

More than everything

Žižek's Badiouian Hegel

Peter Osborne

There are philosophical books, minor classics even, which are widely known and referred to, although no one has actually read them page by page... a nice example of interpassivity, where some figure of the Other is supposed to do the reading for us.

Slavoj Žižek¹

Allow me to be that figure (for now anyway), for Žižek has published a book which, while in no way unreadable – assuming one lives long enough – is unlikely to be actually read.*

Everything about this book revolves around questions of size – literal and metaphorical, possible and impossible (sublime), phantasmatic and mundane. Close to half a million words, over a thousand pages, *Less Than Nothing* is the sarcastically titled tool of Žižek's bid for an imagined continental-philosophical heavyweight crown: the 'mega-book about Hegel' which, setting the 'shitty politics' aside, is his self-declared 'true life's work', 'a true work of love'. (The seamless integration of the publicist function into the author function is a familiar operation.) The jokey title acts as a sign of knowingness at a deeper level too: a knowing disavowal of the book's all-too-obvious desire to be 'more than everything' – a desire with regard to which Žižek has long taken on the burden of symptomatic acting out, on behalf of us all. We might call this his heroic aspect, so long as we bear in mind that there can be no more heroes – which is precisely what gives the hero of the modern his or her distinctive cultural patina. As Foucault's gloss on Baudelaire puts it: 'Modernity is not a phenomenon of sensitivity to the fleeting present; it is the will to "heroize" the present.'² Žižek is nothing if not modern in this regard (postmodernists ruefully reflecting upon the expiry of their 'use by' dates, please take note). Yet there is

an unresolved tension in the paradoxical stance of a knowing disavowal. It is in the ironic tension between what the book says and what it performs (Žižek would presumably call it a symptom) that the philosophical meaning of *Less Than Nothing* resides as in many ways a decidedly unHegelian text.³

The reigning champion in Žižek's imaginary heavyweight contest is, of course, his good friend Alain Badiou, whose door-stopping *Being and Event* (1988)⁴ expanded into the cultural space created by its 2005 English-language reception to spawn *Logics of Worlds* (2006) as *Being and Event, 2* – the cinematically abbreviated subtitle of which hints at its author's bonding with Žižek over the revival of Lenin. *Less Than Nothing* more or less exactly matches for length the extended version of *Being and Event*. Of course, size is just the mundane guise of the idea of the 'big book' here, the book with the big ideas, the book that will become part of the history of philosophy in its canonical mode, the book by a thinker who is more than a man (although apparently never a woman), 'a figure like Plato or Hegel', who 'walks here among us!' – as Žižek is repeatedly quoted as writing of Badiou, with barely concealed aggression. Us ... mere mortals. 'Can this really be the Son of Plato?' we are invited to ask. And what of the son of Hegel?

By the time Badiou's 1982 *Theory of the Subject* was translated into English in 2009 Žižek's formula had become quietly pluralized: 'you hold in your hands proof that philosophers of the status of Plato, Hegel and Heidegger are still walking around today!' So if Badiou is to count as one, who is (or who are) the other philosopher(s) of this status walking around today? The inference is obvious. But things are a little more complicated than the analogy suggests.

* Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, Verso, London and New York, 2012. x + 1038 pp., £50.00 hb., 978 01 84467 897 6. Numbers in the text refer to pages of this edition.

For while Badiou is attributed the status of being ‘a figure like’ the canonical authors of the tradition, in his own name, Žižek’s claim is rather different. For he occupies it not in his own name, but in the name of another from within the tradition: Hegel. Žižek does not so much want to be ‘Žižek, son of Hegel’, on a par with ‘Badiou, Plato’s son’. He wants to channel Hegel himself, to *be* his afterlife, and thereby retroactively to be Hegel himself.

Like the famous intellectual ‘returns’ of the 1950s and 1960s – Lacan’s return to Freud and Althusser’s return to Marx, in particular – Žižek will repeat Hegel ‘in the radical Kierkegaardian sense’ (18). And he will do so, rhetorically at least, precisely; so precisely that Hegel will be completely different (this is the famous difference of repetition) – completely different to what he was, yet exactly as he has always been, since he can only ever have been what he is, and what he is is always to be determined ‘now’. Such is the retroactive temporal logic of Freud’s *Nachträglichkeit* (backwardsness), as elucidated by Lacan and Laplanche, generalized to cultural objects, and raised to the level of history via the concept of repetition. There, at the level of history, it converges with the notion of the afterlife (*Nachleben*) that Walter Benjamin borrowed from Aby Warburg and generalized into a temporality of cultural artefacts, materialistically understood. Predictably, Žižek sticks with the psychoanalytical version, transposing it directly to the history of thought, and letting history go hang itself. We need the second model, though, to make historical sense of Žižek’s practice – a kind of sense that his own structural model of sense refuses, despite its charting of a passage ‘from the logic of the signifier ... to Hegelian dialectics’.⁵ For Žižek, Hegelian dialectics is the elaborated truth of the logic of the signifier, but that logic functions, reflexively, to constrain the dialectics into which it is transformed to the limits of a structural reflexivity. This is where most of the philosophical problems associated with Žižek’s claims on Hegel have their source.⁶

Hegel is so different and yet so completely himself here that he is identical to his repeater: Hegel is Žižek, Žižek is Hegel. This is the chiasmic miracle of *Less Than Nothing* and the ground of its grandiosity. (The presumably ironic, but closer to sarcastic, cheesy chocolate box painting of Žižek, disdainful bestride a horse, on the flap of the dust jacket, while a naked woman crawls abjectly along a red line on the front cover is unlikely to endear him to feminist readers. But nor are they likely to provide him with the outrage he presumably seeks.) Unlike non-philosophical miracles, however, this one takes an awfully long time to

transpire and it depends upon a variety of other transmutations along the way. Most of these will be familiar to regular readers of Žižek, and with twenty other books either authored or edited by him on the Verso list alone, there are presumably a fair number of philosophically minded ones out there who will take up the challenge, encouraged perhaps by those chunks of the book they will recognize along the way.⁷

1, 2, 3

First and foremost, Hegel must become ‘Hegel–Lacan’. Žižek must posit and redeem a deep philosophical identity between Lacan and Hegel as ‘two versions of the same matrix’,⁸ in order to bring Hegel into the conceptual space of post-1960s’ French thought, aka ‘theory’. This is Žižek’s signature move. It is by demonstrating a philosophical identity of Hegel and Lacan at the level of the ‘truth’ of the thought of each that Žižek’s text becomes the medium of that identity, and Žižek (as author of the discourse of Hegel–Lacan, the truth of the discourse of Hegel) may become ‘Hegel’: the name of the author-function of the historical individual in the afterlife of its works. However, interpretative priority must be given to Lacan, as the theoretical representative of the present, within these reciprocal cross-readings. The construction of Hegel–Lacan thus moves backwards, from Lacan to Hegel.

Introduced to an English-language readership in 1989, in chapter 6 of *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (which has the same title as chapter 6 of *Less Than Nothing*: ‘Not Only as Substance, but Also as Subject’ – the temporality of repetition is editorially explicit), on the back of ten years of publications on Hegel in Slovenian, the construction of Hegel–Lacan – reprised in the Hegel chapters of numerous of Žižek’s books – has never wavered. Indeed, it has become more insistent and deeply rooted. Althusser’s return to Marx rested upon Lacan’s return to Freud *methodologically*, in its adoption of the idea of a symptomatic reading. In contrast, Žižek’s return to Hegel rests upon Lacan *ontologically*, in its interpretation of the structure of the movement of Hegelian thought as the same as that of the being of the Lacanian subject: *a positing and retroactive becoming of presuppositions*. The very movement of the interpretation exemplifies the philosophical form that it expounds. The *locus classicus* for the exposition of this structure is not in Lacan himself, but in a text by his disciple Jacques-Alain Miller, only recently translated into English: ‘Action of the Structure’.⁹ Written in 1964, in response to Lacan’s founding of the École Freudienne de Paris, and published in 1968 in the *Cahiers pour l’Analyse*,

this text provides the key to Lacanian structuralism as a theory of the subject (the subject is the retroactive effect of its positing as a presupposition), and thereby to the passage from Lacan to Badiou, traversed in Badiou's own *Theory of the Subject* – the text in which Badiou became 'Badiou'.¹⁰ This is a passage that exercises Žižek, as the object of a series of rivalrous loves: for Lacan, for Badiou, and for the idea of politics that the passage between them spawned. Initially fixed by the figure of Lacan, this troubling set of identifications has more recently come to rest on the signifier 'communism'.

Žižek's insistence on the existence of the Hegel–Lacan matrix largely takes the form of the repetition of a very few fundamental arguments across a variety



of readings and supporting jokes. (Let us not forget the jokes, and their crucial diversionary as well as pedagogical function. Interestingly, there are less of them in *Less Than Nothing*, they are largely relegated to footnotes, and they possess little effectivity, either pedagogically or as diversions. The mega-book is a serious genre.) These repetitions are pragmatic. They are a political practice of habit-formation within the ideological space of 'theory'. Indeed, the construction of Hegel–Lacan was initially conceived, in late Althusserian fashion, as a contribution to the theory of ideology ('ideology' being the name, in those days, for that which 'interpellates individuals as subjects'). Since then, the position has become progressively more richly elaborated, philosophically, leading up to what we must assume is its pretty-much-definitive exposition in *Less Than Nothing*. This progressive deepening has two main staging posts.

The first of these, and hence the second main move on the way to the construction of the speculative identity Hegel–Žižek, is a Hegelian revision of Lacan: a theoretical complication of the Lacanian triad Imaginary–Symbolic–Real, which would de-transcendentalize the Real – the Real having hitherto

been falsely interpreted as the ontologically privileged domain, in opposition to the Imaginary and the Symbolic. The method is the 'dialecticalization' of the relations between them.¹¹ The second deepening, and hence the third move on the way to the transformation of Hegel into Hegel–Žižek, is historico-philosophically almost as startling as the initial move of identifying Hegel with Lacan: the transmigration of the philosophical soul of middle-period Schelling directly into Hegel's texts. This is startling because Schelling's philosophy always used to be considered by Hegelians (following the master) as having been superseded in its various one-sidednesses by Hegel's dialectical path to the absolute, and as a model of regression to the undialectical immediacy of intellectual intuition. This reading has long been discredited. Whether one can convincingly establish an identity between Hegel and the middle-period Schelling, though, is something else.

Žižek's writings on Schelling date from the mid-1990s.¹² His interpretation of Schelling lies at the very centre of the Hegel interpretation in *Less Than Nothing*, in three respects. First, it provides the philosophical structure required to mediate the extremes of Hegel and Lacan, on the outer edges of the Hegel–Lacan configuration. Schelling is here both 'Schelling-for-Hegel' and 'Schelling-for-Lacan'. Schelling provides the theoretical form that binds Hegel to Lacan. Second, this opens the door to resituating Hegel within a re-reading of German Idealism more generally, on the basis of the recent revival of literature about the latter, in relation to which Žižek's reading of Hegel can be both polemically refunctioned and further developed.¹³ The main antagonists here are Dieter Henrich (upon whom Žižek often relies, although he also criticizes him on specific points) and Robert Pippin, whose one-dimensionally Kantian Hegelianism is subject to refreshingly robust attack.

Finally, Schelling offers Žižek the opportunity, however fleeting, to connect Hegel–Lacan (effectively rewritten now as Hegel–Lacan–Schelling) to the topic of 'dialectical materialism' – a phrase Žižek uses affirmatively in a relatively orthodox manner to denote the specifically philosophical space of the conjunction of materialism with dialectics. Schelling was already located 'At the Origins of Dialectical Materialism', in the opening chapter of the Schelling book, *The Indivisible Remainder* – in a new version of an (unacknowledged) argument originally made by Manfred Frank back in 1975.¹⁴ Here that connection – and crucially the slippage it makes possible – will be used to infiltrate a Badiouian version of the materialist dialectic inside Hegel himself.

Hegel, Žižek appears to believe, must be read *as* a dialectical materialist, although he is uncharacteristically coy about coming out and actually saying it. This is odd. This a book in which the author has forgotten to state his main thesis. (Psychoanalysis, anyone?) An argument is insinuated by the subtitle of the book, but the closest Žižek comes to connecting the phrase ‘dialectical materialism’ directly to Hegel is a brief reference to *Lacan’s* ‘identification with dialectical materialism’, which cites a passage from *Seminar XVIII* about the rejection of ‘the nominalist tradition’ dictated by the concept of the real (780). This may have something to do with the peculiar positioning of Badiou in this text, which disrupts the metaphors of Žižek’s subtitle: can a void cast a shadow?

Žižek is in competition with Badiou, on behalf of Hegel, but he nonetheless ‘remains faithful to Badiou’s original project of a radical emancipatory project which passes through Lacan’ (19). The result is something that is at first sight, from the standpoint of the current distribution of theoretical and political positions in European philosophy, a strange creature: a Badiouian Hegel. Something has gone seriously wrong with Žižek’s project here: it has been taken over by Badiou. Žižek has rendered Hegel to Badiou. From the more distanced viewpoint of a Marxian practical and historical materialism, on the other hand, the conjunction is less strange, if still eccentric. For each philosophy is a full-blown idealism struggling with the limitations of its grasp on actuality, which *redefines reality* in terms of the gap that structures the limitation. This leads to an abstract, classical philosophical conception of materialism as no more than the affirmation of the *internal* negation of idealism – a materialism without content, writ large. It is not surprising that Hegel himself (and, on occasion, Lenin) preferred the determinacy of a self-professed dialectical idealism.

Philosophy in the boudoir

These, then, are the main theoretical elements that are assembled, combined and deployed by Žižek in *Less Than Nothing* in something like a systematic – or at least a comprehensively polemically contextualized – form. It is this constant contextualization, which overruns the main part of the book, that makes the book so long. Part II, on Hegel, takes up no more than one-fifth of the book, if we exclude its ‘Interludes’; still less than a third if they are included. It could easily have been a stand-alone, far more digestible volume. However, despite the fact that this is, in its self-presentation, a book *about* Hegel, it also wants to be a

work of contemporary philosophy in a far more ambitious sense: a historically reflective and conjuncturally oriented philosophy of the subject, capable of showing the falsity and incorporating within itself the truth of all other positions, under the intellectual conditions of the present. This is an authentically Hegelian desire. Doing this in the form of, and alongside, an account of Hegel, however, rather than as an independent philosophical construction, means that a multiplicity of modes of address are welded together into a strangely homogenous, albeit internally variegated and often distracted, discourse, with no clear sense of its addressee. It sometimes seems as if Žižek is standing



on the mountain top ranting into the void. This sense of distraction is exacerbated by the way in which arguments regularly start up from the beginning, over and again. Yet all this discursive malfunctioning could be viewed as an essential part of the text’s symptomatic cultural and psychic form and deeper social meaning. To live in Babel, you must speak Babel.

That said, *Less Than Nothing* is carefully, if somewhat gauchely structured, as the story of a seduction. It begins with ‘The Drink Before’ (Part I): some emblematic, fast-forward philosophical prehistory – Plato, Christianity, Fichte. It progresses to ‘The Thing Itself’, in two parts: Hegel and Lacan. And it ends with ‘The Cigarette After’ (Part IV), during which smoke is puffed in the faces of some competing philosophical positions: Badiou, Heidegger and ‘The Ontology of Quantum Physics’. (*The Indivisible Remainder*, Žižek’s other ‘true love’ philosophy book, also ends with a chapter on quantum physics – the mainstream analytical test of a philosophy’s sperm count.) The Conclusion – presumably ‘A Quick Exit’, before things get complicated – is a restatement of Žižek’s own version of Lacanian politics (‘The Political Suspension of the Ethical’) with various other bits and pieces thrown in along the way. At the close, on the way out the door, Žižek wrestles himself free from Badiou on the

question of ‘the aim of the proletariat’, and leaves with G.K. Chesterton: ‘the lost causes are exactly those which might have saved the world’ (1010). We are left to ponder quite what Hegel–Lacan (or Hegel–Lacan–Schelling–Badiou as he has become by then – it is getting crowded in Žižek’s bed) thinks about that.

Two other formal features complicate the plan. First, six polemical ‘Interludes’ are episodically woven into the fabric of Parts II and III on: Marx and Hegel; Foucault and Derrida and the history of madness; some recent texts on Hegel’s political philosophy, retroactivity; Quentin Meillassoux (‘Correlationism and Its Discontents’); and Cognitivism. Second, each of the chapters is internally extremely fluid, open to multiple digressions, repetitions, inversions (predictably, there is a multiplicity of inversions), passing polemical engagements and remarks about other things that happen to have struck Žižek at the time of writing. One can see here the wholly strategical character of the choice of philosophers with whom he shares ‘The Cigarette After’. For if there is a philosopher Žižek needs to engage with philosophically (rather than just wrestle), it is Deleuze, the great contemporary anti-Hegel, in the full dialectical meaning of the term. Deleuze does not fit into Žižek’s wholly artificial Greimasian square of the four positions constituting ‘today’s ideologico-philosophical field’ (6). Yet as soon as Žižek asks himself ‘Is it Still Possible to be a Hegelian Today?’ (Chapter 4) he turns to Deleuze as the philosopher whose conception of the ‘pure past’ he must combat.

There is plenty of contingency to be found in this text and at a microscopic scale it is certainly lively. The literary form through which this contingency is transformed (retroactively) into necessity is one that recognizes the contingency of its own necessity. (Žižek dances a while with Meillassoux on this topic.) What is unclear is why all this material must be funnelled so exclusively through the dual optic of Hegel and dialectical materialism. What do the signifiers ‘Hegel’ and ‘dialectical materialism’ offer Žižek such that he needs to pass all of his philosophical materials through them (while overdetermining them with Lacan), however historically unconvincing it may be? Who and what is being forgotten or effaced as a result? Let us examine the ‘less than nothing’ of Žižek’s dialectical materialism a little more closely.

Materialism of the void

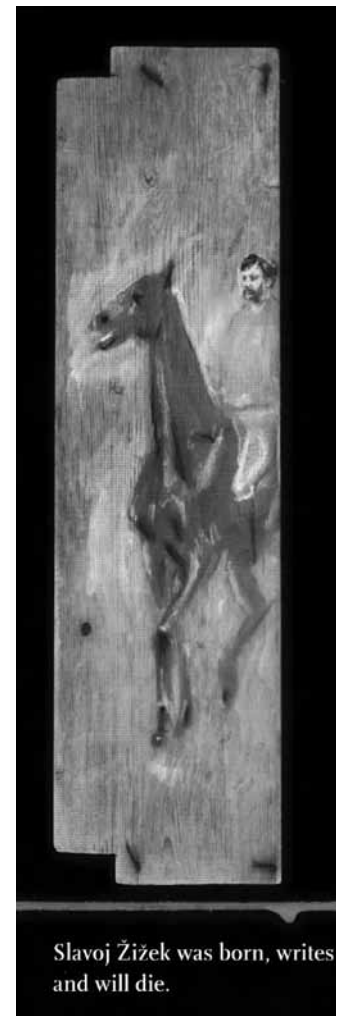
The argument here is simple, and, despite its supposed Schellingian ‘origins’, derives from Badiou’s reading of Plato. It sets out from the claim that ‘nothing’ (in its opposition to ‘something’) counts as one, and

if one wants to conceive materialism, as the affirmation of an irreducible multiplicity, in opposition to the idealistic ‘One’, one must therefore derive it not from nothing (Deleuze’s alleged error) but from the void, which is ‘less than nothing’. Reality, in its irreducible multiplicity comes from, or fundamentally is, the void. It is more than everything (the One) – it exceeds the One – *because* it is less than nothing.

Žižek finds this argument, and with it a ‘minimal definition’ of dialectical materialism, in a passage in Plato’s *Parmenides*:

whether one is or is not, one and the others in relation to themselves and one another, all of them, in every way, are and are not, and appear to be and appear not to be. (67)

Quite why we should consider this a ‘materialism’ *today* is unclear – other than on the already stated formalistic grounds that it enacts a negation of the idealism of ‘the one’, and materialism is to be defined (and exhausted) by the affirmation of the negation of idealism. Yet the whole history of materialism since the Enlightenment, and Marx’s ‘new’ materialism in particular, dissociates itself from the idea that such a formalistically idealist negation of the metaphysics of idealist univocity has anything to do with the ontological specificity of materiality in its complex modern senses. This is why Žižek needs quantum physics so badly, as a contemporary ‘scientific’ example of his antique materialism. Outside of the hallowed circle of the Badiouian axiom (the ‘I propose to name...’),¹⁵ a generic affirmation of multiplicity, or even ‘multiple multiplicities’, doth not a materialist make – especially when claimed on behalf of Hegel. The fact that Žižek immediately glosses the quotation from Plato (above) in terms of a Lacanian–Badiouian conception of the void merely confirms the point:



Slavoj Žižek was born, writes and will die.

If there is no One, just multiplicities of multiplicities, then the ultimate reality is the Void itself; all determinate things 'are and are not'. (67)

The void at the heart of the structuralism of the subject ('the action of a structure') is grounded here in a fully blown formalist metaphysics of the void as the less than nothing. The only trick left to perform is to find it in Hegel too, with added dialectics – not just the dialectics of the 'are and are not' of determinate being, but the dialectics of determinate being and the void itself. It is the *contingency* of this process that provides the grounds for its materialist credentials within Hegel himself. This contingency is squared with the *necessity* of dialectical logic via Žižek's main thesis of 'Hegelian retroactivity' (219):

the process of becoming is not in itself necessary, but is the *becoming* (the gradual contingent emergence) of *necessity itself*. ... every dialectical passage or reversal is a passage in which the new figure emerges ex nihilo and retroactively posits or creates its necessity. (231)

On this basis we are offered a 'return from Marx to Hegel' that enacts 'a "materialist reversal" of Marx himself' (207) – presumably because Marx is held to maintain a deterministic conception of necessity.

The retroactivity claim is an important one – broadly parallel to Benjamin's concept of the afterlife. But the manner of its exposition and attribution to Hegel begs a number of questions. First, it is a hermeneutical relation that holds between phenomenologically or historically successive stages, relative to certain – here, unspecified – conditions of intelligibility. (This is the problem of historical 'legibility' that so preoccupied Benjamin.) Second, these stages are totalized by Hegel, within the present, as a condition of their demonstrable necessity. (Hegel's logic presupposes 'the standpoint of the absolute'.) Third, as a result, significant portions of the empirically real are critically excluded from actuality on the basis of these judgements of intelligibility. It is not clear that Žižek is prepared to accept any of these three conditions, in his analogical projection of the retroactivity of the structuralist subject onto Hegel's dialectical logic. As for the 'materialist reversal' from Marx back to Hegel, it actually happens within Marx's own texts, specifically in *Capital*, where the ontological peculiarity of the value-form is shown to enact just such a process. However, it is ontologically particular to capital – that is its materialism: in Žižek's terms, the contingent historical specificity of its necessity. Such dialectical logical necessity cannot be a feature of a general metaphysics without being precisely what it is

in Hegel – idealism – because it lacks the capacity for sufficiently determinate significant (that is, practically relevant) differentiation. Simply calling it 'materialism', on the basis of its difference from an ancient philosophical logic of 'the One', does not stop it being idealism in a broader sense.

And Marx? Or *Geist* for that matter?

Dialectical materialism is important to Žižek for positional political reasons; he does not want to vacate its rhetorical ground. After all, how else can he revive Lenin? But this leaves Marx, the critique of political economy and the whole tradition of a Marx-based critical social theory stranded in something of a void (if I may be excused the terminology), suspended between Hegel–Lacan (or Hegel–Lacan–Schelling–Badiou, as he has become: HLSB, he is after all by now a kind of philosophical bank) and Lenin. In Žižek's discourse, there is a gaping hole between the ontology of the subject (now generalized, following Hegel–Badiou, into the materialist metaphysics of 'also as substance'), on the one hand, and a mercenary and wholly strategic political journalism, on the other.

The mediating ground of the social – the structures and social forms of capitalist societies and the forms of collective practices they provoke, for example – is almost wholly absent. It appears only in the Lacanian form of the Big Other; as I appear to you here, in Žižek's terms, as 'the Other supposed to do the reading for you'. This reduction of the social to a single figure recalls the phenomenological ontology of Levinas, in which the social appears exclusively as 'religion'.¹⁶ This structural homology between the places of the Big Other and religion in Žižek's and Levinas's work, respectively, perhaps accounts for the seemingly anachronistic preoccupation with and prioritization of religion in Žižek's ideological analyses. Either way, both render all social forms indifferent, reduced to a single structural model.

It is interesting at this point, in conclusion, to compare Žižek's Hegel to the previous full-on attempt to retrieve Hegel's thought for contemporary left intellectual life: Gillian Rose's *Hegel Contra Sociology*, about which I wrote in this journal thirty years ago.¹⁷ (Žižek makes no reference to it, sticking to recent readings congenial to aspects of his own.) Rose's dense book is still read, for the incisiveness of its argumentation, and the distinctiveness of its principled maintenance of the concept of the absolute as a *sine qua non* of Hegel's thought, not within a religious reading, but from the standpoint of the project of a 'critical Marxism'. In this respect, as its title indicates, it proposes 'to retrieve

Hegelian speculative experience for social theory', as an alternative to the neo-Kantianism of the sociological tradition.¹⁸ What is of interest in this proposal in comparison with Žižek's book, apart from its insistence on the distinction between dialectical thought and speculative experience (or the speculative relativization of dialectical thinking) is the recovery of *spirit* (*Geist*) as a philosophically sophisticated social category, focused on the question of the production and reformation of forms of subjectivity. Its affirmation of a purely Hegelian–phenomenological standpoint is politically restrictive, but it at least acknowledges that Hegel's philosophy is grounded on a distinctive conception of, and relation to, historically determinate social forms; and that our relation to it must negotiate the historical ontology of such forms, *from which the structure of dialectical logic itself derives*. The Lacanianism of Žižek's Hegel strips this out, leaving a bare psychoanalytical subject facing up to the Big Other, in a manner largely restricted to a politics of dissent, however radical or shared with other individuals. 'We should pass to the question "Which politics fits psychoanalysis?"', Žižek declares (963).

I am not sure that *Less Than Nothing* is 'the true life's work' that Žižek wants it be; or that it is wise for him to want it to be read in that way. But it does present a life's worth of intellectual materials. That they are impressive is without doubt. However, for all the variety of these materials, there is something machinic about the way in which Žižek processes them by subjecting them to the hermeneutical structure of Hegel–Lacan. The constant 'surprising' inversions (the surprise wears off) evoke deconstruction at the time of its routinization. In this respect, there is a danger of him remaking 'Hegel, the Difference-Obliterating Dialectical Machine' – a reading that Žižek explicitly rejects. Yet his own script is re-enacted so repeatedly that it appears as a new standardized formula. This is the point at which knowing cannot save Žižek from his own doing.

Big books (unlike Big Others) often take a long time to be received, if they are received at all. Meanwhile, as the press release puts it: '*Less Than Nothing* is available for extraction.'

Notes

1. Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, 2nd edn, Verso, London and New York, 2002, p. xi.
2. Michel Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?', in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow, Penguin, London, 1991, p. 40.
3. The book's paradoxical title also has the incidental function of out-nothing-ing the upstart Critchley's 1997 *Very Little... Almost Nothing*, which by these standards gets nowhere near nothing, let alone the 'less than nothing' that turns out to be 'everything you always wanted to know, but were afraid to ask'. We may 'know not what we do', but Žižek does and he is determined to tell us. But being unable to know itself means the subject undertaking this task cannot help but undermine it.
4. See Peter Osborne, 'Neo-Classic: Alain Badiou's Being and Event', *Radical Philosophy* 142, March/April 2007, pp. 19–29.
5. Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, pp. xvii–xxxv.
6. For an early diagnosis and critique, see Peter Dews, 'The Tremor of Reflection: Slavoj Žižek's Lacanian Dialectics', *Radical Philosophy* 72, July/August 1995, pp. 17–29.
7. Žižek has complicated this parlour game of spotting the passage – or the chapters – from his other books by a reverse move: reusing chapter headings and subheadings from them for new elaborations of the same topics.
8. Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, p. xviii.
9. Jacques-Alain Miller, 'Action of the Structure', in Peter Hallward and Knox Peden, eds, *Concept and Form*, Volume One: *Key Texts from the Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, Verso, London and New York, 2012, pp. 69–83.
10. For Žižek's version of this theory of the subject, see 'Cogito: The Void Called Subject', Part I of Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 1993, pp. 7–80.
11. See the auto-critique of *The Sublime Object of Ideology* in the hundred-page Foreword to the second edition of *For They Know Not What They Do*.
12. Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters*, Verso, London and New York, 1996; Slavoj Žižek/F.W.J. von Schelling, *The Abyss of Freedom/Ages of the World*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1997.
13. The initial outcome of this strategy appeared in Markus Gabriel and Slavoj Žižek, *Mythology, Madness and Laught: Subjectivity in German Idealism*, Continuum, London and New York, 2009. The second of Žižek's two chapters there, 'Fichte's Laughter' (pp. 122–67) reappears in Chapter 3 of *Less Than Nothing* as 'Fichte's Choice'. It is one of the best parts of the book.
14. Manfred Frank, *Der unendliche Mangel an Sein: Schellings Hegelkritik und die Anfänge der Marxschen Dialektik*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt, 1975. See also Manfred Frank, 'Schelling's Critique of Hegel and the Beginnings of Marxian Dialectics', *Idealistic Studies*, vol. 19, no. 3, 1989, pp. 251–68.
15. See Alain Badiou, 'Democratic Materialism and the Materialist Dialectic', *Radical Philosophy* 130, March/April 2005, pp. 20–24 – the first section of the Preface to *Logics of Worlds*.
16. 'We propose to call "religion" that bond that is established between the same and the other without constituting a totality.' Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, 1969, p. 40. There it is again, the axiomatic 'We propose to call...'
17. Peter Osborne, 'Hegelian Phenomenology and the Critique of Reason and Society', *Radical Philosophy* 32, Autumn 1982, pp. 8–15. See also Tony Gorman, 'Gillian Rose and the Project of a Critical Marxism', *Radical Philosophy* 105, January/February 2001, pp. 25–36.
18. Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, Athlone Press, London, 1981, p. 1.