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Love Without Mercy

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1 Against the Digital Heresy

In the Larry King debate between a rabbi, a Catholic priest and a Southern Baptist, broadcast in March 2000, both the rabbi and the priest expressed their hope that the unification of religions is feasible, since, irrespective of his or her official creed, a thoroughly good person can count on divine grace and redemption. Only the Baptist — a young, well-tanned and slightly overweight, repulsively slick Southern yuppie — insisted that, according to the letter of the Gospel, only those who "live in Christ" by explicitly recognizing themselves in his address will be redeemed, which is why, as he consequently concluded, "a lot of good and honest people will burn in hell." In short, goodness (applying common moral norms) which is not directly grounded in the Gospel is ultimately just a perfidious semblance of itself, its own travesty. Cruel as this position may sound, if one is not to succumb to the Gnostic temptation, one should unconditionally endorse it. The gap that separates Gnosticism from Christianity is irreducible — it concerns the basic question of "who is responsible for the origin of death":

> If you can accept a God who coexists with death camps, schizophrenia, and AIDS, yet remains all-powerful and somehow benign, then you have faith [...]. If you *know* yourself as having an affinity with the alien, or stranger God, cut off from this world, then you are a Gnostic.[1]

These, then, are the minimal coordinates of Gnosticism: each human being has deep in himself a divine spark which unites him with the

[1] Harold Bloom, *Omens of Millenium* (London: Fourth Estate, 1996), p. 252.

Supreme Good; in our daily existence, we are unaware of this spark, since we are kept ignorant by being caught in the inertia of material reality. How does such a view relate to Christianity proper? Is it that Christ had to sacrifice himself in order to pay for the sins of his father who created such an imperfect world? Perhaps this Gnostic Divinity, the evil Creator of our material world, is the clue to the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, the "vanishing mediator" repressed by both of them: the Mosaic figure of the severe God of the Commandments is a fake whose mighty apparition is here to conceal the fact that we are dealing with a confused idiot who botched up the job of creation. In a displaced way, Christianity then acknowledges this fact; Christ dies in order to redeem his father in the eyes of humanity. Along the same lines, the Cathars, the Christian heresy *par excellence*, posited two opposed divinities: on the one hand, the infinitely good God who, however, is strangely impotent, unable to CREATE anything; on the other hand, the Creator of our material universe who is none other than the Devil himself (identical to the God of the Old Testament) — the visible, tangible world in its entirety is a diabolical phenomenon, a manifestation of Evil. The Devil is able to create, but is a sterile creator; this sterility is confirmed by the fact that the Devil succeeded in producing a wretched universe in which, despite all his efforts, he never contrived anything lasting. Man is thus a split creature: as an entity of flesh and blood, he is a creation of the Devil. However, the Devil was not able to create spiritual Life, so he was supposed to have asked the good God for help; in his bounty, God agreed to assist the Devil, this depressingly sterile creator, by breathing a soul into the body of lifeless clay. The Devil succeeded in perverting this spiritual flame by causing the Fall, i.e. by drawing the first couple into the carnal union which consummated their position as the creatures of matter.

Why did the Church react in such a violent way to this Gnostic narrative? Not because of the Cathar's radical Otherness (the dualist belief in the Devil as the counter-agent to the good God; the condemnation of every procreation and fornication, i.e. the disgust at Life in its cycle of generation and corruption), but because these "strange" beliefs which seemed so shocking to the Catholic orthodoxy "were precisely those that had the appearance of stemming logically from orthodox contemporary doctrine. That was why they were considered so dangerous."[2] Was Cathar dualism not simply a consequent development of the Catholic belief in the Devil? Was the Cathar

[2] Zoe Oldenbourg, *Massacre at Montsegur* (London: Orion Books, 1998), p. 39.

rejection of fornication also not the consequence of the Catholic notion that concupiscence is inherently "dirty," and merely has to be tolerated within the confines of marriage, so that marriage is ultimately a compromise with human weakness? In short, what the Cathars offered was the *inherent transgression* of the official Catholic dogma, its disavowed logical conclusion. And, perhaps, this allows us to propose a more general definition of what heresy is: in order for an ideological edifice to occupy the hegemonic place and legitimize the existing power relations, it HAS to compromise its founding radical message — and the ultimate "heretics" are simply those who reject this compromise, sticking to the original message. Recall the fate of Saint Franciscus: by insisting on the vow of poverty of the true Christians, by refusing integration into the existing social edifice, he came very close to being excommunicated — he was embraced by the Church only after the necessary "rearrangements" were made, which flattened this edge that posed a threat to the existing feudal relations.

Heidegger's notion of *Geworfenheit*, of "being-thrown" into a concrete historical situation, could be of some help here. *Geworfenheit* is to be opposed both to the standard humanism and to the Gnostic tradition. In the humanist vision, a human being belongs to this earth, he should be fully at home on its surface, able to realize his potentials through the active, productive exchange with it — as the young Marx put it, earth is man's "anorganic body." Any notion that we do not belong to this earth, that Earth is a fallen universe, a prison for our soul striving to liberate itself from the material inertia, is dismissed as life-denying alienation. For the Gnostic tradition, on the other hand, the human Self is not created, it is a preexisting Soul thrown into a foreign and inhospitable environment. The pain of our daily lives is not the result of our sin (of Adam's Fall), but of the fundamental glitch in the structure of the material universe itself which was created by defective demons; consequently, the path of salvation does not reside in overcoming our sins, but in overcoming our *ignorance*, in transcending the world of material appearances by way of achieving the true Knowledge. What both these positions share is the notion that there is a home, a "natural" place for man: either this world or the "noosphere" from which we fell into this world and for which our souls long. Heidegger points the way out of this predicament: what if we effectively are "thrown" into this world, never fully at home in it, always dislocated, "out of joint," in it, and what if this dislocation is our constitutive, primordial condition, the very horizon of our being? What if there is no

previous "home" out of which we were thrown into this world, what if this very dislocation grounds man's ex-static opening to the world?

As Heidegger emphasizes in *Sein und Zeit*, the fact that there is no *Sein* without *Dasein* does NOT mean that, if the *Dasein* were to disappear, no things would remain. Entities would continue to be, but they would not be disclosed within a horizon of meaning — there would have been no *world*. This is why Heidegger speaks of *Dasein* and not of man or subject: the subject is OUTSIDE the world and then relates to it, generating the pseudo-problems of the correspondence of our representations to the external world, of the world's existence, etc.; man is an entity INSIDE the world. *Dasein*, in contrast to both of them, is the ex-static relating to the entities within a horizon of meaning, which is in advance "thrown" into the world, in the midst of disclosed entities. However, there still remains a "naive" question: if entities are there as Real prior to *Lichtung*, how do the two ultimately relate? *Lichtung* somehow had to "explode" from the closure of mere entities — did not Schelling struggle with this ultimate problem (and fail) in his *Weltalter* drafts, which aimed at deploying the emergence of *logos* out of the proto-cosmic Real of divine drives? Are we to take the risk of endorsing the philosophical potentials of modern physics, whose results seem to point towards a gap/opening already discernible in pre-ontological nature itself? Furthermore, what if THIS is the danger of technology: that the world itself, its opening, will disappear, that we will return to the prehuman mute being of entities without *Lichtung*?

It is against this background that one should also approach the relationship between Heidegger and Oriental thought. In his exchange with Heidegger, Medard Boss proposes that, in contrast to Heidegger, in Indian thought, the Clearing [*Lichtung*] in which beings appear does not need man [*Dasein*] as the "shepherd of being" — human being is merely one of the domains of "standing in the clearing" which shines forth in and for itself. Man unites himself with the Clearing through his self-annihilation, through the ecstatic immersion into the Clearing.[3] This difference is crucial: the fact that man is the unique "shepherd of Being" introduces the notion of the epochal *historicity* of the Clearing itself, a motif totally lacking in Indian thought. Already in the 1930s, Heidegger emphasized the fundamental "derangement" [*Ver-Rueckheit*] that the emergence of Man introduces into the order of entities: the event of Clearing is in itself an *Ent-Eignen*, a radical and thorough distortion,

[3] See Martin Heidegger, *Zollikoner Seminare*, herausgegeben von Medard Boss (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1987), pp. 223-225.

with no possibility of "return to the undistorted Order" — *Ereignis* is co-substantial with the distortion/derangement, it is NOTHING BUT its own distortion. This dimension is, again, totally lacking in Oriental thought — and Heidegger's ambivalence is symptomatic here. On the one hand, he repeatedly insisted that the main task of the Western thought today is to defend the Greek breakthrough, the founding gesture of the "West," the overcoming of the pre-philosophical mythical "Asiatic" universe, against the renewed "Asiatic" threat — the greatest opposite of the West is "the mythical in general and the Asiatic in particular."[4] On the other hand, he gave occasional hints as to how his notions of Clearing and Event resonate with the Oriental notion of the primordial Void.

The philosophical overcoming of the myth is not simply a letting-behind of the mythical, but a constant struggle with(in) it: philosophy needs the recourse to myth, not only for external reasons, in order to explain its conceptual teaching to the uneducated crowds, but inherently, to "suture" its own conceptual edifice where it fails to reach its innermost core, from Plato's myth of the cave to Freud's myth of the primordial father and Lacan's myth of *lamella*. Myth is thus the Real of logos: the foreign intruder, impossible to get rid of, impossible to remain fully within. Therein resides the lesson of Adorno's and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: Enlightenment always already "contaminates" the naive immediacy of the mythical. Enlightenment itself is mythical, i.e. its own grounding gesture *repeats* the mythical operation. And what is "postmodernity" if not the ultimate *defeat* of the Enlightenment in its very triumph: when the dialectic of Enlightenment reaches its apogee, the dynamic, rootless postindustrial society *directly generates its own myth*. The technological "reductionism" of cyberspace (mind itself is ultimately reduced to a "spiritual machine") and the pagan mythic imaginary of sorcery, of mysterious magic powers, etc., are strictly the two sides of the same phenomenon: the defeat of modernity in its very triumph.

The cyberspace ideologists's notion of the Self liberating itself from the attachment to its natural body, i.e. turning itself into a virtual entity floating from one contingent and temporary embodiment to another, can thus present itself as the final scientific-technological realization of the Gnostic dream of the Self getting rid of the decay and inertia of material reality. That is to say, is the notion of the "aetheric" body we can

[4] Martin Heidegger, *Schelling's Treatise on Human Freedom* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1985), p. 146.

recreate for ourselves in Virtual Reality not the old Gnostic dream of the immaterial "astral body" come true? So what are we to make of this seemingly convincing argument that cyberspace functions in a Gnostic way, promising to elevate us to a level in which we will be delivered of our bodily inertia, provided with another ethereal body? Konrad Lorenz once made the ambiguous remark that we ourselves ("actually existing" humanity) are the sought-after "missing link" between animal and man — how are we to read this? Of course, the first association that imposes itself here is the notion that "actually existing" humanity still dwells in what Marx designated as "pre-history," and that true human history will begin with the advent of the passage between animal and overman. Does the cyberspace ideology not resuscitate the same notion?

These paradoxes provides the proper background for Michel Houellebecq's *Atomized (Les particules elementaires)*, the story of radical DESUBLIMATION, if there ever was one: in our postmodern, "disenchanted", permissive world, sexuality is reduced to an apathetic participation in collective orgies. *Les particules*, a superb example of what some critics perspicuously baptized "Left conservatism," tells the story of two half-brothers: Bruno, a high-school teacher, is an undersexed hedonist, while Michel is a brilliant but emotionally desiccated biochemist. Abandoned by their hippie mother when they were small, neither has ever properly recovered; all their attempts at the pursuit of happiness, whether through marriage, the study of philosophy, or the consumption of pornography, merely lead to loneliness and frustration. Bruno ends up in a psychiatric asylum after confronting the meaninglessness of permissive sexuality (the utterly depressive descriptions of the sexual orgies between forty-somethings are among the most excruciating readings in contemporary literature), while Michel invents a solution: a new self-replicating gene for a post-human desexualized entity. The novel ends with a prophetic vision: in 2040, humanity is replaced by these humanoids who experience no passions proper, no intense self-assertion that can lead to destructive rage.

Almost four decades ago, Michel Foucault dismissed "man" as a figure in the sand that is now being washed away, introducing the (then) fashionable topic of the "death of man." Although Houellebecq stages this disappearance in much more naïve and literal terms, as the replacement of humanity with a new post-human species, there is a common denominator between the two: *the disappearance of sexual difference*. In his last works, Foucault envisioned the space of pleasures liberated from Sex, and one is tempted to claim that Houellebecq's post-human society of clones is the realization of the Foucauldian dream of

Selves who practice the "use of pleasures." Perhaps the best way to specify the role of sexual love which is threatened here is through the notion of reflexivity as *the movement whereby that which has been used to generate a system is made, through a changed perspective, to become part of the system it generates*. This reflexive appearance of the generating movement within the generated system, in the guise of what Hegel called the "oppositional determination," as a rule takes the form of the opposite: within the material sphere, Spirit appears in the guise of the most inert moment (crane, formless black stone); in the later stage of a revolutionary process when Revolution starts to devour its own children, the political agent which effectively set in motion the process is re-negated into the role of its main obstacle, of the waverers or outright traitors who are not ready to follow the revolutionary logic to its conclusion. Along the same lines, is it not the case that, once the socio-symbolic order is fully established, the very dimension which introduced the "transcendent" attitude that defines a human being, namely SEXUALITY, the uniquely human "undead" sexual passion, appears as its very opposite, as the main OBSTACLE to the elevation of a human being to pure spirituality, as that which ties him/her down to the inertia of bodily existence? For this reason, the end of sexuality in the much celebrated "posthuman" self-cloning entity expected to emerge soon, far from opening up the way to pure spirituality, will simultaneously signal the end of what is traditionally designated as the uniquely human spiritual transcendence. All the celebrations of the new "enhanced" possibilites of sexual life that Virtual Reality offers cannot conceal the fact that, once cloning supplements sexual difference, the game is over. Incidentally, with all the focus on the new experiences of pleasure that lie ahead with the development of Virtual Reality, direct neuronal implants, etc., what about new "enhanced" possibilities of TORTURE? Do biogenetics and Virtual Reality combined not open up new and unheard-of horizons for extending our ability to endure pain (through widening our sensory capacity to sustain pain, through inventing new forms of inflicting it)? Perhaps the ultimate Sadean image of an "undead" victim of the torture who can sustain endless pain without having at his/her disposal the escape into death also waits to become reality. Perhaps, in a decade or two, our most horrifying cases of torture (say, what they did to the Dominican Army Chief of Staff after the failed coup in which the dictator Trujillo was killed — sewing his eyes together so that he wasn't able to see his torturers, and then for four months slowly cutting off parts of his body in most painful ways, like

using clumsy scissors to detach his genitals) will appear as naïve children's games.

We all know of Alan Turing's famous "imitation game" which should serve to test if a machine can think: we communicate with two computer interfaces, asking them any imaginable question; behind one of the interfaces is a human person typing the answers, while behind the other there is a machine. If, based on the answers we get, we cannot tell the intelligent machine from the intelligent human, then, according to Turing, our failure proves that machines can think. What is a little bit less known is that in its first formulation, the issue was not to distinguish human from machine, but man from woman. Why this strange displacement from sexual difference to the difference between human and machine? Was this simply due to Turing's eccentricity (recall his well-known troubles because of his homosexuality)? According to some interpreters, the point is to oppose the two experiments: a successful imitation of a woman's responses by a man (or vice versa) *would not prove anything*, because the gender identity does not depend on the sequences of symbols, while a successful imitation of man by a machine would prove that this machine thinks, because "thinking" is ultimately the proper way of sequencing symbols. What if, instead, the solution to this enigma is much more simple and radical? What if sexual difference is not simply a biological fact, but the Real of an antagonism that *defines humanity*, so that once sexual difference is abolished, a human being effectively becomes indistinguishable from a machine?

Does, then, the full formulation of the genome effectively foreclose subjectivity and/or sexual difference? When, on June 26, 2000, the completion of a "working draft" of the human genome was publicly announced, the wave of commentaries about the ethical, medical, etc. consequences of this breakthrough rendered manifest the first paradox of the genome, the immediate identity of the opposite attitudes: on the one hand, the idea is that we can now formulate the very positive identity of a human being, what s/he "objectively is," what predetermines his/her development; on the other hand, knowing the complete genome — the "instruction book for human life," as it is usually referred to — opens up the way for the technological manipulation, enabling us to "reprogram" our (or, rather, others') bodily and psychic features. This new situation seems to signal the end of the entire series of traditional notions: theological creationism (comparing human with animal genomes makes it clear that human beings evolved from animals — we share more than 99 percent of our genome with the chimpanzee), sexual reproduction (rendered superfluous by the prospect of cloning), and, ultimately,

psychology or psychoanalysis — does the genome not realize Freud's old dream of translating psychic processes into objective chemical processes?

Here, however, one should be attentive to the formulation which repeatedly occurs in most of the reactions to the identification of the genome: "The old adage that every disease with the exception of trauma has a genetic component is really going to be true."[5] Although this statement is meant as the assertion of a triumph, one should nonetheless focus on the exception that it concedes, the impact of a trauma. How serious and extensive is this limitation? The first thing to bear in mind here is that "trauma" is NOT simply a shorthand term for the unpredictable chaotic wealth of environment influences, so that we are lead to the standard proposition according to which the identity of a human being results from the interaction between his/her genetic inheritance and the influence of his/her environment ("nature versus nurture"). It is also not sufficient to replace this standard proposition with the more refined notion of the "embodied mind" developed by Francisco Varela[6]: a human being is not just the outcome of the interaction between genes and environment as the two opposed entities; s/he is rather the engaged embodied agent who, instead of "relating" to his/her environs, mediates-creates his/her life-world — a bird lives in a different environment than a fish or a man. However, "trauma" designates a shocking encounter which precisely DISTURBS this immersion into one's life-world, a violent intrusion of something which doesn't fit. Of course, animals can also experience traumatic ruptures: say, is the ants's universe not thrown off the rails when a human intervention totally subverts their environs? However, the difference between animals and humans is crucial here: for animals, such traumatic ruptures are the exception, they are experienced as a catastrophy which ruins their way of life; for humans, on the contrary, the traumatic encounter is a universal condition, the intrusion which sets in motion the process of "becoming human." Humans are not simply overwhelmed by the impact of the traumatic encounter — as Hegel put it, they are able to "tarry with the negative," to counteract its destabilizing impact by spinning out intricate symbolic cobwebs. This is the lesson of both

[5] Maimon Cohen, Director of the Harvey Institute for Human Genetics at the Greater Baltimore Medical Center, quoted in International Herald Tribune, June 27, 2000, p. 8.

[6] See Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993).

psychoanalysis and the Jewish-Christian tradition: the specific human vocation does not rely on the development of man's inherent potentials (on the awakening of the dormant spiritual forces OR of some genetic program); it is triggered by an external traumatic encounter, by the encounter of the Other's desire in its impenetrability. In other words (and *pace* Steve Pinker),[7] *there is no inborn "language instinct"*. There are, of course, genetic conditions that have to be met if a living being is to be able to speak; however, one actually starts to speak, one enters the symbolic universe, only by reacting to a traumatic jolt — and the mode of this reacting (i.e. the fact that we symbolize in order to cope with a trauma) is NOT "in our genes."

The ongoing decoding of the human body, the prospect of the formulation of each individual's genome, confronts us in a pressing way with the radical question of "what we are": am I that, the code that can be compressed onto a single CD? Are we "nobody and nothing," just an illusion of self-awareness whose only reality is the complex interacting network of neuronal and other links? The uncanny feeling generated by playing with toys like tamagochi concerns the fact that we treat a virtual non-entity as an entity: we act "as if" (we believe that) there is, behind the screen, a real Self, an animal reacting to our signals, although we know well that there is nothing and nobody "behind," just the digital circuitry. However, what is even more disturbing is the implicit reflexive reversal of this insight: if there is effectively no one out there, behind the screen, *what if the same goes for myself*? What if the "I," my self-awareness, is also merely a superficial "screen" behind which there is only a "blind" complex neuronal circuit?[8] Or, to make the same point from a different perspective: why are people so afraid of airplane crashes? It's not the physical pain as such — what causes such horror are the two or three minutes while the plane is falling down and one is fully aware that one will die shortly. Does the genome identification not transpose us into a similar situation? That is to say, the uncanny aspect of the genome identification concerns the temporal gap that separates the knowledge of what causes a certain disease from the development of the technical means to intervene and prevent this disease from evolving — the period of time in which we shall know for sure that, say, we are about to get a dangerous cancer, but will be unable to do anything to

[7] See Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct* (New York: Harper Books, 1995).

[8] It is, of course, the work of Daniel Dennett which popularized this version of the "selfless" mind — see Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1991).

prevent it. And what about "objectively" reading our IQ or the genetic ability for other intellectual capacities? How will the awareness of this total self-objectivization affect our self-experience? The standard answer (the knowledge of our genome will enable us to intervene into our genome and change for the better our psychic and bodily properties) still begs the crucial question: if the self-objectivization is complete, who is the "I" that intervenes into "its own" genetic code in order to change it? Is this intervention itself not already objectivized in the totally scanned brain?

The "closure" anticipated by the prospect of the total scanning of the human brain resides not only in the full correlation between the scanned neuronal activity in our brain and our subjective experience (so that a scientist will be able to give an impulse to our brain and then predict to what subjective experience this impulsive will give rise), but in the much more radical notion of bypassing subjective experience as such: what scanning will make it possible to identify DIRECTLY will be our subjective experience, so that the scientist will not even have to ask us what we experience — he will be able to READ IMMEDIATELY on his screen what we experience. There is further evidence which points in the same direction: a couple of milliseconds *before* a human subject "freely" decides in a situation of choice, scanners can detect the change in the brain's chemical processes which indicates that the decision was already taken — even when we make a free decision, our consciousness seems just to register an anterior chemical process. The psychoanalytic-Schellingian answer to it is to locate freedom (of choice) at the *unconscious* level: the true acts of freedom are choices/decisions which we make while unaware of it — we never decide (in the present tense); all of a sudden, we just take note of how *we have already decided*. On the other hand, one can argue that such a dystopian prospect involves the loop of a *petitio principii*: it silently presupposes that the same old Self which phenomenologically relies on the gap between "myself" and the objects "out there" will continue to be here after the completed self-objectivization.

The paradox, of course, is that this total self-objectivization overlaps with its opposite: what looms at the horizon of the "digital revolution" is nothing else than the prospect that human beings will acquire the capacity of what Kant and other German Idealists called "intellectual intuition" [*intellektuelle Anschauung*], the closure of the gap that separates (passive) intuition and (active) production, i.e. the intuition which immediately generates the object it perceives — the capacity

hitherto reserved for the infinite divine mind. On the one hand, it will be possible, through neurological implants, to switch from our "common" reality to another computer-generated reality without all the clumsy machinery of today's Virtual Reality (the awkward glasses, gloves...), since the signals of the virtual reality will directly reach our brain, bypassing our sensory organs:

> Your neural implants will provide the simulated sensory inputs of the virtual environment — and your virtual body — directly in your brain. [...] A typical 'web site' will be a perceived virtual environment, with no external hardware required. You 'go there' by mentally selecting the site and then entering that world.[9]

We will thus reach a kind of omnipotence, being able to change from one reality to another by the mere power of our thoughts, to transform our bodies as well as the bodies of our partners: "With this technology, you will be able to have almost any kind of experience with just about anyone, real or imagined, at any time."[10] The question to be asked here is: will this still be experienced as "reality"? Is not, for a human being, "reality" ONTOLOGICALLY defined through the minimum of RESISTANCE? — real is that which resists, that which is not totally malleable to the caprices of our imagination.

As to the obvious counter-question: "However, everything cannot be virtualized — there still has to be the one 'real reality', that of the digital or biogenetic circuitry itself which generates the very multiplicity of virtual universes!", the answer is provided by the prospect of "downloading" the entire human brain (once it will be possible to scan it completely) onto an electronic machine more efficient and less awkward than it. At this crucial moment, a human being will change its ontological status "from hardware to software": it will no longer be identified with (stuck to) its material bearer (the brain in the human body). The identity of our Self is a certain neuronal pattern, the network of waves, which, in principle, can be transferred from one to another material support. Of course, there is no "pure mind", i.e. there always has to be some kind of embodiment — however, if our mind is a software pattern, it should be in principle possible for it to shift from one to another material support (is this not going on all the time at a different level: is the "stuff" our cells are made of not continuously changing?).

[9] See Ray Kurzweil, *The Age of Spiritual Machines* (London: Phoenix, 1999), p. 182.
[10] Op.cit., p. 188.

The idea is that this cutting off of the umbilical cord that links us to a single body, this shift from having (and being stuck to) a *body* to freely floating between different *embodiments* will mark the true birth of the human being, relegating the entire hitherto history of humanity to the status of a confused period of transition from the animal kingdom to the true kingdom of the mind.

Here, however, philosophical-existential enigmas emerge again, and we are back at the Leibnizian problem of the identity of the indiscernibles: if (the pattern of) my brain is loaded onto a different material support, which of the two minds is "myself"? In what does the identity of "myself" consist, if it resides neither in the material support (which changes all the time) nor in the formal pattern (which can be exactly replicated)? No wonder Leibniz is one of the predominant philosophical references of the cyberspace theorists: what reverberates today is not only his dream of a universal computing machine, but the uncanny resemblance between his ontological vision of monadology and today's emerging cyberspace community in which global harmony and solipsism strangely coexist. That is to say, does our immersion into cyberspace not go hand in hand with our reduction to a Leibnizean monad which, although "without windows" open to external reality, mirrors in itself the entire universe? Are we not more and more monads with no direct windows onto reality, interacting alone with the PC screen, encountering only the virtual simulacra, and yet immersed more than ever into the global network, synchronously communicating with the entire globe? The impasse which Leibniz tried to solve by way of introducing the notion of "preestablished harmony" between the monads, guaranteed by God Himself, the supreme, all-encompassing monad, repeats itself today, in the guise of the problem of communication: how does each of us know that s/he is in touch with the "real other" behind the screen, not only with spectral simulacra? Therein resides one of the key unanswered enigmas of the Wachowski brothers' film *The Matrix*: why does the Matrix construct a *shared* virtual reality in which all humans interact? It would have been much more economic to have each subject interacting ONLY with the Matrix, so that all humans encountered would have been only digital creatures. Why? The interaction of "real" individuals through the Matrix creates its own big Other, the space of implicit meanings, surmises, etc., which can no longer be controlled by the Matrix — the Matrix is thus reduced to a mere instrument/medium, to the network that only serves as a material support for the "big Other" beyond its control.

More radically even, what about the obvious Heideggerian counter-thesis that the notion of the "brain in the vat" on which this entire scenario relies, involves an ontological mistake: what accounts for the specific human dimension is not a property or pattern of the brain, but the way a human being is situated in his/her world and ex-statically relates to the things in it; language is not the relationship between an object (word) and another object (thing or thought) in the world, but the site of the historically determinate disclosure of the world-horizon as such. To this, one is tempted to give a cynical outright answer: OK, so what? With the immersion into Virtual Reality, we will effectively be deprived of the ex-static being-in-the-world that pertains to the human finitude — but what if this loss will open up to us another, unheard-of, dimension of spirituality?

The paradox — or, rather, the *antinomy* — of cyberspace reason concerns precisely the fate of the body. Even advocates of cyberspace warn us that we should not totally forget our body, that we should maintain our anchoring in "real life" by returning, regularly, from our immersion in cyberspace to the intense experience of our body, from sex to jogging. We will never turn ourselves into virtual entities freely floating from one to another virtual universe: our "real life" body and its mortality is the ultimate horizon of our existence, the ultimate, innermost impossibility that underpins the immersion in all possible multiple virtual universes. Yet, at the same time, in cyberspace the body returns with a vengeance: in popular perception, "cyberspace IS hardcore pornography," i.e. hardcore pornography is perceived as the predominant use of cyberspace. The literal "enlightenment," the "lightness of being," the relief/alleviation we feel when we freely float in cyberspace (or, even more, in Virtual Reality), is not the experience of being bodiless, but the experience of possessing *another* — aetheric, virtual, weightless — *body*, a body which does not confine us to the inert materiality and finitude, an angelic *spectral body*, a body which can be artificially recreated and manipulated. Cyberspace thus designates a turn, a kind of "negation of negation," in the gradual progress towards the disembodying of our experience (first writing instead of the "living" speech, then press, then the mass media, then radio, then TV): in cyberspace, we return to bodily immediacy, but to an uncanny, virtual immediacy. In this sense, the claim that cyberspace contains a *Gnostic* dimension is fully justified: the most concise definition of Gnosticism is precisely that it is a kind of *spiritualized materialism*: its topic is not

directly the higher, purely notional, reality, but a "higher" BODILY reality, a proto-reality of shadowy ghosts and undead entities.

2. "Father, why did you forsake me?"

What, then, does the Christian tradition oppose to this Gnostic legacy? Let us start with Gilles Deleuze's exemplary analysis of Chaplin's late films:

> Between the small Jewish barber and the dictator [in *The Great Dictator*], the difference is as negligible as that between their respective moustaches. Yet it results in two situations as infinitely remote, as far opposed as those of victim and executioner. Likewise, in *Monsieur Verdoux*, the difference between the two aspects or demeanours of the same man, the lady-assassin and the loving husband of a paralysed wife, is so thin that all his wife's intuition is required for the premonition that somehow he 'changed.' [...] The burning question of *Limelight* is: what is that 'nothing,' that sign of age, that small difference of triteness, on account of which the funny clown's number changes into a tedious spectacle?[11]

The same imperceptible "almost nothing," of course, also accounts for the difference between the two Veroniques in Kieslowski's *Double Life*. The paradigmatic case of this "almost nothing" are the old paranoiac science-fiction films from the early 1950s about aliens occupying a small American town: they look and act like normal Americans, we can distinguish them only via the reference to some minor detail. It is Ernst Lubitsch's *To Be Or Not To Be* which brings this logic to its dialectical climax. In one of the funniest scenes of the film, the pretentious Polish actor who, as the part of a secret mission, has to impersonate the cruel high Gestapo officer Erhardt, does this impersonation in an exaggerated way, reacting to the remarks of his interlocutor about his cruel treatment of the Poles with a loud vulgar laughter and a satisfied constatation, "So they call me Concentration Camp Erhardt, hahaha!" We, the spectators, take this for a ridiculous caricature — however, when, later in the film, the REAL Erhardt appears, he reacts to his interlocutors *in exactly the*

[11] Gilles Deleuze, *L'image-mouvement* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1983), pp. 234-236.

same way. Although the "real" Erhardt thus in a way imitates his imitation, "plays himself," this uncanny coincidence makes all the more palpable the absolute gap that separates him from the poor Polish impersonator. In Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, we find a more tragic version of the same uncanny coincidence: the low-class Judy who, under the pressure exerted from and out of her love for Scottie, endeavours to look and act like the high-class fatal and ethereal Madeleine, turns out to BE Madeleine: they are the same person, since the "true" Madeleine Scottie encountered was already a fake. However, this identity of Judy and Judy-Madeleine, this difference between the two fakes, again renders all the more palpable the absolute otherness of Madeleine with regard to Judy — the Madeleine that is given nowhere, that is present just in the guise of the ethereal "aura" that envelops Judy-Madeleine. The Real is the appearance as appearance, it not only appears WITHIN appearances, but it is also NOTHING BUT its own appearance — it is just a certain GRIMACE of reality, a certain imperceptible, unfathomable, ultimately illusory feature that accounts for the absolute difference within identity. So, with regard to the grimace of real/reality, it is crucial to keep open the reversibility of this formulation. In a first approach, reality is a grimace of the real — the real, structured/distorted into the "grimace" we call reality through the pacifying symbolic network, somehow like the Kantian *Ding-an-sich* structured into what we experience as objective reality through the transcendental network. However, at a deeper level, the real itself is nothing but a grimace of reality: the obstacle, the "bone in the throat" which forever distorts our perception of reality, introducing anamorphic stains in it, or the pure *Schein* of Nothing that only "shines through" reality, since it is "in itself" thoroughly without substance.

A homologous inversion is to be accomplished by way of the "illusion of the real," the postmodern denunciation of every (effect of) the Real as an illusion: what Lacan opposes to it is the much more subversive notion of the *Real of the illusion itself*.[12] Consider the fashionable argument according to which Real Socialism failed because it endeavoured to impose onto reality an illusory utopian vision of humanity, not taking into account the way real people are structured through the force of tradition: on the contrary, Real Socialism failed because it was — in its Stalinist version — ALL TOO "REALISTIC," because it underestimated the REAL of the "illusions" which continued to determine human activity ("bourgeois individualism," etc.), and

[12] I borrowed this notion from Alenka Zupancic.

conceived of the "construction of socialism" as a ruthlessly "realistic" mobilization and exploitation of the individuals in order to build a new order. One is thus tempted to claim that, while Lenin still remained faithful to the "real of the (Communist) illusion", to its emancipatory utopian potential, Stalin was a simple "realist", engaged in a ruthless power-struggle.

Each of the two parts of Freud's inaugural dream on Irma's injection concludes with a figuration of the Real. In the conclusion of the first part, this is obvious: the look into Irma's throat renders the Real in the guise of the primordial flesh, the palpitation of the life substance as the Thing itself, in its disgusting dimension of a cancerous outgrowth. However, in the second part, the comic symbolic exchange/interplay of the three doctors also ends up with the Real, this time in its opposite aspect — the Real of writing, of the meaningless formula of trimethylamine. The difference hinges on the different starting point: if we end with the Imaginary (the mirror-confrontation of Freud and Irma), we get the Real in its imaginary dimension, as a horrifying primordial image that cancels the imagery itself; if we start with the Symbolic (the exchange of arguments between the three doctors), we get the signifier itself transformed into the Real of a meaningless letter/formula. Needless to add, these two figures are the very two opposite aspects of the Lacanian Real: the abyss of the primordial Life-Thing and the meaningless letter/formula (as in the Real of the modern science). And, perhaps, one should add to them the third Real, the "Real of the illusion", the Real of a pure semblance, of a spectral dimension which shines through our common reality.

A homologous reversal is to be accomplished if we are to properly conceive the paradoxical status of the Real as impossible. The deconstructionist ethical edifice is based on the IMPOSSIBILITY of the act: the act never happens, it is *impossible for it to occur*, it is always deferred, about to come, there is forever the gap that separates the impossible fullness of the Act from the limited dimension of our contingent pragmatic intervention (say, the unconditional ethical demand of the Other from the pragmatic political intervention with which we answer it). The fantasy of metaphysics is precisely that the impossible Act CAN or COULD happen, that it would have happened if it were not for some contingent empirical obstacle; the task of the deconstructionist analysis is then to demonstrate how what appears (and is misperceived) as a contingent empirical obstacle actually gives body to a proto-transcendental *a priori* — such apparently contingent obstacles HAVE to occur, the impossibility is structural, not empirical-contingent. For

example, the illusion of anti-Semitism is that social antagonisms are introduced by the Jewish intervention, so that, if we eliminate Jews, the fully realized non-antagonistic harmonious social body will take place; against this misperception, the critical analysis should demonstrate how the anti-Semitic figure of the Jew simply gives body to the structural impossibility constitutive of the social order.

It seems that Lacan also fits this logic perfectly: does the illusory fullness of the imaginary fantasy not cover up a structural gap, and does psychoanalysis not assert the heroic acceptance of the fundamental gap and/or structural impossibility as the very condition of desire? Is this not, exactly, the "ethics of the Real" — the ethics of accepting the Real of a structural impossibility? However, what Lacan ultimately aims at is precisely the opposite. Let us take the case of love. Lovers usually dream that in some mythical Otherness ("another time, another place"), their love would have found its true fulfilment, that it is only the present contingent circumstances which prevent this fulfilment; and is the Lacanian lesson here not that one should accept this obstacle as structurally necessary, that there is NO "other place" of fulfilment, that this Otherness is the very Otherness of the fantasy? NO: the "Real as impossible" means here that THE IMPOSSIBLE DOES HAPPEN, that "miracles" like Love (or political revolution: "in some respects, a revolution is a miracle," said Lenin in 1921) DO occur. From "impossible TO happen" we thus pass to "the impossible HAPPENS" — this, and not the structural obstacle forever deferring the final resolution, is the most difficult thing to accept: "We'd forgotten how to be in readiness even for miracles to happen."[13]

And it's exactly the same with belief: the lesson of Graham Greene's novels is that religious belief, far from being the pacifying consolation, is the most traumatic thing to accept. Therein resides the ultimate failure of Neil Jordan's film *The End of the Affair*, which accomplishes two changes with regard to Greene's novel upon which it is based: it *displaces* the ugly birthmark (and its miraculous disappearance after a kiss by Sarah) from the atheist preacher to the private investigator's son, and it *condenses* two persons (the atheist preacher whom Sarah visited after her shocking encounter with the miracle, i.e. the rising of her lover from the dead, and the older Catholic priest who tries to console Maurice, the narrator, and Sarah's husband after her death) into one, the preacher whom Sarah is secretly visiting and who is mistaken by

[13] Christa Wolf, *The Quest for Christa T.* (New York: Farrar, Giroux and Strauss, 1979), p. 24.

Maurice for her lover. This replacement of the agnostic preacher by a priest thoroughly misses the point of Sarah's visits: in a dialectic of faith that is Greene's trademark, she starts to visit him precisely because of his ferocious anti-theism: she wants desperately to ESCAPE her faith, the miraculous proof of God's existence, so she takes refuge with the avowed atheist — with the predictable result that not only does he fail in delivering her of her faith, but that, at the novel's end, he himself becomes a believer (THIS is also the reason why the miracle of the disappearing birthmark has to take place on HIS face!). The psychoanalytic name for such a "miracle," for an intrusion which momentarily suspends the causal network of our daily lives, is, of course, *trauma*. In his *Zollikoner Seminare*, edited by Medard Boss, Heidegger dismisses Freud as a causal determinist:

> He postulates for the conscious human phenomena that they can be explained without gaps, i.e. the continuity of causal connections. Since there are no such connections 'in consciousness,' he has to invent 'the unconscious,' in which there have to be the causal links without gaps.[14]

Here, of course, Heidegger completely misses the way the Freudian "unconscious" is grounded in the traumatic encounter of an Otherness whose intrusion precisely *breaks*, interrupts, the continuity of the causal link: what we get in the "unconscious" is not a complete, uninterrupted, causal link, but the repercussions, the after-shocks, of traumatic interruptions.[15] Although there is a similarity between this Lacanian Real and the notion of the "priority of the objective" elaborated by Adorno, Heidegger's most embittered critic, it is this very similarity that renders all the more palpable the gap that separates them. Adorno's basic endeavour is to reconcile the materialist "priority of the objective" with the idealist legacy of the subjective "mediation" of all objective reality: everything we experience as directly-immediately given is already mediated, posited through a network of differences; every theory that asserts our access to immediate reality, be it the phenomenological *Wesensschau* or the empiricist perception of elementary sensual data, is

[14] Martin Heidegger, *Zollikoner Seminare*, p. 260.

[15] For a more detailed elaboration of this key feature, see Chapter 1 of Slavoj i ek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* (London: Verso Books, 2001), where I rely on Jean Laplanche's exemplary account in his *Essays on Otherness* (London: Routledge, 1999).

false. On the other hand, Adorno also rejects the idealist notion that all objective content is posited/produced by the subject — such a stance also fetishizes subjectivity itself into a given immediacy. This is the reason why Adorno opposes the Kantian *a priori* of the transcendental categories which mediate our access *to* reality (and thus constitute what we experience *as* reality): for Adorno, the Kantian transcendental *a priori* does not simply absolutize the subjective mediation — it obliterates *its own* historical mediation. The table of Kantian transcendental categories is not a pre-historical "pure" a priori, but a historically "mediated" conceptual network, i.e., a network embedded in and engendered by a determinate historical constellation. How, then, are we to think TOGETHER the radical mediation of all objectivity and the materialist "priority of the objective"? The solution is that this "priority" is the very result of mediation brought to its end, the kernel of resistance that we cannot experience directly, but only in the guise of the absent point of reference on account of which every mediation ultimately FAILS.

It is a standard argument against Adorno's "negative dialectics" to reproach it for its inherent inconsistency. Adorno's answer to this is quite appropriate: stated as a definitive doctrine, as a result, "negative dialectics" effectively IS "inconsistent" — the way to properly grasp it is to conceive of it as the description of a *process* of thought (in Lacanese, to include the position of enunciation involved in it). "Negative dialectics" designates a position which includes its own failure, i.e. which produces the truth-effect through its very failure. To put it succintly: one tries to grasp/conceive the object of thought; one fails, missing it, and through these very failures the place of the targeted object is encircled, its contours become discernible. So what one is tempted to do here is to introduce the Lacanian notion of the "barred" subject and the object as real/impossible: the Adornian distinction between immediately accessible "positive" objectivity and the objectivity targeted in the "priority of the objective" is the very Lacanian distinction between (symbolically mediated) reality and the impossible Real. Furthermore, does the Adornian notion that the subject retains its subjectivity only insofar it is "incompletely" subject, insofar as some kernel of objectivity resists its grasp, not point towards the subject as constitutively "barred"?

There are two ways out of the deadlock where Adorno's "negative dialectics" ends, the Habermasian one and the Lacanian one. Habermas, who correctly perceived Adorno's inconsistency, his self-destructive

critique of a Reason which cannot account for itself, proposed as a solution the pragmatic *a priori* of communicative normativity, a kind of Kantian regulative ideal presupposed in every intersubjective exchange. Lacan, on the contrary, elaborates the *concept* of what Adorno deployed as dialectical paradoxes: the concept of the "barred" subject that exists only through its own impossibility — the concept of the Real as the inherent, not external, limitation of reality.

At the level of theology, this shift from external to inherent limitation is accomplished by Christianity. In Judaism, God remains the transcendent irrepresentable Other. As Hegel was right to emphasize, Judaism is the religion of the Sublime: it tries to render the suprasensible dimension not through the overwhelming excess of the sensible, like the Indian statues with dozens of hands, etc., but in a purely negative way, by renouncing images altogether. Christianity, on the contrary, renounces this God of Beyond, this Real behind the curtain of the phenomena; it acknowledges that there is NOTHING beyond the appearance — nothing BUT the imperceptible X that changes Christ, this ordinary man, into God. In the ABSOLUTE identity of man and God, the divine is the pure *Schein* of another dimension that shines through Christ, this miserable creature. It is only here that iconoclasm is truly brought to its conclusion: what is effectively "beyond the image" is that X that makes Christ the man God. In this precise sense, Christianity inverts the Jewish sublimation into a radical desublimation: not desublimation in the sense of the simple reduction of God to man, but desublimation in the sense of the descent of the sublime Beyond to the everyday level. Christ is a "ready made God" (as Boris Groys put it), he is fully human, inherently indistinguishable from other humans in exactly the same way Judy is indistinguishable from Madeleine in *Vertigo*, or the "true" Erhardt is indistinguishable from his impersonator in *To Be Or Not to Be* — it is only the imperceptible "something", a pure appearance which cannot ever be grounded in a substantial property, that makes him divine. THIS is why Christianity is the religion of love and of comedy: as examples from Lubitch and Chaplin demonstrate, there is always something comic in this unfathomable difference that undermines the established identity (Judy IS Madeleine, Hynkel IS the Jewish barber). And love is to be opposed here to desire: desire is always caught in the logic of "this is not that," it thrives in the gap that forever separates the *obtained* satisfaction from the *sought-for* satisfaction, while love FULLY ACCEPTS that "this IS that" — that the woman with all her weaknesses and common features IS the Thing I unconditionally

love, that Christ, this miserable man, IS the living God. Again, to avoid a fatal misunderstanding, the point is not that we should "renounce transcendence" and fully accept the limited human person as our love object, since "this is all there is": transcendence is not abolished, but rendered ACCESSIBLE — it shines through in this very clumsy and miserable being that I love.[16]

Christ is thus not "man PLUS God": what becomes visible in him is simply the divine dimension in man "as such." So, far from being the Highest in man, the purely spiritual dimension towards which all men strive, "divinity" is rather a kind of obstacle, a "bone in the throat" — it is something, that unfathomable X, on account of which man cannot ever fully become MAN, self-identical. The point is not that, due to the limitation of his mortal sinful nature, man cannot ever become fully divine, but that, *due to the divine spark in him, man cannot ever fully become MAN.* Christ as man=God is the unique case of full humanity (*ecce homo*, as Pontius Pilatus put it to the mob demanding the lynching of Christ). For that reason, after his death, there is no place for any God of the Beyond: all that remains is the Holy Spirit, the community of believers onto which the unfathomable aura of Christ passes once it is deprived of its bodily incarntion. To put it in Freudian terms, once it can no longer rely on the *Anlehnung* onto Christ's body, it has the same sense as the drive which aims at the unconditional satisfaction and which always has to "lean on" a particular, contingent material object which acts as the source of its satisfaction.

The key distinction to be maintained here can be exemplified by the (apparent) opposite of religion, the intense sexual experience. Eroticization relies on the inversion-into-self of the movement directed at an external goal: the movement itself becomes its own goal. (When, instead of simply gently shaking the hand offered to me by the beloved person, I hold to it and repeatedly squeeze it, my activity will be automatically experienced as — welcome or, perhaps, intrusively unwelcome — eroticization: what I do is change the goal-oriented activity into an end-in-itself.) Therein resides the difference between the goal and the aim of a drive: say, with regard to the oral drive, its goal may be to eliminate hunger, but its aim is the satisfaction provided by the activity of eating (sucking, swallowing) itself. One can imagine the two satisfactions entirely separated: when, in a hospital, I am fed intravenously, my hunger is satisfied, but not my oral drive; when, on

[16] I am borrowing this formula of love as the "accessible transcendence" from Alenka Zupancic, to whom this whole passage is deeply indebted.

the contrary, a small child rhythmically sucks a pacifier, the only satisfaction he gets is that of the drive. This gap that separates aim from goal "eternalizes" drive, transforming the simple instinctual movement which finds peace and calm when it reaches its goal (say, the full stomach) into the process which gets caught in its own loop and insists on endlessly repeating itself. The crucial feature to take note of here is that this inversion cannot be formulated in the terms of the primordial lack and the series of metonymic objects trying (and, ultimately, failing) to fill in its void. When the eroticized body of my partner starts to function as the object around which drive circulates, this does NOT mean that his/her ordinary ("pathological", in the Kantian sense of the term) flesh-and-blood body is "transubstantiated" into a contingent embodiment of the sublime impossible Thing, holding (filling out) its empty place. Let us take a straightforwardly "vulgar" example: when a (heterosexual male) lover is fascinated with his partner's vagina, "never getting enough of it," prone not only to penetrate it, but to explore and caress it in all possible ways, the point is NOT that, in a kind of deceptive short-circuit, he mistakes the piece of skin, hair and meat for the Thing itself — his lover's vagina *is*, in all its bodily materiality, "the thing itself", not the spectral appearing of another dimension. What makes it an "infinitely" desirable object whose "mystery" cannot ever be fully penetrated is its non-identity to itself, i.e. the way it is never directly "itself." The gap which "eternalizes" drive, turning it into the endlessly repetitive circular movement around the object, is not the gap that separates the void of the Thing from its contingent embodiments, but the gap that separates the very pathological object FROM ITSELF, in the same way that, as we have just seen, Christ is not the contingent material ("pathological") embodiment of the suprasensible God: his "divine" dimension is reduced to the aura of a pure *Schein.*

We all know the phrase "the devil resides in the details" — implying that, in an agreement, you should be attentive to the proverbial small letter specifications and conditions at the bottom of the page which may contain unpleasant surprises, and, for all practical purposes, nullify what the agreement offers. However, does this phrase hold also for theology? Is it really that God is discernible in the overall harmony of the universe, while the Devil sticks in small features which, while insignificant from the global perspective, can mean terrible suffering for us individuals? With regard to Christianity, at least, one is tempted to turn this formula around: *God resides in details* — in the overall drabness and indifference of the universe, we discern the divine dimension in barely perceptible details — a kind smile here, an unexpected helpful gesture there. The

Turin Shroud with the alleged photographic imprint of Christ is perhaps the ultimate case of this "divine detail," of the "little bit of the real" — the very hot debates about it neatly fall into the triad IRS: the Imaginary (is the image discernible on it the faithful reproduction of Christ?), the Real (when was the material made? Is the test which demonstrated that the linen was woven in 14th century conclusive?), the Symbolic (the narrative of the Shroud's complicated destiny through the centuries). The true problem, however, resides in the potential catastrophic consequences for the Church itself if the tests will indicate again that the Shroud is authentic (from Christ's time and place): there are traces of "Christ's" blood on it, and some biochemists are already working on its DNA — so what will this DNA say about Christ's FATHER (not to mention the prospect of CLONING Christ)?

And what about the Jewish assertion of the unconditional iconoclastic monotheism: God is One, totally Other, with no human form? The commonplace position is here that pagan (pre-Jewish) gods were "anthropomorphic" (say, old Greek gods fornicated, cheated, and engaged in other ordinary human passions), while the Jewish religion with its iconoclasm was the first to thoroughly "de-anthropomorphize" divinity. What, however, if things are the exact opposite? What if the very need to prohibit man making the images of God bears witness to the "personification" of God discernible in "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness" (Genesis 1:26) — what if the true targets of Jewish iconoclastic prohibition are not previous pagan religions, but rather *its own* "anthropomorphization"/"personalization" of God? What if Jewish religion *itself* generates the excess it has to prohibit? In other words, making images has to be prohibited not because of the pagans; its true reason is the premonition that, if the Jews were to do the same as the pagans, something horrible would have emerged (the hint of this horror is given in Freud's hypothesis about the murder of Moses, this traumatic event on the denial of which the Jewish identity is raised).

In pagan religions, such a prohibition would have been *meaningless*. Christianity then goes one step further by asserting not only the likeness of God and man, but their direct *identity* in the figure of Christ: "no wonder man looks like God, since a man [Christ] IS God." According to the standard notion, pagans were anthropomorphic, Jews were radically iconoclastic, and Christianity effects a kind of "synthesis", a partial regression to paganism, by introducing the ultimate "icon to erase all other icons," that of the suffering Christ. Against this commonplace, one should assert that it is the Jewish religion which remains an

"abstract/immediate" negation of anthropomorphism, and, as such, attached to it, determined by it in its very direct negation, whereas it is only Christianity that effectively "sublates" paganism.

Thus in iconoclasm Judaism fights ITS OWN EXCESS. That is to say, *apropos* of the standard opposition between the Cartesian self-transparent subject of thought and the Freudian subject of the unconscious (which is perceived as anti-Cartesian, as undermining the Cartesian "illusion" of rational identity), one should bear in mind that the opposition through which a certain position asserts itself is *its own* presupposition, its own inherent excess (as is the case with Kant: the notion of diabolical Evil which he rejects is only possible within the horizon of HIS OWN transcendental revolution). The point here is not so much that the Cartesian *cogito* is the presupposed "vanishing mediator" of the Freudian subject of the unconscious (a thought worth pursuing), but that the subject of the unconscious is already operative in the Cartesian *cogito* as its own inherent excess: in order to assert *cogito* as the self-transparent "thinking substance", one HAS to pass through the excessive point of madness which designates *cogito* as the vanishing abyss of substanceless thought. And does the same not go for Jewish iconoclasm? It does not prohibit/fight pagan images, but the image-like power of ITS OWN founding gesture. It is the JEWISH God who is the FIRST fully "personalized" God, a God who says "I am who am." In other words, iconoclasm and other Jewish prohibitions do not relate to pagan Otherness, but to the violence of Judaism's OWN imaginary excess. In this sense, Christianity — with its central notion of Christ as man-God — simply makes "for itself" the personalization of God in Judaism. And is this prohibition of images not equivalent to the Jewish disavowal of the primordial crime?[17] In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud already implies this ultimate identity: the primordial parricide is the ultimate fascinating image. What, then, does the Christian reassertion of the unique *image* of the crucified Christ stand for?

So how are Judaism and Christianity related? The standard Judeo-Lacanian answer is that Christianity is a kind of regression to the imaginary narcissistic fusion of the community that forsakes the traumatic tension between Law and sin (its transgression). Consequently, Christianity replaces the logic of Exodus, of an open-ended voyage without any guarantee as to its final outcome, with the messianic logic of the final reconciliation — the idea of the "perspective of Last Judgement" is foreign to Judaism. Along these lines, Eric Santner is

[17] See Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Musica Ficta* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1994).

fully justified in claiming that, while Judaism is a religion whose public discourse is haunted by the spectral shadow of its obscene uncanny double, of its excessive transgressive founding violent gesture (it is this very disavowed attachment to the traumatic kernel which confers on Judaism its extraordinary chutzpah and durability), Christianity does not possess *another*, its own, obscene disavowed supplement, but simply *has none*.[18] The Christian answer is that, precisely, *the tension between the pacifying Law and the excessive superego is not the ultimate horizon of our experience*. That is, it is possible to step out of this domain, not into a fake imaginary bliss, but into the Real of an act; it is possible to cut the Gordean knot of transgression and guilt. Antigone is thus effectively the precursor of a Christian figure, insofar as there is no tension whatsoever in her position between Law and transgression, between transgression and guilt, between the unconditional ethical demand and her inadequate answer to it.

So, perhaps, the difference between Judaism and Christianity is, to put it in Schelling's terms, the difference between contraction and expansion: Jewish contraction (perseverance, enduring in the status of a remainder) lays the ground for the Christian expansion (love). If Jews assert the Law without superego, Christians assert love as *jouissance* outside the Law. In order to get at *jouissance* outside Law, not tainted by the obscene superego supplement of the Law, the Law itself has first to be delivered from the grip of *jouissance*. The position to adopt between Judaism and Christianity is thus not simply to give preference to one of them, even less to opt for a kind of pseudo-dialectical "synthesis," but to introduce the gap between the enunciated content and the position of enunciation: as for the content of the belief, one should be a Jew, while retaining the Christian position of enunciation.

Herbert Schnaedelbach's essay 'Der Fluch des Christentums'[19] provides perhaps the most concise liberal attack on Christianity, enumerating its seven (not sins, but) "birth-blunders": (1) the notion of the original sin that pertains to humanity as such; (2) the notion that God paid for that sin through a violent legal settlement with himself, sacrificing his own son's blood; (3) the missionary expansionism; (4) anti-Semitism; (5) eschatology with its vision of the final Day of Reckoning; (6) the import of the Platonic dualism with its hatred of the

[18] See Eric Santner, "Traumatic Revelations: Freud's Moses and the Origins of Anti-Semitism," in Renata Salecl, ed., *Sexuation* (Durham: Duke UP, 2000).

[19] See Herbert Schnaedelbach, 'Der Fluch des Christentums', *Die Zeit* 20, 11. Mai 2000, pp. 41-42.

body; (7) the manipulative dealing with historical truth. Although, in a predictable way, Schnaedelbach puts most of the blame on Saint Paul, on his drive to institutionalize Christianity, he emphasizes that we are not dealing here with a secondary corruption of the original Christian teaching of love, but with a dimension present at the very origins. Furthermore, he insists that — to put it bluntly — all that is really worthwhile in Christianity (love, human dignity, etc.), is not specifically Christian, but was taken over into Christianity from Judaism.

What is perceived here as the problem is precisely Christian *universalism*: what this all-inclusive attitude (recall Saint Paul's famous "There are no men or women, no Jews and Greeks") involves is a thorough exclusion of those who do not accept to be included into the Christian community. In other "particularistic" religions (and even in Islam, in spite of its global expansionism), there is a place for others, they are tolerated, even if they are condescendingly looked upon. The Christian motto "All men are brothers," however, ALSO means that "Those who are not my brothers ARE NOT MEN." Christians usually praise themselves for overcoming the Jewish exclusivist notion of the Chosen People and encompassing the entirety of humanity — the catch is here that, in their very insistence that they are the Chosen People with the privileged direct link to God, Jews accept the humanity other people who celebrate their false gods, while Christian universalism tendentially excludes non-believers from the very universality of humankind.

The question nonetheless remains (if such a quick dismissal does not fail to account for the momentous dimension of the Paulinian *agape*) as to the "miracle" of the retroactive "undoing" of sins through the suspension of the Law. One usually opposes here the rigorous Justice of Judaism and Christian Mercy, the inexplicable gesture of undeserved pardon: we, humans, were born in sin, we cannot ever repay our debts and redeem ourselves through our own acts — our only salvation lies in God's Mercy, in His supreme sacrifice. In this very gesture of breaking the chain of Justice through the inexplicable act of Mercy, of paying our debt, Christianity imposes on us an even stronger debt: we are forever indebted to Christ, we cannot ever repay him for what he did to us. The Freudian name for such an excessive pressure which we cannot ever remunerate is, of course, *superego*.[20] More precisely, the notion of Mercy is in itself ambiguous, such that it cannot fully be reduced to this superego agency: there is also Mercy in the sense Badiou reads this

[20] One should not forget that the notion of Mercy is strictly correlative to that of Sovereignty: only the bearer of sovereign power can dispense mercy.

notion, namely the "mercy" of the Event of Truth (or, for Lacan, of the act) — we cannot actively decide to accomplish an act, the act surprises the agent itself, and "mercy" designated precisely this unexpected occurrence of an act.

Usually, it is Judaism which is conceived as the religion of the superego (of man's subordination to the jealous, mighty and severe God), in contrast to the Christian God of Mercy and Love. However, it is precisely through NOT demanding from us the price for our sins, through paying this price for us Himself, that the Christian God of Mercy establishes itself as the supreme superego agency: "I paid the highest price for your sins, and you are thus indebted to me FOREVER." Is this God as the superego agency, whose very Mercy generates the indelible guilt of believers, the ultimate horizon of Christianity? Is the Christian *agape* another name for Mercy?

In order to properly locate Christianity with regard to this opposition, one should recall Hegel's famous dictum *apropos* of the Sphynx: "The enigmas of the Ancient Egyptians were also enigmas for the Egyptians themselves." Along the same lines, the elusive, impenetrable *Dieu obscur* also has to be impenetrable to Himself, He must have a dark side, something that is in Him more than Himself. Perhaps this accounts for the shift from Judaism to Christianity: Judaism remains at the level of the enigma OF God, while Christianity involves the move to the enigma IN God Himself. The Christian *logos*, the divine Revelation in and through the Word, and the enigma IN God are strictly correlative, the two aspects of one and the same gesture. It is precisely because God is an enigma also IN AND FOR HIMSELF, because he has an unfathomable Otherness in Himself, that Christ had to emerge to reveal God not only to humanity, but TO GOD HIMSELF — it is only through Christ that God fully actualized himself as God.

What is incomprehensible within the pre-Christian horizon is the full shattering dimension of this impenetrability of God to Himself, discernible in Christ's "Father, why did you forsake me?", this Christian version of the Freudian "Father, can't you see that I am burning?". This total abandonment by God is the point at which Christ becomes FULLY human, the point at which *the radical gap that separates God from man is transposed into God himself.* Here, *God the Father himself stumbles upon the limit of his omnipotence.* What this means is that the Christian notion of the link between man and God thus inverts the standard pagan notion according to which man approaches God through spiritual purification, through casting off the "low" material/sensual aspects of his

being and thus elevating himself towards God. *When I, a human being, experience myself as cut off from God, at that very moment of the utmost abjection, I am absolutely close to God, since I find myself in the position of the abandoned Christ.* There is no "direct" identification with (or approach to) the divine majesty: I identify myself with God only through identifying myself with the unique figure of God-the-Son abandoned by God. In short, Christianity gives a specific twist to the story of Job, the man-believer abandoned by God — it is Christ (God) himself who has to occupy the place of Job. Man's identity with God is asserted only in/through God's radical self-abandonment, when the inner distance of God towards himself. The only way for God to create free people (humans) is to open up the space for them in HIS OWN lack/void/gap: man's existence is the living proof of God's self-limitation. Or, to put it in more speculative-theological terms: man's infinite distance from God, the fact that he is a sinful, evil being, marked by the Fall, unworthy of God, has to be reflected back into God himself, as the Evil of God the Father Himself, i.e. as his abandonment of his Son. Man's abandonment of God and God's abandonment of his Son are strictly correlative, the two aspects of one and the same gesture.

This divine self-abandonment, this impenetrability of God to himself, thus signals God's fundamental *imperfection.* And it is only within this horizon that the properly Christian Love can emerge, a *Love beyond Mercy.* Love is always love for the Other insofar as he is lacking — we love the Other BECAUSE of his limitation, helplessness, ordinariness even. In contrast to the pagan celebration of the Divine (or human) Perfection, the ultimate secret of the Christian love is perhaps that it is the loving attachment to the Other's imperfection. And THIS Christian legacy, often obfuscated, is today more precious than ever.