . (but it's not). —Exactly the same holds also for God who, for Lacan, possesses not actual existence but counterfactual ex-sistence—*l'inexistence divine*, as Quentin Meillassoux put it: god qua real is like the impossible *jouissance*: it never was here *and* we cannot get rid of it, or, in the case of god, there is not god *and* it continues to haunt us in its very inexistence.

Dupuy often mentions the ancient story of the twelfth camel: an Arab merchant dies and leaves to his three sons eleven camels, with the precise instructions on how to distribute them: the first son gets half of the camels, the second one-third, and the third one-sixth. So how to do it when 11 is not divisible by 2, 3 or 6? A wise judge proposes the solution: he will add just to the sum a camel of his own. Now we have twelve camels and the first son gets six, the second three,

²⁸ Lacan, *Seminar, Book XX: Encore*, seminar 6 (Feb. 13, 1973).

and the third two, together eleven; the judge then takes back the camel he added, so that he is not at a loss. . . (Niklas Luhmann has written a book on this.) The key feature is here that one can also merely imagine the twelfth camel—it needn't exist in reality. And is god not something like the twelfth camel, is the twelfth camel not one of the names for god, a lie (a nonexisting entity) which makes things clear? So does god exist or not? It does not exist as a fact, but it inexists counterfactually, which does not mean that it is simply an illusion: it is the paradox of an illusion which is immanent to reality itself, a counterfactual immanent to factuality, to our symbolic universe:

It is really fabulous that the function of the other, of the other as locus of the truth, and in a word of the only place, even though an irreducible one, that we can give to the term of Divine Being, of God to call him by his name. God is properly the locus where, if you will allow me the term, there is produced the *dieu*, the *dieur*, the *dire*, for a trifle, *dire* gives us *Dieu*.

As long as something is said, the God hypothesis will be there. And it is precisely as trying to say something that there is defined the fact that, in short, there can be no true atheists other than theologians. Namely, those who speak about God.²⁹

It is in this sense that Lacan speaks of the “God hypothesis” (ironically referring, of course, to Lamarck’s famous reply to Napoleon, that in his theory of nature he had no need for such a hypothesis)—in the same sense in which Badiou talks about the “Communist hypothesis.” This is why it is not enough for a materialist to deny god’s existence, he must also qualify his counterfactual ex-sistence: if there were a God (which there is not), he would not have been a being of supreme Good, a beautiful illusion, but an evil, cruel, ignorant God—this is the point made by *The Rapture*.

²⁹ Ibid., seminar 5 (January 16, 1973).