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Lacan's Thing With Hegel

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*for Todd McGowan,
the apostle of contradiction*

In the opening of his brilliantly insightful book on Hegel, Todd McGowan makes good use of the apochryphal story about Hegel's last words before dying: "Only one man has understood me, and even he did not understand me." McGowan rightly observes that "no other philosopher in the Western tradition occasions such wild divergence concerning the principal concerns of her or his philosophy."

To capture the immensity of the divergence of views concerning Hegel, one would have to imagine some readers of Marx seeing him as a champion of the capitalist system rather than its foremost opponent or envision disciples positing Friedrich Nietzsche as an advocate of Christian morality rather than its fierce critic.¹

In view of this history of colossal misreadings, McGowan proposes that a prime source of problems for interpreters of Hegel is that he arrived a century too early. Hegel attempted to radically rethink the cardinal problem of contradiction, asserting an ontology of subjectivity inescapably rooted in contradiction, one hundred years before the breakthrough accomplished by Sigmund Freud. It was the invention of psychoanalysis that revealed unmistakably how the human being is a split subject. For Freud, the pitfalls of self-contradiction are not limited to the embarrassing slips of the tongue that bedevil otherwise well-intentioned people – like the man in Freud's famous example who, tripped up by his own mixed emotions,

brought down his gavel to open a conference by saying “I hereby declare this meeting *adjourned!*” On the contrary, contradiction is inscribed into the fundamental structure of human subjectivity. Irremediably divided between conscious intention and unconscious desire, the human being is by necessity a creature at odds with itself.

McGowan points out that the contradictory split in the subject “manifests itself most concretely in the psychoanalytic symptom,” and he develops that idea with reference to Freud’s classical formulation, that of a “compromise formation” that serves two masters. “The symptom is at once the expression of the subject’s desire and the indication of that desire’s repression.”² The symptom simultaneously enacts the repression of an unconscious impulse, but it also, at least symbolically, gratifies that very impulse. The Bible-thumping sermon that rages against the evils of the flesh pounds home a repressive message, but also inevitably licks its lips with enjoyment about the very degeneracy it vilifies.

In this essay, I want fully to endorse McGowan’s perspective but also to supplement it by sketching a radical interpretation of the symptom from a Lacanian standpoint that intersects with the philosophy of Hegel. But Lacan *with* Hegel? Before launching my argument, it has to be acknowledged that Lacan, too, has to be grouped with the long list of bad readers of Hegel that McGowan takes to task. It is quite true that Lacan refers a very great deal to Hegel, and that he took key lessons from Hegel’s work. References to Hegel in Lacan’s *Écrits* massively out-number any other thinker with the exception of Freud. But those citations cluster around two foci, one admiring and one resolutely critical. The greater part of the positive take-aways are associated with the imaginary drama of recognition and aggressivity, which Lacan sees as akin to Hegel’s dialectic of master and slave. For Lacan, Hegel “provided the definitive theory of the specific function of aggressiveness in human ontology.”³ On this count, Hegel appears to attract Lacan precisely because he was a theorist of constitutive contradictory tension.

But Lacan also takes Hegel, in accordance with the sadly familiar interpretation of Hegel’s “absolute knowing,” to chart a dialectical resolution of conflict, a final metaphysical closure. This move Lacan categorically rejects. Thus Lacan lays it down as “inadmissible that I should be accused of having been lured by a purely dialectical exhaustion of being.”⁴ It is in this second instance that we glimpse the sticking point of Lacan’s enduring ambivalence toward the very term “dialectic,” and the prime reason he so often distances himself from Hegel even as he repeatedly returns to him like the proverbial moth.

In what follows, I want to illuminate the deeply Hegelian character of Lacan's theorization of the symptom by putting forward an interpretation that Lacan himself never specifically articulated though which is everywhere implied by his thought. I want to show in a novel way how a red thread of Hegelian philosophy can be discerned at the very foundations of Lacan's reappropriation of Freud.

I take my point of departure from one of the most dramatic moments in Lacan's teaching, the sustained discussion of *das Ding* that occupies roughly the first half of his 7th Seminar, "The Ethics of Psychoanalysis." Lacan's reference is to a brief passage from the unpublished "Project for a Scientific Psychology" of 1895, in which Freud theorizes that the child divides the figure of the *Nebenmensch*, the "neighbour" or fellow human being, between what it can recognize on the basis of similarities to its own body – precisely the sort of reflective recognition that Lacan associates with the imaginary – and a locus of something that is "new and non-comparable," a zone of something unknown.⁵ This excess of something unrepresentable Freud calls *das Ding*, and he goes on to argue that this splitting of the human Other, a division that reserves in the heart of the familiar a locus for something unknown, serves as the basic schema for all of the child's future attempts to understand the nature of objects. "For this reason," Freud writes, "it is in relation to the fellow human-being that a human-being learns to cognize." The key point is not merely that there remains an inaccessible, noumenal core of all objects but that the original template that alerts the child to the existence of such an unknown dimension is taken from the example of what is unfathomable in the fellow human being.⁶

It's hard to overstate the emphasis Lacan puts on the problematic of *das Ding* for rewriting the essentials of his entire outlook.⁷ The Thing becomes nothing less than the primordial pivot around which the effects of the unconscious revolve. "*Das Ding*," he says, "is a primordial function which is located at the level of the initial establishment of the gravitation of the unconscious *Vorstellungen*."⁸ Precisely because the Thing occupies the most obscure core of the unconscious, the most inaccessible yet determinative engine of desire, it deserves to be identified as the most elemental motive *cause* of human behavior. As if to emphasize a profundity that resonates with the most archaic roots of thought in the ancient world, Lacan resorts to a salad of Latin and Greek: "At the heart of man's destiny is the *Ding*, the *causa* [. . .] it is the *causa pathomenon*, the cause of the most fundamental human passion."⁹

If *das Ding* forms in some way the core of the unconscious, Lacan also identifies it with the most elemental functions of speech and language. "*Das Ding*,"

he says, [. . .] is the very correlative of the law of speech in its most primitive point of origin." He insists, in fact, that "the Thing only presents itself to the extent that it becomes word."¹⁰ As we will see in what follows, it is the way in which something of *das Ding* is taken up into and sustained by the signifier that allows for the fact, as Lacan puts it, that "the question of *das Ding* is still attached to whatever is open, lacking, or gaping at the center of our desire."¹¹

What is new and crucially important in Lacan's treatment of the Thing over that of Freud is the way he identifies the enigmatic locus of something uncognized in the maternal Other with the root source of anxiety. This idea forms the core theme of Lacan's tenth seminar on *Anxiety*. Lacan expressly rejects Freud's comparison of anxiety as fear without an object. "Not only is [anxiety] not without object," says Lacan, "but it very likely designates the most, as it were, profound object, the ultimate object, the Thing."¹² The challenge of the neighbour-Thing consists not simply in the discovery of an inaccessible kernel at the heart of the Other but in the way that it raises the unsettling question of what object I am for that unknown desire. "Anxiety," Lacan insists, "resides in the subject's fundamental relationship [. . .] with the desire of the Other."¹³ "Anxiety is bound to the fact that I don't know which object *a* I am for the desire of the Other."¹⁴ The question presses with particular force in the drama of toilet training when the demand of the care-taker for the regulation of the infant's bowels reenergizes anxiety about the unanswered question of what the maternal Other wants. The Lacanian thesis thus goes beyond merely locating the source of anxiety in the fellow human being. It asserts, contrary to the sweetest myth about childhood, that the hidden source of the deepest and most uncanny anxiety is the mother herself.

What provokes anxiety [. . .] is not, contrary to what is said, the rhythm of the mother's alternating presence and absence. The proof of this is that the infant revels in repeating this game of presence and absence. [. . .] The most anguishing thing for the infant is precisely [. . .] when the mother is on his back all the while, and especially when she's wiping his backside.¹⁵

The essential point at stake in locating anxiety in the encounter with the fellow human being is underlined simply but powerfully, and with an interesting link to Hegel, when we attend to the almost inescapably tense situation that arises around meeting the eyes of another person. There is virtually no human culture in which this highly charged moment is not surrounded by unwritten yet unmistakable

prohibitions. Indeed, it would not be too much to say that eye contact between strangers, sustained even momentarily, is a kind of uncodified but absolutely elementary human taboo. In most situations, meeting the gaze of the Other is not to be maintained for more than a second or two. If such a meeting lingers more than that, it almost inevitably triggers anxiety. Otherwise said, eye contact readily raises the specter of *das Ding*. While Lacan himself doesn't comment upon it, this interpretation returns us to the famous passage from Hegel's Jena manuscripts in which he compares the human subject to an inky Night of fearful apparitions. Hegel's point would seem very precisely to endorse the implication of Lacan's theory the anxiety-producing neighbour-Thing: the eyes of the fellow human being present us with a terrifying abyss.

The human being is this Night, this empty nothing which contains everything in its simplicity – a wealth of infinitely many representations, images, none of which occur to it directly, and none of which are not present. This [is] the Night, the interior of [human] nature, existing here – pure Self – [and] in phantasmagoric representations it is night everywhere: here a bloody head suddenly shoots up and there another white shape, only to disappear as suddenly. We see this Night when we look a human being in the eye, looking into a Night which turns terrifying.¹⁶

The fuller implications of locating the uncanny and abyssal Thing in the child's relation to the mother concern nothing less than Lacan's rewriting of the Freudian Oedipus complex. The psychic challenge posed by the child's relation with the mother is not, as Freud thought, the pain of having to give up its desire for the mother, along with accepting the traumatic consequences that accrue from the paternal threat of castration that effects separation. On the contrary, the challenge is posed to the child by the mother's desire, in so far as it remains an unknown. The figure of the mother rears up as a fearful and monstrous specter, the threatening void of a gigantic question mark. If there is a link to the myth of Oedipus in this Lacanian perspective, it resides less in the familiar schema of murdering the father and marrying the mother than it does with Oedipus as the man who confronts a mortal riddle. Lacan poses the mother in the role of the dreadful and enigmatic Sphinx. It is in the light of this perspective that we can make sense of Lacan's unsettling comparison of the mother to a giant praying mantis.¹⁷ Elsewhere, Lacan invokes a similar metaphor, likening the mother to a crocodile and the phallic signifier to a stick

with which to keep its jaws from snapping shut.¹⁸ Refusing the notion that the child forsakes the mother under the father's threat of castration, Lacan proposes that the child takes its own distance from the maternal Thing, a defensive operation made possible by reliance on the signifier. The notion of the Other-Thing, introduced in 1960, thus becomes retroactively the key to Lacan's conception of the paternal metaphor in which the "Name of the Father" is substituted for the unknown Desire of the Mother.¹⁹

In being confronted by the Thing in the Other, what is ultimately at stake is the subject's own coming-to-be, the subject's own being-a-Thing-to-itself. The zone of the questionable in the Other is also that of the subject's own question. The Other's void is the launch-point of the subject's own desire. The unknown Thing thus promises to translate Lacan's signature thesis that human desire is the desire of the Other. This most elusive stake of the game concerns the real of the subject's mute *jouissance*. It is a locus that can be approached only in mythic terms, conceivable only as a primordial, indeterminate X. Lacan's point is that the void of the Other always comes first, and that the question of the subject's desire can be posed only in the locus of the Other. "What anxiety targets in the real," he concludes, "includes the x of a primordial subject moving towards his advent as subject, [. . .] since the subject has to realize himself on the path to the Other. [. . . this subject] is the subject of *jouissance* [. . .] it can in no way be isolated as a subject, unless mythically."²⁰

It is, however, with respect to Lacan's conception of the signifier that we can mark the most profound linkage with the thought of Hegel. The key is to recognize how the signifier performs a double function of defense and engagement, of distancing and reconnecting.

The relation of the signifier to the Thing is twofold. The first "level" is essentially defensive. Thus Lacan says of *das Ding* that "the magic circle that separates us from it is imposed by our relation to the signifier."²¹ It is along this line that Lacan analyzes the mono-syllabic sounding of the second person pronoun.²² "What does the emission, the articulation, the sudden emergence from out of our voice of that "You!" (*To!*) mean?" he asks. And he answers: "You" contains a form of defense, and I would say that at the moment when it is spoken, it is entirely in this "You," and nowhere else, that one finds what I have evoked today concerning *das Ding*."²³ Slavoj Žižek gives a good summary statement of this defensive function of the signifier, generalized in the symbolic law that governs it. "The ultimate function of the Law," he says, "is not to [. . .] retain our proximity to the neighbor, but, on the contrary,

to keep the neighbor at a proper distance, to serve as a kind of protective wall against the monstrosity of the neighbour.”²⁴

Lacan expands on this defensive effect in what he calls primally “ceded objects” – *les objets cessibles* – his update of Freudian part objects, which include not only the breast and the feces but also the first inarticulate cries of the infant. In each case, something is given up by the infant, thrust into the space between subject and Other as if to establish a zone of separation.²⁵ These intermediary objects are the first incarnations of the *objet a*. The surprising result is that the most primordial function of language in human beings is thereby thought to consist not in connection but disjunction, not in communication with others but in separation from them. The first word of the human infant is a declaration of independence. This reading gives a new twist to the Hegelian phrase Lacan liked to quote from early on: “the word is the murder of the Thing.”

Yet if the first inchoate eruptions of the voice, inflected with anxiety, separate the subject from Other, they are also destined to become the means by which the question of *das Ding* will be ceaselessly re-posed. As Lacan says: “The world of our experience, the Freudian world, assumes that it is this object, *das Ding*, as the absolute Other of the subject, that one is supposed to find again.”²⁶ On this side of its function, the signifier marks the site of the unknown Thing, locating it at a distance yet holding and sustaining it in preparation for further exploration. What is at stake is the most radical implication of Lacan’s theory of the signifier, perhaps the very thing that led him to claim that he had “defined the signifier as no one else had dared.”²⁷ In every entry into language, in every iteration of signifying material, there resounds some echo of the unanswered and unanswerable question of the Thing. Here, Lacan’s conception of the signifier departs from the dominant assumption among students of language that the primal function of signification is indicative. At the most elementary level, the first utterance, indeed every utterance, implicitly poses a *question*. The original function of language is not merely indicative, but *interrogative*.

In exactly what way, then, does the signifier overcome its fundamentally defensive function in order to re-access the Thing? How, as Lacan put it early in his career, is the signifier able “to recover the debt that it engenders”?²⁸ The answer is less a matter of the way Lacan inverts Saussure’s famous diagram of signifier, signaling the primacy of the signifier *over* the signified, than of the stress Lacan puts on the bar that separates the two. For Lacan, the vector of meaning that connects signifier to signified is paradoxically less important than the *resistance* to that connection, the *incompleteness* or *failure* of that vector. The most fertile dimension of

the signifier consists in the way that it opens a horizon of *semantic indeterminacy*. The “resistance” of the bar between signifier and signified has the effect of holding open the possibility of “something more” than the ostensible meaning. For Lacan, such pregnant “resistance” arises from Saussure’s own signature contribution to linguistics, namely that the meaning of each signifier is dependent on its relations within the diacritical system of its relations with other signifiers. It is the effect of this interweaving, the “pull” on every signifier exerted by the larger network in which it is embedded, that constitutes the so-called “resistance” of the bar. By means of the interwovenness of the system, Lacan claims, “the signifier reflects its light into the darkness of incomplete significations.” The signifier’s most important function resides in energizing a penumbra of incomplete tendrils of meaning, including even subtler reverberations that border on pure nonsense.

In Lacan’s view, the “resistance” of the bar is what makes possible the metaphoric conjunction between two distinctly different terms. It provides the wiggle room for the poetic spark, or the neurotic slip. But there is also a more radical dimension at stake that is relevant to the void of the Thing. We can glimpse it in one of Lacan’s earliest and most well-known discussions of metaphor, focused on the example he takes from Victor Hugo’s “Booz endormi”: “His sheaf was neither miserly nor spiteful.” The ostensible purpose of the metaphor, what is obliquely being said about Booz, concerns his generosity. His sheaves, “neither miserly nor spiteful,” might be shared out with those in need. Yet just as the very binding-together into sheaves relies for its meaning on its implicit negation in spilling or scattering, the metaphor that speaks for Booz’ magnanimity also subtly hints at its very opposite. Booz is thereby linked to the very greed and spitefulness that the metaphor would seem to deny. As Lacan says, when the metaphoric sheaf stands in for Booz himself,

it has replaced him in the signifying chain at the very place where he was to be exalted by the sweeping away of greed and spite. But now Booz himself has been swept away by the sheaf, and hurled into the outer darkness where greed and spite harbor him in the hollow of their negation.²⁹

Every enunciation of the signifier, as if inevitably casting a kind of negative shadow of the very thing it signifies, tacitly calls up its very opposite. But with this focus on the diacritical system of the signifier, haven’t we strayed far beyond the “perceptual complex” that Freud associated with *das Ding*, the opposition between the contour of the object and the registration of an uncognizable excess? Not at all.

To see how and why affords us a profound insight into the nature and structure of the signifier at the most fundamental level. It is quite true that the archaic drama of the *Komplex der Nebenmensch* envisioned by Freud occurs before the infant's mastery of speech. But this fact does not at all rule out the elemental functioning of signification. On the contrary, the imaginary-real binary of the "perceptual complex" of *das Ding is itself identical with the most basic structure of every signifier*.

To grasp this point, consider the following. When does a pointing finger become a signifier? Precisely when one sees the finger, but then looks away from it in the direction towards which it points. This deceptively simple operation requires two indispensable acts on the part of the perceiver. The first, of course, is the perceptual recognition of the finger itself as a discrete object of attention. This first step of the act of ostension can easily be achieved by your dog. But the second crucial stage the dog cannot follow. For the finger to succeed in functioning as a signifier, it is necessary that the finger-image be immediately taken as merely the jumping-off spot for something else at some distance away. The image of the finger must be psychically evacuated of attention in favor of something completely different that hasn't yet appeared in the visual field, something as yet unknown. This transfer is what the dog can't manage. What the dog lacks is a capacity for the negative, for an empty expectation, an anticipation of one-knows-not-what. The pointing finger casts our attention outward in readiness to be surprised.³⁰ As Heidegger would have put it, the meaning of the pointing finger is to direct us toward some remote site of *die Lichtung*, the pure opening of disclosure.

The underlying dynamic at stake here is by no means limited to ostension. Every letter, every word, spoken or written, must first somehow minimally register upon perception. The signifier is, as Saussure reminded us, first of all an *image*. But image-recognition of the signifier is converted to signification only when the bare image-body of the signifier is instantaneously passed over in favor of something other than itself—the signified. The purpose of the signifying image is to self-vacate its own claim on attention, abdicating its own status as image, and thereby making itself transparent to its meaning. Crucially for Lacan's theory of the signifier, however, that's not all. The movement of the signifier toward meaning also opens up an indeterminant dimension, a kind of ontological wiggle-room in the zone of the signified, that leaves an open space in which it is possible, among other things, for the receiver of the message to ask whether the message was heard correctly, to wonder if something else was intended by it, or to fear that the speaker was lying. However distantly, the signifier always bears within itself an echo of the unknown

Thing. In this way, far from wholly lacking the dimension of the symbolic, Freud's *Komplex der Nebenmensch* can be identified with the absolutely original instance of the signifier. It schematizes the zero-degree of signification.

The double action of the signifier, simultaneously defensive and expressive, distancing and disclosive, is precisely parallel to Freudian theory of the compromise formation of the symptom. Indeed, we can now wonder whether this conjunction of the Lacanian signifier with the Freudian symptom isn't the most fundamental and far-reaching feature of Lacan's rewriting of psychoanalytic theory. Its implication is that the paradox of symptomatic behavior is not confined to exceptional moments in which human nature is bent under the pressure of contingency. *Human behaviour is symptomatic through and through.* In the human psyche, it's symptoms "all the way down."³¹

If the two-fold function of the signifier embodies the Freudian symptom, it also constitutes an exemplary instance, perhaps *the* exemplary instance, of Hegelian *Aufhebung*, the very heartbeat of the dialectical movement that Hegel is everywhere at pains to illustrate. In accord with the two-fold meaning of the German word, something that undergoes *Aufhebung* is simultaneously canceled and preserved. In the famous dialectical movement with which Hegel opens his *Logic*, for example, the concept of Being finds its *Aufhebung* in Becoming. In the stream of Becoming, the ever-flowing river of Heraclitus, the unchanging stillness of Being is annulled, replaced by ceaseless motion and flux. And yet the stillness of Being also returns in a new form. In the river of becoming, the one thing that remains the same, unchanging, is change itself.

In exactly such a dialectical movement, we can now say that the linguistic signifier, at the most elementary level of its functioning, serves to accomplish the most primordial *Aufhebung*. The signifier both cancels *das Ding*, distancing the subject from it, offering an arbitrary sound in the place of the unknown Thing, yet it also preserves something of what is canceled, marking it for further cognizing sometime in the future. The signifier establishes a locus suspended between the subject and the Other, at once putting what remains unknown and potentially threatening about the Other at a safe distance, yet thereby repositions it and maintains it as a question.³² The deepest parallel to Hegel centers on the way that *Aufhebung* can be said to be the process by which the determination of any particular thing is made possible by a dialectically oppositional relation with what it is not. As Hegel says in a willing bow to Spinoza, "Determination is negation." If the first movement of *Aufhebung* effects a negation, the second enables, by a negation of the

negation, a reapproach by a new path to what has been negated. Only such a double movement unleashes what Hegel called “the portentous power of the negative.” Lacan claims something similar for the reality of discourse mediated by the signifier. The result is that discourse is never, nor ever can be, fully transparent. It always regenerates a dimension of the questionable. “Every discourse presents itself as heavy with consequences,” Lacan says, “but ones that are obscure. Nothing of what we say, in principle, fails to imply some. Nevertheless we do not know which.”³³ In the terms we have been working out here, discourse never fails to bear within itself, and to reproduce in its consequences for the unfolding of thought, something of the dimension of *das Ding*.

What is emerging from this discussion is what we might call the “elementary matrix of the signifier.”³⁴ The structure of that matrix arises from the way in which the primordial word is spoken to the Other, which means it is centered on the relation to *das Ding*. And the elementary matrix has a conspicuously two-fold function. It is at once separating and signifying. The “ceded object” of the signifier introduces a distance between the subject and the Other but it also designates the Other and thereby opens the space of the question about what remains unknown about the Other. In his 20th seminar, Lacan calls this tropism toward a vacant potentiality of meaning “*signifiance*.”³⁵ As opposed to “*signification*,” which indicates the more specific semantic cargo of the signifier, “*signifiance*” names power of the signifier to hold open a horizon of meaning-as-yet-to-be-determined. This horizon is inseparable from the Other to whom the signifier is addressed and from whom a response is expected. Moreover, this inseparability from the Other is arguably the very flip side of the initial moment of separation. The conception at which we arrive is therefore one of a two-fold function. The signifier both separates from the Other and, in the very same stroke, rebinds the subject to the Other. How are we to clarify this double-function?

The matrix of the signifier presents two potentialities. On one side, we have the attachment of the signifier to a particular signified. Call it the signifier’s *primary semantic force*. It grounds a stable *meaning*. We hear a word and are bound to imagine the object or state of affairs that it signifies. Lacan more than once points out that where Saussure called the linkage between signifier and signified “arbitrary,” intending to point to the absence of any natural connection between them, he (Lacan) stresses the *necessary* connection. When we hear the word “hippopotamus,” it is virtually impossible to avoid thinking of a hippopotamus. But there is a second, essentially elusive dimension of every signifier that opens out

toward an indeterminate horizon. It is this second dimension that is tied to *das Ding* and its status as an unknown. It's tempting, in contrast with the determinate meaning of the *semantic*, to call this other dimension simply *mantic*. In fact, what is at stake is well reflected in the sense of the Greek word *mantikos*, which referred to prophecy and divination. What is *mantic* reaches out into something beyond our ken. Intimately related to *mantikos* is the word *mania*, which in Greek implies a kind of inspired madness. In its mantic dimension, the spoken word always reaches beyond a definite assignment of meaning toward an ecstatic horizon of indeterminacy, a meaning-as-yet-unknown.

We can relate this two-fold dimensionality of the signifier--semantic vs. mantic--to the common distinction between denotation and connotation, and for good reason. Denotation generally involves a direct reference to some definite object or state of affairs where connotation may spread out in various directions in what might be thought of as incomplete tendrils of meaning, mere hints or shades of meaning. We can also readily relate the vaguer but potentially more fertile and far-reaching connotative dimension to the way in which every signifier is bound up with the larger system of other signifiers. In this sense, the *elusive* dimension is to be related to the *allusive*. There's no doubt that Lacan is intensely interested in such an allusive penumbra of meaning, particularly in his analyses of metaphor and metonymy. But there is clearly, and very crucially, something more radical at stake in the Lacanian conception of the signifier. We touched on it earlier in discussing Lacan's notion of the bar that separates signifier and signified. Lacan posits a kind of positive resistance to definite signification. The result is the symbolic projection of a gap or void. As he puts it, "the fashioning of the signifier and the introduction of a gap or a hole in the real is identical."³⁶ For Lacan, there is an excess of all semantic import that is potentially borne by every signifier and that passes beyond even the most vaguely connotative resonance of meaning. One is tempted to make a reference, as Lacan himself does more than once, to the pre-Socratic notion of Non-being. Every signifier bears within itself an appeal to pure lack, to a Thing which is a No-thing.

Is not some such open space of pure anticipation of meaning a positive condition for the formation of metaphor, the very thing that makes metaphor possible? The question concerns the open zone of *potential* association, across which the poetic spark jumps. In order for a metaphor to work – using, to cite a classic example, the metaphor of "the flower of the nation" to refer to young men drafted for war – one must be able to hear and understand the semantic content of the word "flower" while holding open a space of meaning yet-to-be-determined that

lies in some way beyond the conventional denotation of the petal-blossom that enables botanical reproduction. This open space is precisely the continuing resonance of the lack in the Other that Lacan calls *das Ding*.

A final piece of confirmation of the Lacanian thesis about the open horizon of the signifier, the dimension that he variously calls *manque à être* or *béance*, is offered in precisely the place we would most want and need to find it: at the heart of the psychoanalytic process itself. For how else are we to account for the phenomenon of *free association*? In free association, I give myself over to a pure openness (a task well known to be trickier one might think) toward connections to apparently unrelated ideas. A subjective posturing toward an unfettered readiness to receive whatever comes to mind is both the heart of the psychoanalytic *method*, the means by which dreams, slips, and fantasies will be opened toward a larger horizon of connections to other things, but is also a key *goal* to be achieved by analysis. To have passed through a successful psychoanalysis is to feel oneself more readily called by what doesn't make sense from the standpoint of conscious calculation. The "well analyzed" person has, among other things, become more open to the fertile, even radically transformative influence of thoughts that hover on the border of complete nonsense. One way to characterize the positive outcome of analysis is an enlarged capacity to tolerate proximity to the unknowable Thing.

From this angle of view, we glimpse a profound affinity between the goals of psychoanalysis and the true meaning of Hegel's appeal to *Absolute Wissen*. The ultimate point of the final section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, far from claiming to have completed the project of knowing, to have grasped some all-embracing, all-integrating vision of Truth at the end of history, is rather an assertion of a renewed and reverential appreciation of unknowing, the way in which the subject comes to realize that there can be no complete knowledge. The paradoxical lesson of Absolute Knowing leads finally to releasing oneself to the enigma of the object, to re-engaging the experience of reality in its ultimate unknowability. As Slavoj Žižek summarizes this point, the subject of Absolute Knowing becomes "a thoroughly *emptied* subject, a subject reduced to the role of pure observer (or, rather, registrar) of the self-movement of the content itself."³⁷ This moment of release is the culmination of Spirit's life-process, in which Spirit gives itself to the very otherness of the object. "*The supreme moment of the subject's freedom*," Žižek says, "*is when it sets free its object, leaving it alone to freely deploy itself [. . .] 'Absolute freedom' is here literally absolute in the etymological meaning of *absolvere*: releasing, letting go. . . Is this not the Hegelian version of *Gelassenheit*?"³⁸ Mindful of this perspective,*

the climactic sentences of Hegel's conclusion on "Absolute Knowing" ring in our ears with a completely refreshed significance.

The self-knowing spirit knows not only itself but also the negative of itself, or its limit: to know one's limit is to know how to sacrifice oneself. This sacrifice is the externalization in which Spirit displays the process of its becoming Spirit in the form of *free contingent happening*, intuiting its pure Self as Time outside of it, and equally its Being as Space. This last becoming of Spirit, *Nature*, is its living immediate Becoming; Nature, the externalized Spirit, is in its existence nothing but this eternal externalization of its *continuing existence* and the movement which reinstates the *Subject*.³⁹

¹ Todd McGowan, *Emancipation After Hegel: A Contradictory Revolution*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019): 37.

² Both quotations appear at McGowan, *Emancipation After Hegel*: 44.

³ Jacques Lacan, "Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis," in *Écrits*, translated by Bruce Fink. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co. 2006): 98.

⁴ Jacques Lacan, "Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire," in *Écrits*: 681.

⁵ For this and the following quotation, see Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated by J. Strachey. (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), Vol. 1:331.

⁶ I capitalize "Other" here and will continue to do so throughout this essay, but the choice is an awkward one in so far as capitalization is usually reserved in Lacanian discourse to designate the "big Other" of the symbolic order. In fact, however, Lacan himself alternates in his capitalization of *Autre* throughout his work without complete consistency. The most logical course would seem to call for using the lower case for the little other and the upper case for the big Other. But then again, even the little other of the fellow human being sometimes deserves the emphasis lent by the capitalization, precisely because, when its Thingly dimension is taken into account, the fellow human being becomes something totally different than the impression of ordinary experience leads us to conclude. It is to emphasize this point that I will retain the capitalization even of the "little Other."

⁷ This signaling of the importance of *das Ding* is very prominent in Seminar 7 but specific mention of the Thing tends to disappear in subsequent years. While Lacan later offers a handful of references to it, references which are clearly marked as significant, his later paucity of comment on the Thing definitely shows signs of reticence, the reason for which Lacan never clarifies. What is clear, however, is that the place and function of *das Ding* is largely taken over by the concept of the *objet a*. Clarifying the relation between the two would be a salutary exercise, but also a lengthy and complicated one which I will not attempt here.

⁸ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, tr. Dennis Porter, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1992): 62.

⁹ Lacan, *Seminar VII, Ethics*:97.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*: 55.

¹¹ Ibid: 84.

¹² Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X: Anxiety*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, tr. A. R. Price (Cambridge UK & Malden MA: Polity Press, 2014):311. It must be admitted, however, that the passage I quote here, while obviously an unambiguous and forceful statement, is the only explicit mention of the Thing offered in the 10th seminar. I take this single, yet markedly emphatic statement, to be an indication of the earlier-noted reticence or ambivalence that Lacan maintained toward his own idea.

¹³ Lacan, *Seminar X, Anxiety*: 279.

¹⁴ Ibid: 325.

¹⁵ Ibid: 53-54.

¹⁶ Hegel, *The Philosophy of Spirit (Jena Lectures 1805-6)*. Part I. "Spirit according to its Concept," <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/jl/ch01a.htm>

¹⁷ See Lacan, *Seminar X, Anxiety*: 22.

¹⁸ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 16, The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, Translated by Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007):112.

¹⁹ Lacan had introduced the "paternal metaphor" three years earlier. See Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, Livre IV: La relation d'objet, 1956-57*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1991):379.

²⁰ Lacan, *Seminar X, Anxiety*: 173.

²¹ Lacan, *Seminar VII, Ethics*: 134

²² What does the emission, the articulation, the sudden emergence from out of our voice of that "You!" (*To!*) mean? A "You" that may appear on our lips at a moment of utter helplessness, distress or surprise in the presence of something that I will not right off call death, but that is certainly for us an especially privileged other---one around which our principle concerns gravitate, and which for all that still manages to embarrass us. I do not think this "You" is simple---this you of devotion that other manifestations of the need to cherish occasionally comes up against. I believe that one finds in that word the temptation to tame the Other, that prehistoric, that unforgettable Other, which suddenly threatens to surprise us and to cast us down from the height of its appearance. "You" contains a form of defense, and I would say that at the moment when it is spoken, it is entirely in this "You," and nowhere else, that one finds what I have evoked today concerning *das Ding*." *Seminar VII, Ethics*: 56.

²³ Lacan, *Seminar VII, Ethics*: 56.

²⁴ Slavoj Žižek, S. "Neighbors and Other Monsters: A Plea for Ethical Violence," in Žižek, S. and Santner, E. & Reinhard, K. *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2005):162-163.

²⁵ In the midst of his discussion of defenses against *das Ding*, three years before arriving at his notion of "ceded objects" in the seminar on Anxiety, Lacan remarks that "here the ego defends itself by hurting itself as the crab gives up its claw." Lacan, *Seminar VII, Ethics*: 73.

²⁶ Lacan, *Seminar VII, Ethics*: 52.

²⁷ Quoted by Jean-Luc Nancy and Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe in *The Title of the Letter*, Translated by François Raffoul and David Pettigrew. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992): 46. n.7.

²⁸ Lacan, *Écrits*: 144.

²⁹ Ibid: 422.

³⁰ This discussion doesn't at all imply that the dog cannot be surprised. The dog hears a rustle in the hallway and, rushing into the hallway, appears surprised that its owner is home. What the dog cannot do is be surprised by a signifier.

³¹ In connection with this discussion of the way the signifier itself displays the structure of the symptom it is interesting to note the observation of Slavoj Žižek about how Lacan tends to universalize the concept of symptom in his later work: "The same matrix is at work in the shifts in the Lacanian notion of the symptom. What distinguishes the last stage of Lacan's teaching from the previous ones is best approached through the changed status of this notion. Previously a symptom was a pathological formation to be (ideally, at least) dissolved in and through analytic interpretation, an index that the subject had somehow and somewhere compromised his desire, or an index of the deficiency or mal-functioning of the symbolic Law that guarantees the subject's capacity to desire. In short, symptoms were the series of exceptions, disturbances, and mal-functionings, measured by the ideal of full integration into the symbolic Law (the Other). Later, however, with his notion of the universalized symptom, Lacan accomplished a paradoxical shift from the "masculine" logic of Law and its constitutive exception to the "feminine" logic, in which there is *no* exception to the series of symptoms – that is, in which there are *only* symptoms, and the symbolic Law (the paternal Name) is ultimately just one (the most efficient or established) in the series of symptoms." Slavoj Žižek, "The Real of Sexual Difference," in Barnard, S. and Fink, B., eds. *Reading Seminar XXL Lacan's Major Work on Love, Knowledge, and Feminine Sexuality*. (Albany NY: State University of New York Press): 58.

³² How is this question "maintained"? Here, too, Hegel provides a helpful point in his distinction between *an sich* and *für sich*. The question may remain merely implicit, or in itself (*an sich*). Or it may at some point erupt into explicit expression, rising to the level of being *für sich*, or "for itself."

³³ Jacques Lacan, "Seminar XVI: From an Other to the other, 1968" translated for private use from the unpublished French transcript of the seminar by Cormac Gallagher, Session of 11/20/68.

³⁴ I am tempted to use the term "elementary cell" but "elementary matrix" seems eminently preferable. "Cell" has the drawback of too easily suggesting a unity where "matrix" calls up an intrinsic complexity. Moreover, "matrix" has the advantage of sounding an oblique reference to the mother, which of course is an absolutely key part of my intention. In fact, Lacan himself refers at one point to the "elementary cell of the signifier." That he definitely does not intend any notion of a simple unity, however, is obvious from the fact that he uses the phrase to describe what is probably his most dauntingly complicated schema, the "graph of desire." See Lacan, *Écrits*: 681.

³⁵ Lacan also uses the term "*signifiance*" much earlier. See Lacan, *Écrits*: 424.

³⁶ Lacan, *Seminar VII, Ethics*: 121.

³⁷ Slavoj Žižek, "Hegel and Shitting: The Idea's Constipation," in Slavoj Žižek et. al., *Hegel and the Infinite: Religion, Politics, and Dialectic*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011): 222.

³⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London & New York: Verso, 2012): 402.

³⁹ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Translated A. V. Miller, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977): 492.