

DIFFERENCE & DEFECATION

On Žižek's essay "Hegel and Shitting"

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Reason, essentially the Notion, is directly sundered into itself and its opposite, an antithesis which for that very reason is equally immediately resolved. But when Reason is presented as its own self and its opposite, and is held fast in the entirely separate moment of this asunderness, it is apprehended irrationally; and the purer the moments of this asunderness, the cruder is the appearance of this content which is either only for consciousness, or only ingenuously expressed by it. The depth which Spirit brings forth from within-but only as far as its picture-thinking consciousness where it lets it remain-and the ignorance of this consciousness about what it really is saying, are the same conjunction of the high and the low which, in the living being, Nature naively expresses when it combines the organ of its highest fulfilment, the organ of generation, with the organ of urination. The infinite judgement, qua infinite, would be the fulfilment of life that comprehends itself; the consciousness of the infinite judgement that remains at the level of picture-thinking behaves as urination.¹

An activity as banal as digestion is an issue that is far from being alien to Hegel's dialectics. This giant of German Idealism extensively elaborates on these bodily functions, including the faecal activity that inevitably follows. The pages devoted to that issue in his *Naturphilosophie* do not leave many details untouched.²

In a lot of comments, however, the theme of 'digestion' is put forward as a general metaphor for the dialectical machinery as such. Remember the well-known phrase by Adorno stating that Hegel's "system is the belly turned mind".³ The Spirit, facing in reality the other than itself, coincides with the movement that appropriates that otherness in order to acknowledge it as the "phenomenon" in which it is mirrored and in which it recognizes itself. This is to say that, during its historical process, the Spirit develops itself as an all-embracing digestive apparatus that 'eats' and 'digests' everything other than itself. Being destroyed/negated in its otherness, the entire reality,

¹ A.V. Miller, *Hegel's Phenomenology of the Spirit*, translated by A.V. Miller, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 210; last part is quoted in: Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Second Edition, p. 237.

² A.V. Miller (1970), *Hegel's Philosophy of Nature*, Being Part Two of the *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences (1830)*, translated from Nicolin and Pöggeler's Edition (1959) and from the *Zusätze* in Michelet's Text (1847), with foreword by J.N. Findley, F.B.A., Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 393-406.

³ Theodor W. Adorno (1973), *Negative Dialectics*, translated by E.B. Ashton, London / New York, p. 23.

including its history, turns out to be that what 'feeds' the Spirit in order to make it become what it is: transparent self-consciousness.

But if 'eating' and 'digestion' can be used as metaphors for the progressive way in which the Spirit discovers its self-consciousness in the act of 'appropriating' reality's alienating otherness, what about the faecal function included in that metaphor? At first sight, that function seems excluded from the metaphor. Even if, on its way to absolute knowledge, there might have been some faecal-like production, at the end, this too is 'sublated' by the Spirit – thus revealing itself not as a simple belly, but as a coprophagical one.

1. Defecation

And yet, some commentators put forward the metaphor of 'faecality' ('shitting') as essential to Hegelian dialectics. Slavoj Žižek is one of them. He not only does so in the context of the many jokes his oeuvre is interlarded with. He faces the issue directly and in full seriousness as well — in "Hegel and Shitting" for instance, the closing essay of the volume he co-edited under the title *Hegel & the Infinite*.⁴

At the end of this essay, in order to once again make clear why the faecality metaphor is an adequate image for the "matrix for the dialectical process", he opposes this metaphor to the one of coprophagy.

So, to pursue the rather tasteless metaphor, Hegel was not a sublimated coprophagist, as the usual notion of the dialectical process would lead us to believe. The matrix of the dialectical process is not that of defecation-externalization followed up by a swallowing up (re-appropriation) of the externalized content; on the contrary, it is one of appropriation followed by the excremental movement of dropping, releasing, letting go.⁵

⁴ Slavoj Žižek (2011), "Hegel and Shitting. The Idea's Constipation", in: Slavoj Žižek, Clayton Crockett, Creston Davis (eds.) (2011), *Hegel & the Infinite: Religion, Politics, and Dialectic*, New York: Columbia University Press, p 221-232. This essay – without the title – is retaken in: Slavoj Žižek (2012), *Less than Nothing. Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, London / New York: Verso, p. 399 ff.

⁵ Žižek 2011: 231; 2012: 405.

This passage retakes the beginning of the essay where, after quoting Adorno's image of the Spirit as a belly – a “thoroughly constipated” belly, Žižek adds – he introduces his different, opposite metaphor:

But what about the inevitable counter-movement, the Hegelian shitting excrementation? Is not the subject of what Hegel calls "Absolute Knowing" also a thoroughly *emptied* subject, a subject reduced to the role of pure observer (or, rather, registrar) of the self-movement of the content itself?⁶

So, the Spirit is not simply a consumer – eater and digester – of the otherness it sublates. There is, Žižek says, also the “counter-movement” of defecation. This is immediately linked to the movement that establishes the subject in its ultimate phase, “the subject of what Hegel calls ‘Absolute Knowing’”. It more exactly changes the status of the Spirit's subject – of the Spirit becoming subject. In the final movement of returning to itself, i.e. when the Spirit has appropriated not simply reality's otherness it consumes/sublates, but has now also appropriated the very act of appropriating/consuming/sublating as such, in other terms, when the Spirit for the last time has gone “From Substance to Subject”⁷, then the Spirit is not a full, but an empty belly. Become subject, having realized its ultimate state of self-consciousness in having recognized itself transparently in the alienating otherness of the outside reality, the Spirit's belly is not full of what it has ‘eaten’. Instead, that belly has emptied itself.

Žižek's suggestive claim is that the ultimate phase of reality's dialectical process – i.e. of the becoming self-conscious of the consciousness which is the motor of reality's history – is no longer a Spirit eating reality's otherness, but a Spirit released from what it has digested and allowing reality to enjoy its own freedom. What then follows is an addition which is far from being self-evident (as we will discuss later): the subject, released from the reality it has appropriated (eaten), becomes reality's “observer” – observer of freed reality, no longer dependent on the Spirit.

A few lines further, Žižek repeats his thesis and reveals his source in Hegel, be it by only quoting three words of it:

⁶ Žižek 2011: 222; Žižek's italics; see also, slightly modified, 2012: 399.

⁷ This is the title of the chapter (chapter 6) in which Žižek's “Hegel and Shitting” is incorporated in his ‘opus magnum’ on Hegel, *Less than Nothing: “Not Only As Substance, But Also As Subject”* (Žižek 2012: 359-417).

Does the final subjective position of the Hegelian System thus compel us to turn around the digestive metaphor? The supreme (and for many the most problematic) case of this counter-movement occurs at the very end of the *Logic*, when, after the notional deployment is completed, closing the circle of the absolute Idea, the Idea, in its resolve/decision, "freely releases itself" into Nature: lets Nature go, leaves it off, discards it, pushes it away from itself; and thus liberates it.⁸

A few lines before the end of the *Logic*, we do read indeed that the Spirit – or, literally, the "Idea" –, in its "final subjective position", "freely releases itself". In German: "daß die Idee sich selbst *frei entläßt*".⁹ What Žižek calls the "counter-movement" of "defecation" is present in the word "*entlassen*": to free, to liberate. Notice, however, that this is not the German word for "defecation", although it sounds very similar to it: to defecate in German is "*entlasten*". "[D]aß die Idee sich selbst *frei entlastet*" (defecated) is not the same as "*sich selbst frei entläßt*" (releases). Yet, metaphorically, it is not impossible to understand in the word *entlassen* something structurally similar to "defecation". If the Spirit is a belly, its ultimate act – the act in which it establishes its ultimate Self – is to empty that belly and to free itself from the digested food that is given back its full independence. Žižek sums up some illustrations of that thesis, all of them extremely short.

The same move is accomplished by God himself who, in the guise of Christ, as a finite mortal, also "freely releases itself" into temporal existence. And the same goes for early modern art, where Hegel accounts for the rise of "dead nature" paintings (not only of landscapes, flowers, etc., but of food and dead animals). Because of the development of art, subjectivity no longer needs the visual as the principal medium of its expression. For example, because the accent shifted to poetry as a more direct presentation of a subject's inner life, the natural is "released" of the burden to express subjectivity and thus gains freedom and can

⁸ Žižek 2011: 222; see also, slightly modified, Žižek 2012: 400.

⁹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1969), *Werke 6: Wissenschaft der Logik II*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, p. 573.

be asserted on its own.¹⁰

Christ's incarnation is not simply the way in which the Spirit appropriates material, mortal reality; it is above all the way in which it sets material reality free. Even early modern art, in its then popular genre of "nature morte", (still life),¹¹ shows this liberation. It manifests how Nature, freed from its living principle (the Spirit), nonetheless lives: freely, on its own.

2. Abrogation

Yet, are things as clear as Žižek puts them? Does the metaphor of "defecation" really illustrate the "matrix" of Hegelian dialectics? Let us have a closer look at the way in which Žižek includes the three Hegel words in his own text. In the quote above, we read that

the Idea, in its resolve/decision, "freely releases itself" *into* Nature: lets Nature go, leaves it off, discards it, pushes it away from itself; and thus liberates it.¹²

The Spirit "freely releases itself" *into* Nature. God "freely releases itself" *into* temporal existence. It is the word "into" that is problematic here. In the last quote, the word is at least a bit at odds with the sentence that is supposed to explain it. What does this explanation say the Spirit does? It "lets Nature go, pushes it away from itself". But this is not to say that the Spirit "releases itself *into* Nature". The Spirit rather releases Nature *from* itself or releases itself *from* Nature. Rather than making a move *into* Nature, the Spirit establishes a move *away from* it or at least creates a gap between itself and Nature. Only then the metaphor of "defecation" seems to make some sense.

Does it? Does it even then? How, then, does the act of defecation result in a "subject reduced to the role of pure observer (or, rather, registrar)" – as Žižek mentions in one of the quotes above? How could an act of shitting result in a 'subject'? And who or what, then, is the subject of *that* act?

¹⁰ Žižek 2011: 222; see also, slightly modified, Žižek 2012: 400.

¹¹ Hegel has surely the 17th century Dutch School in mind, with painters such as Pieter Claesz, Willem Claeszoon Heda, Willem Kalf, Abraham van Beijeren, and others.

¹² Žižek 2011: 222; my italics, MDK; see also, slightly modified, Žižek 2012: 400.

We will face these questions further onwards. But notice first that it is not the qualification of “observer” that is problematic here, for this is perfectly readable in Hegel’s *Logic*, in the sentence that Žižek quotes as support for his defecation thesis:

The passage is therefore to be understood here rather in this manner, that the Idea *freely releases* itself in its absolute self-assurance and inner poise.¹³

Or in Hegel’s German:

Das Übergehen ist also hier vielmehr so zu fassen, daß die Idee sich selbst *frei entläßt*, ihrer absolut sicher und in sich ruhend.¹⁴

“... *ihrer absolut sicher und in sich ruhend*”, “in its absolute self-assurance and inner poise”. The ultimate “passage” in the history of the Spirit, which renders the appropriation of Nature’s otherness by Being’s self-consciousness into a separation freeing Nature from the Spirit’s dominance, implies an “absolute self-assurance and inner poise”. If this act of separation is to be considered as defecation, may we think then that Nature has become faeces defecated by the Spirit? Not at all. Or that the Spirit has become faeces, a piece of waste rubbish dropped by Nature? On the contrary, the Spirit beholds its full spiritual, i.e. self-conscious character. If it can let Nature go, it is because, in that Nature, there is no ‘otherness’ left to be understood/sublated/eaten/digested. The acts of understanding/sublation/eating/digestion are over, the Spirit’s belly has no longer to eat and, consequently, to digest, in order to realise what it is: self-consciousness. The difference between the belly of self-consciousness and its food, between the Spirit and materiality’s otherness, has become entirely transparent so that self-consciousness is no longer to be fed. It is now in “its absolute self-assurance” – sure as it is to be not a piece of waste expelled from being’s self-conscious universality, but nothing less that the very essence of all that is – an essence arrived at what, in its fundament, it really is: self-consciousness.

¹³ A.V. Miller (1969), *Hegel’s Science of Logic*, translated by A.V. Miller, with Foreword by J.N. Findlay, London / New York: Georges Allen & Unwin LTD / Humanities Press, p. 843.

¹⁴ Hegel 1969: 573.

The passage at the end of the *Logic* shows that the Spirit obstructs its own movement of sublation (*Aufhebung*): instead of sublating and unifying the difference that is the motor of its dialectical process, the Spirit reinstalls that very difference. But can the establishing of that difference, that separation of the Spirit and its other, be thought as defecation? The immediate implication of that defecation as put forward by Žižek – the installation of the Subject – seems to contradict this.

The attentive reader of Žižek's text gets a bit less confused when he realises that the author's direct source here is not Hegel himself, but one of his commentators. When, in his essay, he explains "shitting" by calling it "abrogation", it is obvious that his first source is Catherine Malabou's famous volume *The Future of Hegel*, in which that concept – abrogation – is coined as an 'addendum' or 'correction' to the common understanding of Hegel's *Aufhebung*.¹⁵ Žižek cites Malabou extensively:

"Contrary to what one would initially imagine, these two processes of sublation and abrogation are completely interdependent. Considering the last moment of absolute spirit (*Philosophy*), one readily notes the synonymy between the verbs *aufheben* and *befreien* ('to liberate'), as well as *ablegen* ('to discard', 'to remove', 'to take away'). Speculative abrogation, in no way alien to the process of the *Aufhebung*, is indeed its fulfillment. Abrogation is a *sublation of sublation*, the result of the *Aufhebung*'s work on itself and, as such, its transformation. The movement of suppression and preservation produces this transformation at a certain moment in history, the moment of Absolute Knowledge. Speculative abrogation is the *absolute sublation*, if by 'absolute' we mean a relief or sublation that frees from a certain type of attachment."¹⁶

Sublation, that movement by which the Spirit eats and digests everything which is other than itself goes hand in hand with the movement in which the Spirit withdraws from its 'food' and sets this free.¹⁷ More exactly, the two movements are both two sides of the

¹⁵ Catherine Malabou (2005), *The Future of Hegel, Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic*, translated by Lisabeth Doring, Preface by Jacques Derrida, London / New York: Routledge. See more specifically the paragraph "*Aufhebung* and Abrogation" (Malabou 2005: 156).

¹⁶ Žižek 2011: 223; Žižek quotes Malabou 2005: 156.

¹⁷ A few lines above the quote, we read that, next to the theme of *Aufhebung*/Sublation, in "Hegel's philosophical lexicon, there are many words that designate such a 'self-release'. Thus we can thematize in Hegel's work a motif of *speculative abrogation of letting go (dessaisissement)*." Malabou 2005: 156; Malabou's italics.

same coin. The abrogation is a kind of *Aufhebung*, be it “the sublation of sublation”: that what makes sublation having no ending; that what makes that, at any time, the Spirit is overruled by the negative, although that negative is its own and only motor. In other words, the force of the negative keeps that negative negative *in relation to itself as well*. For Malabou, this is one of the elements that show the inner “plasticity” of the Hegelian dialectics, i.e. its quality of never resting in its result but always being capable of negating and “letting go” that result.

With this interpretation, Malabou occupies a place in the long, typically French reading of Hegel, according to which the negative, even if it is the motor of all *Aufhebung*, remains negative and resists any kind of ultimate self-*Aufhebung* that would lead to a final state of mere positivity. Negation remains negative, also in the ultimate phase of the Spirit’s development. Even the apotheosis of the Absolute Knowledge will keep on being challenged/negated by its own ‘self’: negation. It is the conclusion Georges Bataille draws from the lessons Alexandre Kojève gave on the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* from 1933 till 1939.¹⁸ And though Bataille’s Hegel reading is criticized by almost all French ‘Hegelians’ after him, they all keep that strong stress on the radical, at the end not sublutable negativity that is the ground of all that is, of being as well as our knowledge of that being. Or, to put it with Adorno (who, in twentieth century France, was not really read): dialectics is a thoroughly “negative dialectics”.

3. Shitting and ...

But is it correct to define this radical negativity, and its infinite plasticity by referring to the activity of shitting? For Malabou, it is definitely not. The word or theme is simply absent in her book *The Future of Hegel* – which is, as we presume, Žižek’s main source. In order to explain what is at stake in passages such as the last lines of Hegel’s *Logic*, Malabou speaks of “abrogation”. It is her term to conceptualize the moment in which the Spirit, in the ultimate phase of its dialectics and after having entirely understood/appropriated/’eaten and digested’ Nature, in its moment of “Absolute Knowing”, withdraws from that very Nature. Žižek – and only he – reads “abrogation” as

¹⁸ See the famous letter Bataille wrote to Kojève on December 6th, 1934; see: Denis Hollier (éd.) (1979), *Le Collège de Sociologie. Textes de Bataille, Caillois, Guastalla, Klossowski, Kojève, Leiris, Lewitzky, Mayer, Paulhan, Wahl, etc.*, Paris: Gallimard, p. 170-177.

“shitting”, and connects it directly to the Subject. Remember the first quote I took from Žižek’s text:

But what about the inevitable counter-movement, Hegelian defecation? Is not the subject of what Hegel calls "Absolute Knowing" also a thoroughly emptied subject, a subject reduced to the role of pure observer (or, rather, registrar) of the self-movement of the content itself?¹⁹

The ultimate moment in the becoming Subject of the Substance is a moment of separation as radical as the separation of shitting, so Žižek suggests. What Žižek wants to attack is the standardized idea about the Hegelian Subject. That Subject, so he wants to make clear, is not the Spirit in its shape of an all-devouring belly. It is, on the contrary, the Spirit’s emptied belly, i.e. the Spirit after abrogation. And, indeed, the activity of emptying a belly somehow refers to the activity of shitting. But once again: where, then, is the Subject?

For this is, in the quote above, what Žižek claims: it is through an act of shitting that the ultimate Subject – the Subject of “Absolute Knowing” – establishes itself. But how then? Has the Spirit shit its own self? This is what Žižek suggests, though he never says that in so many words, but rather wraps it in in the rhetoric of his style.

For what could it mean that one shits oneself? How can there be a self that is the result of its own shitting? Can the result of shitting ever be at the same time the one who shits? If there is one activity in which the difference between subject and object cannot be surpassed, not even by the tricks and ruses of dialectical reason, it is the activity of shitting. Shit can only be the object, it can never be the subject, the self, of shitting.

And this is precisely what the “matrix” of “shitting” put forward in Žižek’s essay “Hegel and Shitting” suggests. It is true, he never literally writes that the Subject is a piece of shit, but if the Subject is presented as the result of “shitting”, what else it can be?

Whoever is familiar with Žižek’s writings easily hears in the development of this ‘shitting matrix’ that other famous Hegel quote that haunts the Žižekian oeuvre from his first publications onwards: “the Spirit is a bone”, a quote extracted from the chapter on

¹⁹ Žižek 2011: 222; 2012: 399.

phrenology in the Phenomenology of the Spirit.²⁰ There, too, Žižek reads the affirmation of the impossible: the Spirit, Subject, *is* a bone, an object. Why Žižek so eagerly tries to show that the Subject is an object, something abject, a bone, a piece of shit?

Yet, before treating that question, let us recall what Hegel means by Subject – and, first, what the emphasis on the concept of ‘Subject’ is about.

4. ... the Question of the Subject

“*Wissenschaft der Erfahrung des Bewusstseins*”, “Science of the Experience of Consciousness”: thus the title that Hegel first had in mind when, during the intellectual fever of the year 1806, he wrote the volume published the next year as *Phenomenology of the Spirit*.²¹ The volume presents, first of all, a reflection on “consciousness”. So, what is “consciousness”? At the end of the *Introduction*, on the page previous to the one where we see the ‘old’ title turn up in his text²², Hegel defines “consciousness” as follows:

For consciousness is, on the one hand, consciousness of the object, and on the other, consciousness of itself; consciousness of what for it is the True, and consciousness of its knowledge of the truth.²³

Consciousness is “on the one hand” always consciousness *of something*. And, “on the other,” it is consciousness *of the consciousness*, *self-consciousness*. The crucial point is that, though both go hand in hand, they are not reducible to one another. The radicality of that difference: this is Hegel’s basic intuition. When you know, you know *something*, something *else*. But when you realise or know that, when you have knowledge of that knowledge, your consciousness of *that* consciousness is something different. That

²⁰ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1977), *Hegel’s Phenomenology of the Spirit*, translated by A.V. Miller, with an analysis of the text and Foreword by J.N. Findlay, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 208; (1970), *Werke 3: Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, p. 260. Žižek quotes this phrase already in his 1989 book *The Sublime Object of Ideology*; Slavoj Žižek (2008a), *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London / New York: Verso, p. 198, 234, 235, 237, 240; (2008b [original edition 1991]), *For They Know Not What They Do*, London / New York: Verso, 1991, p. 57, 95, 119, 139, 227.

²¹ Dirk Stederoth, *Hegels Philosophie des subjektiven Geistes: Ein komparatorischer Kommentar*, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, p. 323.

²² “Because of this necessity, the way to Science is itself already Science, and hence, in virtue of its content, is the Science of the experience of consciousness.” Hegel 1977: 56; 1970: 80.

²³ Hegel 1977: 54; 1970: “Denn das Bewußtsein ist einerseits Bewußtsein des Gegenstandes, andererseits Bewußtsein seiner selbst; Bewußtsein dessen, was ihm das Wahre ist, und Bewußtsein seines Wissens davon.”

difference is the constitutive split that is at the basis of every act of consciousness. This is the 'original split', which is at the base of any judgement (a judgement being indeed what the German language calls "Urteil": original [ur] division/separation/differentiation [*teilen*]). Saying "this is that" (consciousness of something) implies being also consciousness of that *saying* (self-consciousness), but crucial is that both moments of consciousness remain different from one another and that this difference has a proper functioning that constitutes the very heart of consciousness.

And what happens when that very difference becomes the object of consciousness' "experience"? Then consciousness realises that the experience of that difference changes both parts in the game, both its consciousness and the object it is conscious of. "Experience" takes into account consciousness' constitutive difference *as such*, and realises that this difference plays an active role – Hegel calls it the "dialectical movement" – in both the constitution of the act of consciousness and in what the latter is conscious of. A few lines further in the same passage of the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, Hegel defines "experience" as follows:

*Inasmuch as the new true object issues from it, this dialectical movement which consciousness exercises on itself and which affects both its knowledge and its object, is precisely what is called experience [Erfahrung].*²⁴

*Diese dialektische Bewegung, welche das Bewußtsein an ihm selbst, sowohl an seinem Wissen als an seinem Gegenstande ausübt, insofern ihm der neue wahre Gegenstand daraus entspringt, ist eigentlich dasjenige, was Erfahrung genannt wird.*²⁵

Let us put it with a somewhat simplified example. The Slave is conscious about the fact that compared to his Master, he has no freedom at all. But in the "experience" of the consciousness of that consciousness, he will be able to take into account the inner force of consciousness' very difference, a force which, once operating in the slave's self-consciousness, changes the two players in the game: the slave's ultimate self-

²⁴ Hegel 1977: 55; Hegel's italics.

²⁵ Hegel 1970: 78; Hegel's italics.

consciousness realises that he is Master over the Master, since that Master is finally Slave of the Slave.

And where is the Subject? Is it the Slave who should be defined as the Subject of his 'self-consciousness'? Not exactly. Of course, he experiences the difference between consciousness of something and consciousness of that very consciousness. But being subject of the self-consciousness that shows him the way out of slavery does not coincide with his personal state of mind. That self-consciousness has its 'ground' or 'subject' in the difference *as such*. This difference, applied in the many shapes of consciousness within the dialectical process of history, will change again and again both players in that game, i.e. the things one is conscious of, and the self-consciousness implied in that act of knowing.

It is the *difference itself* between consciousness and self-consciousness, which constitutes the Subject. And the human self-consciousness that realises this is only one of the two elements. It is never (the subject of) that difference as such. This is why human consciousness, including self-consciousness, is marked by a condition of radical alienation. What brings both the known object and self-knowledge more and more to their own Selves, is the difference between both. That difference is the motor. And each time when this difference finds itself in the experience one has of it, it makes one escape that Self – just like that Self, too, again and again, escapes itself, since it mistakenly thinks it has found itself in one's particular self-consciousness.

This is why, precisely from the perspective of the Hegelian premises, the ultimate moment of Absolute Knowledge is highly problematic. For then, ultimately, the difference that is the motor of the self-consciousness that ruled the entire history, should finally find itself, and that Self should definitely have sublated (*aufgehoben*) all difference. Yet, that Self can only be the Self/Subject *of difference*. So where, then, in the ultimate act of sublation, is the difference? Has the Self, in that final phase, overcome its split/difference or does it, on the contrary, ultimately establish that split? The ultimate *Aufhebung* of the difference which is the base of consciousness as such, does it either nullify or establish that difference?

It is obvious that Malabou (among many others) defends the thesis that the final *Aufhebung*, realising the ultimate Subject, establishes the difference. Hence her concept of "abrogation". And this supports her thesis of the radical plasticity of the Hegelian

system, which, for that very reason and despite its undeniable systematic nature, is characterized by a radical flexibility.

It is obvious, too, that Žižek subscribes to the thesis that the ultimate phase in Hegel's dialectics is at the same time the ultimate affirmation of the difference that moves the entire system. This is why he willingly agrees with Malabou's thesis on "abrogation": at the end, the Spirit re-establishes the difference or split, which defines its very essence. He sees in that thesis the affirmation of the famous quote he repeats almost from the first page of his oeuvre: "the Spirit is a bone".

Yet, arguing in his first books that "the Spirit is a bone" is the right perspective to (re)interpret Hegel, Žižek is aware that this is not really in line with the Hegelian text. According to Hegel, claims such as "the Spirit is bone" are examples of what, in his *Logic*, he calls "infinite judgment". It is a judgment in which the elements that – by the act of judging, should be sublated – are put forward very clearly, but in which the sublation of both (i.e. the effective judgment) seems at the same time to be infinitely postponed. Of course, there is a connection between the Spirit and the bone of someone's skull in which the 'spiritual' act of his thinking takes place. Of course, the Spirit has to think the 'matter' which is most near to his operative activity in order to conclude that this 'bone' is the 'mirror' or 'phenomenon' of its logicity, i.e. that it is a '*Phänomenologie des Geistes*'. But saying "the Spirit is bone" is too hasty a judgment: a judgment that has not taken the finite time to develop itself and, therefore, got stuck in a "false infinity".

Žižek fully embraced Malabou's idea of "abrogation", the concept that defines the finale movement of the Spirit at the end of Hegel's *Logic*. In a way, it is perfectly in line with how he interprets the dictum "the Spirit is a bone". The concept of "abrogation" emphasizes the radicalness/[radicality](#) of the dialectic difference, even in the moment of the final sublation. It seems, however, as if the idea does not go far enough for Žižek, if only because this kind of established difference keeps the sovereignty of the Spirit intact. Žižek wants to attack this sovereignty, for it is incompatible with the radicalness of the negativity at work within the dialectic difference.

This is why he comes up with the metaphor of "shitting". "Shitting" supposes an act of difference, in which any connotation of sovereignty is absent – certainly when the Spirit is supposed to occupy the place of the *object* of shitting. For that place is precisely where Žižek locates the subject – the subject of the Hegelian difference as the result of an act of shitting. Nevertheless, as shown above, his argument is apparently only able to

suggest this conclusion. It does not really succeed in thinking the shitting metaphor through. Nowhere in his essay, he answers – or even puts – the question whether the Spirit, yes or no, is itself the faecal production of its own defecation (i.e. its ultimate act of ‘Entzweiung’, of difference). Only by the rhetoric of his writing his claim indicates it.

5. Hegel as Lacanian

But why, then, does Žižek want to link at any cost the Hegelian dialectics to defecation? Of course there is the digestive metaphor that points in that direction, but why insist that this is the most adequate metaphor to think the Subject? Why, then, is that metaphor such a revealing tool for understanding what is at stake in the Hegelian dialectics?

Although in “Hegel and Shitting” the reference is hardly mentioned, it is obvious that Jacques Lacan is the main frame of reference behind the “matrix” Žižek proposes for his Hegel reading. In his early work, Žižek was very clear about it. Already in his 1989 book *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, we read “the only way to ‘save Hegel’ is through Lacan”.²⁶ And in the *Introduction to For They Know Not* (1991), he writes that Hegel and Lacan, together with contemporary criticism of ideology, are his main theoretical frames of reference – adding that it is Lacan who constitutes the binding factor between the three.²⁷

Yet, in “Hegel and Shitting”, the signifier ‘Lacan’ – or more exactly “Lacanesque – is mentioned only once. A few lines further than the passage already quoted on the “countermovement”, the “*emptied* subject” and the “pure observer”, we read:

In this strict sense, the subject itself is the abrogated or cleansed substance, a substance reduced to the void of the empty form of self-relating negativity, [...] –

²⁶ Slavoj Žižek (2008), *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London: Verso, p. xxxi: “the only way to ‘save Hegel’ is through Lacan, and this Lacanian reading of Hegel and the Hegelian heritage opens up a new approach to ideology, allowing us to grasp contemporary ideological phenomena [...] without falling prey to any kind of ‘post-modernist’ traps (such as the illusion that we live in a ‘post-ideological’ condition)”.

²⁷ Slavoj Žižek (2008), *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, London: Verso, p. 2: “the theoretical space of the present book is moulded by three centres of gravity: Hegelian dialectics, Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, and contemporary criticism of ideology. These three circles form a Borromean knot: each of them connects the other two ... The three theoretical circles are not, however, of the same weight: it is their middle term, the theory of Jacques Lacan, which is - as Marx would say - ‘the general illumination which bathes all the other colours and modifies their particularity’”.

in Lacanese, the move from substance to subject is the move from S to \$, the subject is the barred substance.²⁸

Apparently, talking about Hegel and the “shitting” condition of the Subject, Žižek has the Lacanian subject theory in mind. To briefly explain how Lacan defines the Subject, let us take one of his famous formulas: his definition of the signifier, which is a precise definition of the subject as well. The formula runs as follows: “a signifier is what represents a subject for another signifier”.²⁹

‘Signifiers’: this is the “substance” we live in, according to Lacan. We do not deal with real reality, but with the reality as it is invested with our wishes and desires – thus the Freudian starting point of his theory. And so, we are not who we *really* are, we are who we desire to be; or, more precisely, we ‘are’ *desire* for ourselves – i.e. a desire for a Self that always will remain desired. Instead of living at the level of the Real, we live at the one of the Symbolic; we live in a realm structured as language, i.e. as an infinite set of signifiers, each of them endlessly referring to other signifiers. By ‘dancing’ from signifier to signifier we are able to live the desire we ‘are’. This is not to say that we are signifiers, precisely not, we are what lacks in any signifier but what, therefore, we suppose that signifiers represent. And that signifier does not represent it directly to ‘me’ or to someone else, it presents it to other signifiers, and only on that basis one can have the imaginary impression of a self, of one’s identity. This identity is based on the lack that hallmarks the signifier as its operational principle.

This is what the Lacanian idea of the split subject is about. One has to take the word ‘subject’ in its literally meaning of ‘support’, ‘bearer’, ‘platform’. The material out of which our identity is made, is ‘symbolic’: signifiers. Since we are what lacks in that realm of signifiers – and thus what makes that realm incomplete – we are exactly what marks it with a void, a split, a constitutive incompleteness.

When we really want to be confronted with the subject we are, we have to face not the signifiers that represent us, but the radical absence they represent to other

²⁸ Žižek 2011: 222; 2012: 400.

²⁹ “Le signifiant, à l’envers du signe, n’est pas ce qui représente quelque chose pour quelqu’un, c’est ce qui représente précisément le sujet pour un autre signifiant.” Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre IX, L’identification*, session of 6 December 1961, see: <http://staferla.free.fr/S9/S9%20L'IDENTIFICATION.pdf>, p. 27.

signifiers. We have to face our self not in the full subject (S) but in the split subject (\$), the subject as void.

This is what Žižek has in mind when he claims that the subject is the result of a “substance” emptying itself, a substance reducing itself to a mere void – the void which defines the subject according to Lacan. This is the theoretical background of his metaphor of “shitting” as explanation for the moment when the Hegelian dialectics meets his final self of the subject: then the belly of the “substance” (the full Subject, the symbolic order of signifiers) is emptied and meets, in the void that is left (in the lack that hallmarks the signifier), its ‘real’ subject: i.e. that which is represented by the signifier to other signifiers.

To put it, less theoretically, in terms of psychoanalytical practice: at the end of his analysis, when the patient for years again and again has gone through the most intimate story of his life in search for his ‘self’ or ‘subject’, he realises that, in the end, his real self is absent in that story, that any signifier of his story refers to his Self, but that his Self only exist in the infinitely retaken reference to it. It is then that the patient realises that “I is Another” (to use the Arthur Rimbaud phrase that Lacan quotes).³⁰ It is in that sense that the patient, after haven eaten and digested again and again his life story, has to empty himself to find his Self or Subject precisely in that empty void his story has circled around. In that sense “shitting” can be read as a metaphor for the condition in which he has to discover his Self or Subject.

To express a moment of self-emptying, the metaphor of “shitting” would, despite its tastelessness, be justifiable, if “shitting” should *only* be a matter of emptying. But this is not so, it namely *also* concerns a remainder, a rest: “shit”. Žižek’s use of the metaphor avoids that aspect. He wants to save, “with Lacan”, the difference as the basis/subject of Hegelian dialectics: even in its ultimate moment, the dialectic movement re-establishes the difference as such by emptying itself from all that it has appropriated and by installing itself as mere emptiness at the other side of a gap. But if this is an action of “shitting”, where then is the shit? It is nowhere in Hegel, for there is no rest in his system, even not in the ultimate phase where an empty Subject is the “pure observer (or,

³⁰ Thus Rimbaud in his letter to Georges Izambard (13 May 1871) and, two days later, in the one to Paul Demeny (15 May 1871). See: Jacques Lacan, (1988), *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II, The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954–1955*, edited by J.- A. Miller, translated by S. Tomaselli, with notes by J. Forrester, New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company , p. 7.

rather, registrar)” of a freed Nature. And this makes the metaphor in fact invalid. An emptying without rest is highly inadequately illustrated by “shitting”.

In fact, an essay such as “Hegel and shitting” reveals the limits of Žižek’s project “to save Hegel with Lacan”. For, in the Lacanian theory of the subject, the metaphor of “shitting” *does* have an adequate application. There, the “becoming Subject of the Substance” – i.e. the “move [...] from S to \$” – is *not* without rest, a rest which is constitutive for that very subject and that, in one of its shapes, is explicitly identified with the faecal object. The faecal object is one of the shapes of what Lacan calls the “object small a” or “object a”. As explained, the discovery of the subject is a movement of emptying. My subject is not the fullness of the story I have told for years on the psychoanalytical couch, it is what lacks in that story; it is what lacks even when that story is emptied.

That what lacks here is not simply a void, but a remainder, a rest. The lack that keeps the machinery of desire going on is not only symbolic; it is not simply the lack by which the order of signifiers functions. That lack is also “real”, i.e. not incorporated in the symbolic system, but constituting a kind of original ‘rest’ around which the signifying chain circles. Something lacks even at the (symbolic) system that works on the basis of lack. That ‘real’ lack is inoperative in the system and constitutes an original rest.

So if, at the end of the analytical cure, the libidinal being finds its Subject or Self in that what keeps on lacking in his own story, this finding does not make full circle. Once he recognizes that lack, the patient does not meet it as a refreshed “force of the negative” (as Hegel would put it) that allows him to (re)create his own story in absolute freedom. The libidinal being then runs up against a negativity not reducible to signifiers and their lack. It more precisely runs up against an incurable symptom that resists any solution or appropriation. *Object a* is the conceptual term of such a symptom.

So, the ultimate ground of someone’s identity is not the lack of his ‘symbolic’ substance, i.e. the subject. It is rather the object for which the subject (who is the subject of desire) will never stop longing. Here we meet the ultimate reason why Lacan defines the subject as split. It is, so to say, itself (as subject) split from its self (as object), split from the object of his desire – of that what would make the subject a *real* Self.

The Self exists in a movement that never stops preventing it from fully appropriating its Self. Ultimately, its Self is located in an ‘originary’ rest to which the desiring subject will always remain at a distance. That distance is the ultimate

‘subjectum’ or, so to say, the ‘*subjectum* of the subject’. Which is to say that the subject (as ground of one’s desire) is itself supported by a relation to an object for which it will not stop longing, but which it will *fortunately* never reach. ‘Fortunately’, for if it would reach its goal, desire would be fulfilled, and since human being *is* desire, this would coincide with the death of that being. The ultimate constitutive element in the subject is an object, the inaccessible, non-appropriable object of desire.

Here, applied to the Lacanian theory of the subject, the metaphor of “shitting” makes more sense than with respect to Hegel’s system. In a way, the Lacanian subject is the result of an act of “shitting”, of a difference entirely determined by what remains after the act of differentiation: a difference defined by its remainder. The abject object that never will get integrated in the libidinal economy of the subject is nonetheless its ultimately constituting element.

That kind of abject object by definition ‘objecting’ principally the economy of the subject and nonetheless providing it its ultimate ground; this faecal object constituting the subject, is absent in Hegel. This absence makes Žižek’s interpretation of the ultimate phase in Hegel’s dialectics – the becoming Subject as an act of shitting – in the end untenable.

Notice however that this conclusion could as easily have been Žižek’s as well. For the *object a* theory is all over the place in his writings. It is not disproportionate to call it his basic concept, for his oeuvre is all about the non-sublatable remainder which is nonetheless constitutive in the formation of any identity. This is even what he explicitly reads in some works of that other giant of German Idealism, Schelling. The title of his Schelling book, “The Indivisible Remainder”, directly refers to the object *a*.³¹ And it is from the very angle that he intends to read the same ‘material’ negativity in the dialectical machinery of Hegel’s negativity. It is the basic motive behind his essay “Hegel and Shitting”. That essay and its tasteless metaphor, however, show the actual limits of Žižek’s project to re-articulate the core of Hegelian dialectics “in Lacanese”.

Or, to put it bluntly: despite all his efforts, Žižek cannot find any shit in Hegel and this makes the shitting metaphor invalid to describe the “matrix” of his dialectical thought.

³¹ Slavoj Žižek (1996), *The Indivisible Remainder: On Schelling and Related Matters*, London / New York: Verso. See also Slavoj Žižek & F.W.J. von Schelling (1997), *The Abyss of Freedom / The Ages of the World*, An Essay by Slavoj Žižek with the text of Schelling’s *Die Weltalter* (second draft, 1813) in English translation by Judith Norman, The University of Michigan Press.

