

University of Southern Queensland

The Halls of Angst: Culture and Materialism

A Dissertation submitted by

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Abstract

This dissertation is dedicated to problematising Raymond Williams’s seminal work on Cultural Materialism and the institution that emerged from it. The first chapter proper makes various claims: while Culturalism became institutionalised in the academy it has never been popularly assimilated and idealism remains the common currency; the concept of “whole culture” belies the reality that elitism is entrenched; while culturalism touted a “slow revolution,” capitalism has gone from strength to strength; the latter-day institutions of Culturalism generally are apolitical or devoted, merely, to identity politics *within* capitalist culture; the sociological and philosophical premises of Culturalism are dubious and dogmatic. The next chapter, then, analyses the underpinnings of Marxist materialism and the problems with it from Continental and Analytical philosophical perspectives—apropos the latter, this section focuses also on the Body-Mind problem. The final chapter considers several alternatives to reductive materialism before calling for the provisional acceptance of a “post-materialism.” Several hypotheses are also identified that might be subjects of future research. The primary material consulted is diverse, including Williams as well as Marx, Hegel, and German idealism, though mainly their modern expositors, including: Slavoj Žižek, Terry Eagleton, Ernesto Laclau, Catherine Belsey, Jacques Derrida, the Frankfurt School, as well as several Philosophers of “Mind” from the Analytic tradition.

Certification Page

I certify that the ideas, analysis, results and conclusions reported in this dissertation are entirely my own effort, except where otherwise acknowledged. I also certify that this work is original and has not been previously submitted for any other award, except where otherwise acknowledged.

Signature of Candidate

Date

ENDORSEMENT

Signature of Supervisor

Date

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Cultural Materialism

This dissertation began with the critique of the New Historicism that was developed in the narrow parameters of my Honours thesis. Within the confines of that project, I concluded that New Historicism was an apolitical form of criticism whose more apt title was indeed “Cultural Poetics,” as Stephen Greenblatt, its founder, has long insisted. My critique was largely culled from the Anglo-political version of this cultural turn in literary criticism, the roots of which were initiated theoretically by Raymond Williams’s Cultural Materialism, or *Culturalism*. New Historicism and Cultural Materialism have a great deal in common as modes of literary criticism, methodologically and theoretically; each ignores aesthetics in favour of analysing the discursive power formations in which subject texts are composed, yet the former is passive and the latter aggressive, politically. This form of analysis certainly remains valid and useful as a way of understanding texts and their historical conjunctures, and as a mode via which to reflect critically upon power-structures generally, including those which still prevail.

A reformist agenda is thus implied in New Historicist/Cultural Materialist literary criticism which, in fact, is not a new idea at all. As Terry Eagleton has written, literary criticism began in Britain as a “bourgeois ‘public sphere’ ... a reformative apparatus, scourging deviation and repressing the transgressive; yet this juridical technology [was] deployed in the name of a certain historical emancipation” (*Function of Criticism* 12). The agenda, according to Eagleton, was to establish the

hegemony of bourgeois culture and morality in the wake of absolutism and a licentious aristocracy. The complementary agenda of Cultural Materialism was to democratise that hegemony further and to undermine the inequalities of bourgeois culture.

It was this political agenda of the modern reforming cultural criticism that I sympathised with and was interested in assessing in regards to its credentials and efficacy as post-Marxism. I concluded my Honours dissertation by condemning New Historicism for being both aesthetically and politically neutral, or *academic*, though I was naggingly conscious that Cultural Materialism was also either ingenuous or disingenuous in *its* political pretensions; after about four decades of Cultural Materialism, capitalism is more entrenched than ever. Indeed Williams's optimistic forecast of a long revolution has been pegged from the start by a material reality conspicuous for a rapid progression of neoliberalism. I shall leave hanging the pertinent remark that of course we no longer speak of such things—that in recent decades Marx has been carried around by critics, historians, and sociologists like so much regrettable baggage, while capitalism is tacitly treated, at worst, as a necessary evil.

For the present, more expansive project, I decided to get to the bottom of the theoretical/philosophical underpinnings of this asymmetrical critical movement, a heads and tails whose common denomination is *materialism*. The qualified conclusions of my thinking and research are critical not merely of Cultural Materialism, or its obverse, New Historicism, but of what success they *have had* in homogenising “culture” as a miscellany of practices indifferently assessed as to their discursive rudiments and political effects. I was also concerned to assess the justifications for the homogenising process. The second chapter, then, provides an

overview of Cultural Materialism as it emerged theoretically in Britain through the work of Williams, whose seminal conception is in fact a reference point throughout the dissertation, a way of keeping the wide-ranging material I utilise cohesive, but “cultural materialism” becomes the signifier for the philosophical premises that underwrite the practice. Chapter Two transitions, then, from the development of Cultural Materialism to a critique of elements of the politics it engendered. The main focus centres on the contradiction between Williams’s conception of the “whole culture” and the cultural elitism that actually prevails—as well as the neo-liberal ascendancy that has confounded Williams’s pluralist revolution from the start. The final part of Chapter Two presents the stark contradiction between Cultural Materialist ambitions and interventions, and the concomitant march of an evolving capitalism and the current state of play. The chapter thus ends with the problematic of Cultural Materialism in disarray, but also a reaffirmation of what should be the irreconcilable Marxist-Post-Marxist antipathy for the capitalist juggernaut.

Thereafter, the dissertation concerns itself with the fundamental philosophical underpinnings of “cultural materialism”—what is now a more or less generic term: Materialism itself. Chapter Three begins with a revision of Marx’s seminal materialism and Williams’s attempted restitution and reform of it after decades of idealistic contamination within the British radical tradition. Williams’s *own* “problems of materialism” are then canvassed before a more rigorous interrogation is attempted, specifically problematising materialist accounts of consciousness and the Mind-Body problem. Criticism of materialism and accounts of consciousness from the Analytic and Continental Philosophical traditions are contrasted and juxtaposed. By the end of Chapter Three, Materialism *per se* is found to be compromised at the very least.

The final Chapter experiments with a *rapprochement* of some kind between materialism and “idealism.” This is done by analysing several conceptions of idealism—compromises either on materialism, or on idealism—espoused in respective parts by literary critics, theorists, philosophers, and theologians, all concerned one way or another with the problem of agency, emancipation and ethics in the context of global capitalism. The disparate parts of the last chapter in fact form a homologous whole that conditions my own conclusions. During all of this, my critical evaluations are productive of my own ruminations on the various topics, and I offer several considerations for further investigation. Some of these I consider important as original observations worthy of more research, which I hypothesise discretely in my conclusion.

1.2 Basic Critique of Materialist Premises

The Welsh literary-cum-cultural critic Raymond Williams was a true disciple of Marx, and his *Cultural Materialism* was born of the problematical nature of Historical Materialism and the abuses of it that entailed as the dialectic failed to eventuate. Marx was a philosopher first and historian/sociologist second, and his Historical Materialism was a sociological grounding of Hegel’s dialectic of spirit. Hegel followed Kant in refuting the logical absurdity of David Hume’s insistence that *a priori* human reason is groundless, while taking refuge in empiricism—as if observation could operate independent of conceptualisation. Kant and Hegel sought to defend the legitimacy of *a priori* reason, but Hegel excelled himself and confabulated a systemic model of human destiny, dialectically impelled by the idealistic interaction of finite and infinite being.

It is vital to realise that it was this idealistic conception of human destiny and *not* Hegel's method that Marx inverted. Marx utilised Hegel's dialectical method to theorise his *materialist* version of human destiny. Philosophically conceived on the run as it were—influenced by the new Hegelians—Marx's was a scheme almost as ambitious in scale and remote from our mundane affairs as was Hegel's, though Marx's model was never meant to be taken as systemic. Historical Materialism was concerned with the seismic pressures and tectonic shifts of human history, and Marx identified its volatile geo-sociological dynamic as the “mode of production”—how society reproduces itself and the social relations that entail. Marx found that the mode of production evolved, thanks to human innovation, and that inherent conflict between the “social forces of production and the relations of production” are gradually exacerbated unto revolution. This process was theorised to repeat itself and thus instantiated a dialectical progression to political economy that tended inevitably towards more egalitarian societies, and would logically culminate in communism. Marx was a sociologist on a grand scale and his *ultimate* projections remain dubious, though his critique of capitalism was devastating and remains compelling today. The problem, I argue, was and is that Marx's grand materialist scheme of sociological change lacked a sophisticated *human* or idealistic dimension.

Nevertheless, conceived during the dark days of industrial servitude and free markets, it at once spawned a following that became entrenched as an ideology, while simultaneously it logically emasculated its adherents of any real efficacy within the process. Conditions had to be ripe for change and perhaps, in their eagerness for it, Marx and Engels fomented that the fruit must soon fall. The rest is history—frustration, distortion, dogmatism, corruption, tyranny, failure, and disillusionment ensued. Such is the fruit of contemporary interference in a grand

historical process inspired by Hegel, an obverse *material* complement to Hegel's phenomenology of spirit that seemed, rhetorically, and compellingly to many of his followers—and in accordance with the philosophy of the day—to cancel idealism out completely.

The crucial point, as shall be examined in more detail in Chapter Three, is that Marx was philosophically an idealist—though not in the popular sense of the term—or rather a dialectician, and sociologically a materialist. Like Hegel, Marx despised empirical reductionism of the sort David Hume championed and Kant contested. Hume found refuge from “the weakness and disorder of the faculties” in objective nature, as if the two were mutually exclusive. Kant showed that the mere act of cognising a causal relation presupposes its differentiation from other causes, implying a global perspective within any class or sphere of possibilities. Marx occupied the philosophical cusp, more or less, between metaphysics, which runs from Plato to Nietzsche, and the deconstruction of modern philosophy by Nietzsche, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and others.

Historical Materialism and the critique of capitalism were idealistically conceived; inferred via categorical appreciation of a dynamic sphere and logically extrapolated. It is not human essence that Marx theorised, but the march of human society within the current epoch of political economy. Despite propounding materialism, Marx illustrates the critical power of idealism in his works. When Marx wrote that “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness,” he was not necessarily describing the derivation or formation of *consciousness*—or if he was he was being hasty—but the *conditioning* of it. Consciousness, the ability to be *conscious of*, to contextualise—not to mention an obsessive inclination to confabulate, discriminate,

evaluate, appreciate—remains a mystery. This is reflected in Althusser’s failure to impute Marx’s dialectics to “overdetermined” and thus purely material causes, and as we shall see is grudgingly being conceded even by quarters of the modern scientific community. Indeed philosophies of insistent materialism are increasingly being eroded or acknowledged as ideologically rather than empirically founded, the insistence being that only materialist explanations can be considered. Thomas Nagel has recently called for the weaning off of “speculative Darwinian explanations of practically everything,” which, with heavy irony, he refers to as “the materialism and Darwinism of the gaps” (127). The thawing of materialism is thus underway among the Analytic philosophical tradition as well.

Meanwhile Cultural Materialism and Continental Marxism generally retain a determinedly and reductively materialist perspective on culture, despite structuralism having lapsed into relative obsolescence. There are numerous post-structuralist accounts and some that border on idealism, but they remain resolutely materialist. Writing in 1997, Alan Sinfield asserted that the task of the Cultural Materialist is to,

investigate the historical conditions in which textual representations are produced, circulated and received ... engag[ing] with questions about the relations between dominant and subordinate cultures, the implications of racism, sexism and homophobia [and] the scope for subaltern resistance. ... In this approach, the terms art and literature are neither spontaneous nor innocent. They are bestowed by the gatekeepers of the cultural apparatus and should be understood as strategies for conferring authority upon certain representations, and hence upon certain viewpoints.

A non-materialist approach alleges that high culture derives from the human spirit, and hence transcends historical conditions, constituting a reservoir of ultimate truth and wisdom and belonging thereby to all people indifferently.

(Literature, Politics and Culture xxxiv)

This polemic was part of the identity politics Cultural Materialism morphed into, but it is more the logic of the second clause that this dissertation shall take to task.

Sinfield's hyperbole is instructive and it is a moot point whether the Leavisite revolt Williams inaugurated remains as compelling.

For Sinfield, the capacity for and representation of human insight, creativity and angst are consigned to factional oblivion—art and literature are hegemonically constructed and ideologically polarised as either radically productive or canonically conservative. Reflecting soberly in 2004 (in the same volume), Sinfield writes, “The characteristic critical task becomes the demonstration that, perhaps despite appearances, the text at issue actually displays an awareness of its own constructedness. The outcome is disconcertingly like a distorted mirror image of the discovery of the unity of the text in New Criticism and Leavisism” (xix). Sinfield seems to suggest a contradiction of his own anti-essentialism here, that the author and the critic sometimes spookily evince an omnipotent third-person perspective at odds with notions of the stooge-like constructions and assimilations of cultural dupes.

There is perhaps a *singularity* in dialectical reason wherein its concerted logic fails to resolve or supersede itself, that is to materialise in the world. The canniness, yet failure, of both Hegel's and Marx's dialectics to become manifest, or sublated, indicates a degree of phenomenal complexity that is beyond the capacity of our

historicised horizon to predict, issuing as it does from virtual chaos. Thus Marxist philosophers like Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou are preoccupied with the quasi-random revolutionary “act” or “event,” as they call it respectively, of the revolution that Marx perceived but failed to accurately plot. Post-Marxists are conflicted thus with both conviction and defeatism.

Cultural Materialism was intended by Williams to inscribe some order into the contingent nature of Marx and Engels’s epochal determinism, and to offer a sense of political agency to dissident groups. Thanks largely to the influence of Jonathan Dollimore and his *Radical Shakespeare* (1984), and particularly Dollimore’s and Sinfield’s seminal *Political Shakespeare* (1985), the emphasis consolidated into one of political commitment in the form of a critical revision of canonical texts and the oppressive institutions from which they derive. Cultural Materialism came to stand for the “political commitment” of marginalised groups within and against hegemonic institutions; moreover practiced within an academic institution traditionally concerned with the propagation of an idealism naively enthral to the “material forces and relations of production” theorised by Marx (Dollimore and Sinfield viii).

The idea of hegemony of course came from the post-Marxist Antonio Gramsci, and is compelling and useful, but there has been a tendency in Cultural Materialism to deny individual agency within it. Interrogating the ideology of the text, as though the author were hermetically sealed within it, really is tantamount to formalism, and moreover implies a circular logic whereby discursive formations are deconstructed within discursive formations, and by the very literary-critical savants whose omniscience is rigidly denied. Even putting aside these objections, what of the political *efficacy* of the subaltern programme which, in the current milieu of neoliberal ascendancy and accumulating “failure of welfare capitalism,” finds itself

at a similar impasse to that which confounded classical Marxism? In kind, Sinfield's recommendation was to "(1) prepare for a future revolutionary conjuncture; [and] (2) regard socialism, for the time being, as a relative condition—to be achieved in fits and starts where circumstances are propitious. Either way, a good strategy will be to sustain and politicize dissident groups" (*Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* xxxvi).

Since then, Feminism has fallen off the radar, though we are witnessing the ongoing campaign for same sex marriages. Yet the desire for equal conjugal rights, and no doubt in some cases white weddings, seems to be absolutely sincere, rather than a worm in the bud. If same sex marriage represents a "veil" over a piecemeal revolution, neither the participants nor the media seems any longer aware of it. Similarly, the drive for equal pay for women seems predicated on the money, rather than radically motivated, or having any such effect. Noted critical theorist and feminist, Nancy Fraser has recently argued that "emancipatory movements" generally have either unwittingly aligned themselves or their "accents of emancipation" have been used to "excoriate social protection as a fetter on freedom" (130). Identity politics can thus even be seen as in league with the neo-liberal push, albeit innocently. Capitalist culture is nothing if not flexible, but so-called subaltern politics in bourgeois central are not worthy of the name. Indeed identity politics cast as political correctness is now a regular target of satire and the fastidious worm has turned.

The problem is that just as Historical Materialism rendered the ideological superstructure effectually redundant, so too Cultural Materialism invalidated individual experience, to no useful effect and for no better reason, I would argue, than to maintain dubious materialist credentials and an arbitrary, anti-aesthetic

moratorium on high art—provoked more by Leavis and company than Marx. By seeking to maintain an austere materialist, virtually *protestant* philosophy, Williams and his followers alienate those of a more romantic, or Catholic, persuasion—in the process making way for other opportunistic ideologies to appropriate them. One of the most effective weapons used against Marxism has been its own vaunted godlessness, along with rhetorical attacks from its enemies citing “collectivism” and other banalities against it. In seeking to validate and assist the grinding progress of Historical-cum-Cultural *Materialism*, dogmatic Marxism has arguably been its own worst enemy—in failing to appeal to the hearts and minds of those involved.

Post-Marxism has simply not offered a viable or popular or *human* alternative to capitalism, and especially consumerism, indeed it has probably hardened the capitalist order by harassing it, and simultaneously confirmed its jaded denizens within their various ideological diversions. And this brings me to what in a fit of poetic licence I have called “the halls of angst,” my designation for our postmodern condition; that is, to quote Williams, “our lived system of meanings and values,” much of which we remain critically oblivious according to the philosophy of Culturalism, being constructs of it. I seek to contend with this notion and argue that we exceed cultural constructivism; that conformism commonly amounts to a passive suspension of disbelief in our cultured reality.

1.3 The Self and Materialism

What of the individual Self and the minimal distance between it and the *other*? For Continental Philosophy the concept of “other” refers to such a minimal distance

between subjects. Jacques Lacan also theorises the “big Other,” which indicates “radical alterity” either as a non-projected Other or as the cultural-language system itself, which orders and interprets perception. This big Other is what Lacan thus calls the “symbolic order,” to which the subject must defer in its experience of the world. What depth of comradeship can actually be achieved qua an *other* has been an ongoing debate within Continental Philosophy and I elaborate alternative grounds for ethics in the final chapter. Another critical theme concerns the concept of the constructed self, which finds expression only in group consciousness; this tends to elide the common experience of its own private economy—its anxieties and consolations found in solitude and private meditation—not to mention religious experience. I argue that the Self is subject to its own experiential and wanted development, as much as conditioning from the Other. Slavoj Žižek argues much the same thing, assigning this subjective *freedom* to pseudo-ontological premises (*logos*) via Kant, Schelling, Hegel et al and Freud and Lacan, who are also interrogated below—an “interrogation” is designed to exact specific information, as opposed to a sympathetic and exhaustive exegesis. In the interests of the “big picture focus”, or “meta-critique” I am attempting, this is the kind of tactic I employ generally

These are all ethical as well as ontological and political considerations. A problem with classical Marxism is its presumed subsumption of individual agency within such categories as “Means of Production,” “bourgeoisie,” “Proletariat,” and “Historical Materialism.” Marx was intent on liberating the individual, but how much do these obstinate categories help to condition the reactive fetishisation of individualism in the neo-liberal order? As an originator of sociology in the wake of German Romanticism, and as first-hand witness to the horrors of the industrial age and its stark divisions of class and wealth, Marx was precipitated in his discordant

materialist *synthesis* of Hegel's thesis of "Spirit" and the urban squalor that presented as its stark antithesis. The point is that Marx was *rhetorically* theorising diachronic social movement as monolithic and self-governing *in reaction* to Hegel, and not theorising a materialist ontology *tout court*. Marx was not so much "indebted" to Hegel, as is commonly observed, as precipitated by him. Just as Marx diametrically opposed Proudhon's *The Philosophy of Poverty* with his own *The Poverty of Philosophy*, so he famously stood Hegel's dialectical idealism on its head.

This was an illusory juxtaposition, contrary and antithetical, rather than a competing ontology negotiated on equal terms. Beyond grounding humanity firmly in nature, Marx does not concern himself with ontology at all, except to dismiss it abruptly as an ideological contaminant; he changes tack, so to speak, and I argue unfairly condemns Hegel's idealism as *The German Ideology*, held up as a patent contradiction of prevailing material conditions. Marx thereby confounded Hegel's idealism on *political* and *rhetorical* rather than ontological grounds. These kinds of rhetorical adjustment punctuate the development of Marx's materialism—which in a late chapter, below, come back to haunt him—and force him into a reductiveness that logically precludes notions of spontaneity, dissent or self-determination. That shift of emphasis was left to Georg Lukács in his *The History of Class Consciousness*, who more fully theorised class division as the engine of history and the proletariat as an organised solidarity, the individual subsumed within class consciousness (Livinstone). Yet far from denying individualism, Marx simply believed that material equality was the necessary prerequisite for individuals to flourish, that individual distinctiveness was the product of equality, ironically of "collectivism" within a given culture and amid its challenges (*The German Ideology* 316-19).

This is a far cry from the direction Cultural Materialism has taken since. While it retained undercurrents of humanism under Raymond Williams, under the auspices of Theory the individual and the Self went the same way as the author and the aesthetic. Dealing with Shakespearean characterisation, Alan Sinfield for instance notes that “Cultural Materialists regard ‘character’ as a typical mystification of bourgeois ideology, tending to efface the realities of class, race, gender and sexuality, oppression, cooperation, history and ideology. Thus Cultural materialists, as literary critics, ‘analyze the moments at which character effects breakdown, disclosing the ideological project of the play’” (Sinfield “From Bradley to Cultural Materialism” 33).

The problem with such insights into tropological character effects is the logical conflation of fictional and real characters. Can a *real* self be so easily discarded as nothing more than a creature of Sinfield’s deontological categorical imperatives—even de-commodified, merely a product of culture? More importantly, can these formative effects account adequately for the development of the Self? Such questions shall be taken to task, as well as the reductionisms they entail. Shakespeare both orchestrated and implicitly criticised the ideologies at play within his texts. And though no doubt orchestrated somewhat himself, he was also master of the situation, that is, more or less transcendent—as indeed were Hegel and Marx within their discursive context. Frederick Jameson argues that Hegel’s formative opposition, identity and difference, “will always pass through the imaginary and through its ideologies, will always one way or another be mediated by the codes and motifs of some deeper historical classification system or *pensee sauvage* of the historical imagination, some properly political unconscious” (“Marxism” 152). While this is

undeniable in terms of social/political *horizons*, such constraints arguably pertain to relevance rather than absolute limitations.

Similarly, in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990), Terry Eagleton went to great lengths discrediting the idea of the aesthetic as anything more than ideological compliance. Yet while the aesthetic probably has nothing to do with Romantic pantheism, it does suggest a capacity for subjective spontaneity. Eagleton is at odds with the often conservative politics of the aesthetic when he claims that “the aesthetic as custom, sentiment, spontaneous impulse may consort well enough with political domination; but these phenomena border embarrassingly on passion, imagination, sensuality, which are not always so easily incorporable” (*The Ideology of the Aesthetic* 28). Eagleton points here to the politically “ambiguous” nature of the aesthetic, suggesting its versatility as both radical and conservative, though from my acquaintance with Eagleton’s work, this is part of what we could call his “Lacanian turn,” wherein the aesthetic is ascribed to the real of pre-subjective drives. Lacanian post-structuralism is a considerable influence behind post-Marxism generally, and will also be taken to task below. I fail to see the distinction between the aesthetic and the imagination, each having the capacity to take the subject out of the confines of itself. The question is, is this the capacity of the subject or consciousness itself?

Both Shakespeare the author and we, authors of ourselves, retain something experientially essential and potential, and some critical distance, or *anxiety*, in our relations with the world—or so it shall be argued. The fact that such savants as Shakespeare, Hegel, and Marx are inevitably cast against the ideological/discursive relief of their day does not confine them within it. We may decry the horizon within which they extemporise, but to insist upon it denotes a reductive notion of consciousness—which Marx helped to propagate—that can’t account for the critical

distance each man achieves. This is not to retrace a theological tack, but to give due credit to ingenuity and genius; to confound what is surely now the reactionary character of *some* post-structuralist critique—Foucault and Althusser are notables—”historically [that is dialectically] related to a traditional rejection of the desiring self” (Levine 9). Levine continues: “It is ironic to be treating as kin a Judaeo-Christian tradition insisting on ‘self-denial’ and a deeply anti-metaphysical reaction to Judaeo-Christian metaphysics” (9). We need not revert to doctrines of predestination—though even this receives some consideration below—but we ought to acknowledge such attempts at an explanation, as well as that the conscious self remains unaccountable.

For Herbert Marcuse the concept of “essence” is first and foremost grounded in human consciousness, beneath cultural constructedness and beyond epistemology. Essence is grounded in being itself, in the simple fact that the subject is perennially dissatisfied with reality: essence is “motivated by the critical consciousness of ‘bad’ facticity, of unrealised potentialities” (“The Concept of Essence” 46). According to Marcuse, ancient Greek essence is born in potentiality as well as the tension between being and unfolding; essence is what maintains us in the flux: “the *essentia* is, in other words, the inner structure of existence, in which it operates as the principle form for each kind of being” (“The Concept of Essence” 46). The crucial point is that the essence is essential; “in all finite being, essence and existence are ontologically separated. The latter supervenes to the former ‘from outside’” (“The Concept of Essence” 46-47). This outside “existence” is thus an expression of and an imposition upon the essence; the essence thus remains in a state of *potentia transcendentalis* (Marcuse “The Concept of Essence” 47).

Admittedly this sounds rather like philosophical mysticism, but its claims are quite modest, merely that the evidence for essence is in its perennially—I would add pathologically—frustrated potential and aspiration. John Milbank trumps Marcuse’s equivocating “potential” in blatantly calling the same thing “soul”; that is “the *medium* in which we dwell as human beings. ... Aristotle declared that the soul is not only ‘the form’ of the animal body, but it is also ‘in a manner all things.’ In the case of human beings, at least, souls are also capable of thought, or *of consciously reflecting* on all that they are aware of” (my emphasis). Milbank’s position is critical of liberalism, but the left buys in essentially to the same doctrine;

the realm of the psychic and of the psychopolitical is corroded from two opposite directions, ... On the one hand, everything human is declared only natural [for the left, “desire”]—we are a bunch of greedy apes with bigger brains; on the other hand, everything human is declared entirely artificial [ideological], just stuff that we have made up.

Milbank’s important rider, recognised by much earlier thinkers like Galileo but forgotten by us, is that this is “merely the pragmatic truth of technological control, telling us nothing about how deep nature ‘really is’ at all.”

Indeed, post-structural critiques—deconstructions—of the self are far more boastful and credulous of their own reductive reasoning than are those, like Milbank—not to mention Plato and the whole philosophical tradition—who posit a hypothetical reality as the necessary grounds for what we might call our “will to freedom”—what Milbank rather grandly calls “enchanted transcendence.” Milbank dismisses modern liberalism as “disenchanted immanence,” and the so-called

“Heideggerian turn,” which informs the modern left, as “enchanted immanence.” We may paraphrase “enchanted immanence” for our own purposes as the doctrine, *contra* metaphysics, that being is the product of language and culture. This dissertation is devoted to problematising this reductive logic, not merely as philosophically inadequate, but as also politically emasculating.

Chapter Two: Culture

2.1 Culture and Politics

Upon consideration, it seems hardly hyperbolic to muse that exploring the umbrella concept of culture is like embarking upon an odyssey fraught with deception and delusion. The very enterprise is chimerical, for culture is the stuff of being, or at least so it has become fashionable to believe. To explore culture, moreover to objectivise rather than subjectivise it, paradoxically implies a sceptical visitation in a realm wherein the Self takes its bearings. According to Karl Jaspers' thinking, such an exploration must be transient, or what he defined as "Dasein": existence in a minimal sense, the realm of dualism, of objectivity and science, as opposed to his "existenz," which signifies both immanence in and transcendence of society—of culture (17-18). We will deal with the concept of existenz—by any other name—more fully elsewhere, here we are concerned with culture, its more tangible complement. According to traditional sociology, "society comes first and culture after," yet this is merely logical, proceeding from the premise that at a more rudimentary stage of social evolution, homo sapiens "existed in society but without culture" (Merrill 128). Such a statement is untenable today when culture and its analysis have evolved in sophistication such that ontology itself is ruled redundant and culturally derivative. The idea of society without culture is now difficult to imagine, even implausible, yet culture without society (individualism) might be argued to be an apt description of late-capitalist post-modernity. Since Francis Merrill's *Society and Culture* (1961), culture has theoretically taken the place of society, as well as for its denizens, as primary. The cultural turn amounted to putting

the cart before the horse; witness Raymond Williams's seminal inversion, *Culture and Society*. Culture has since become pre-eminent as delimiting both the formative horizon of the self and the extent of its social, material and political being.

Williams's *Culture and Society: 1780-1950* (1958) and *The Long Revolution* (1961) can be dealt with more or less as one—Williams says as much in his Introduction to the latter of the two—in that they deal with the history of British culture as *dynamic*, indeed as proto-revolutionary. In an initial journal article called “The Idea of Culture”—a précis of what was to come—Williams revealed how the idea of culture had passed through a long medley of etymological transition since the Industrial Revolution. Following both Marx and F.R. Leavis, Williams cites the Industrial Revolution as the catalyst from which this deviant history of the multivalent idea of culture proceeded (“Idea” 266). The Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions augured-in extensions of culture in themselves by putting workers at a remove from customary and traditional methods of their reproduction. Industrialisation introduced production for its own sake and at a remove from mere necessity, at the same time releasing workers to pursue private interests and prospects beyond the demeaned delimitations of slavery, dependency, feudalism and the State (Marx *Capital: Vol. One* 448). Marx logically inferred the industrial revolution as being concomitant with advances in agriculture, the whole diverse phenomenon of increased production becoming a mutual dependency. Superfluous peasantry from country regions migrated to urban centres, supplying the demand for industrial labour, whose increased production in turn drove demand for raw and agricultural materials (Marx *Capital: Vol. One* 908-09).

Thus began an unprecedented historical phase of economic and material growth, and of ever-improving technologies, efficiencies and production, along with

the intensification of urban society and the industrial culture that developed with it. This move from rural peasantry and patronage to wage labour in urban centres was also the beginning of the popularisation of culture; the culture of the working classes as distinct from that of their traditional betters. Culture is concomitant with all society and it is ridiculous to suppose it had its advent thanks to industrialisation. Williams's insight was that culture is the complement of every mode of society and its reproduction, but that spontaneous culture—indeed the whole intellectual array of western civilisation—was effectively suppressed by a fetishisation and closeting of the “great tradition,” the sophisticated high culture and its clerisy espoused latterly by Leavis (*Culture and Society* 252-4). The burgeoning of popular culture, facilitated by industrialisation, merely took a more prominent position in its long history of quaint or vulgar juxtaposition and contrast to the high minority culture that generally piped louder theretofore. The logic of Williams's dismissal of Leavis et al is impeccable, yet it rests on the materialist premise that there can be no higher or universal truth imbedded in a mode of culture which sets it apart.

What made the shift to industrial production momentous, at the material level, was that unprecedented surplus production was only realised as capital in the hands of entrepreneurs, making it a bourgeois revolution, rather than overall prosperity or common provision for the immediate future. The salient *new* culture thus remained somewhat elitist in terms of representation, though vulgar, like “new money,” in terms of the old world. William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* and its unintended heroine, Becky Sharpe, illustrate the author's common angst with the new and its unprincipled excesses. Since wage-labour was systemically minimised according to the same economic mechanism—and by the concomitant reality of a “surplus population,” as well as in the interests of profit—and effectively enforced

by the threat of an “industrial reserve army,” this was a new era of hand-to-mouth subsistence, starvation, and cultural spontaneity (Marx *Capital: Vol. One* 781-2). True, large-scale industry also generated opportunities and niche markets for those able to service them and adapt; in turn, however, such opportunism was bought-out or crushed by bigger players; original innovators were gradually consumed in a long process of expropriation that inevitably and perennially alienated society from itself, its traditional roots, and its means of reproducing itself, its cultivation (Marx *Capital: Vol. One* 908-13).

It is worth labouring the point here, especially as it pertains to Williams’s *Long Revolution* thesis. In the positive sense, society began to transcend its organic dependencies; the delimitations imposed by prevailing feudal conditions. Nevertheless it regressed from being a co-operative venture adapted to and constrained by the social order—that is, in inverse equilibrium with the ruling order of things—to a competitive, ergo socially-disintegrating, indeed diasporic phenomenon. Vast urban expansion, as well as provincial and rural outposts, was enlivened by the new spirit of capitalism. The new system *imposed* emancipation, of a sort; the liberated masses were conditionally delivered unto themselves, unconstrained but also unprovisioned, dependent upon the market for their labour, for their day to day subsistence, or upon their entrepreneurial wits and an opportunity to exploit. This was the culture Thackeray despised, rather than the society which bred it. Thus he pined for more principled times, though without criticising the old society which husbanded privilege and parodied principle. In its early stages capitalism inaugurated a new reckoning; society had to be forged anew and initially regressed to pre-social conditions. There was of course synchronic continuity, in terms of individual narratives, but it was possible also to reflect on a very different

world within a mere generation, such that Thackeray, Austen and others were motivated to compose their jaundiced accounts of it. Mannered-society seemed to have entered a punctuated evolutionary phase—a conception of human society that remains pervasive—that mimicked primitive nature. The landed gentry gradually gave way in the new predatory order and the survival of the fittest became a similar motif for Anthony Trollope, in his *The Way We Live Now* (1875), as it was for Thackeray.

This initial process kicked-off of what was recognised by the tradition Williams expounds or, rather, rationalises in *Culture and Society*. Of course that tradition, espoused by Mathew Arnold through Leavis, was more concerned with preventing the disintegration of society and high-culture, specifically the literary tradition, than it was with the lore of folk traditions or craft skills as embodying essentially human practice. According to Leavis:

such traditions are for the most part dead. ... It now becomes plain why it is of so great importance to keep the literary tradition alive. For if language tends to be debased ... instead of invigorated by contemporary use, then it is to literature alone, where its subtlest and finest use is preserved, that we can look with any hope of keeping in touch with our spiritual tradition—with the “picked experience of the ages.” (qtd. in Jones 5)

Arnold and Leavis were thus famously the custodians of a tradition bent on preserving for posterity what the former called “the best that has been thought and written.” This need not, as has become common, be seen purely in the negative light of elitism—or at least the negative light is questionable—as the project was more

one of preserving cultural integrity through the rapid and disconnected changes wrought by industrialisation than it was smug elitism. At least it is possible to defend Arnold and Leavis in this way. Yet they were also preservers of a tradition, which includes Williams, of nurturing rarefied culture for its own sake; by *rarefied* I mean culture severed from its organic roots in traditional practices, indeed removed from nature altogether, as distinct from intellectual/artistic activity performed as a natural extension of organic life and work. This was a conservative or nostalgic Leavisite agenda intended to preserve the fibre of the “organic community” within an artificial, constantly renewing dispensation based on what Marx originally theorised and Joseph Schumpeter would later popularise as “creative destruction.”

Importantly, Leavis’s conservation program was devoted to language itself as much as “great” literature, the idea being that in the organic community work, leisure and language formed the common intercourse, whereas language and leisure were now separated from work and body and debased in the machine age (Day 53-4). Gary Day argues that Leavis’s position had much in common with Adorno’s, whose concern was that without a living intertext in which to reverberate, the “petrified” word cedes cultural richness for comparative banality (54). Indeed, Day argues that Leavis’s position was not wholly antithetical to Marxism, that he anticipated Baudrillard, and even that he “was more ‘revolutionary’ than the Marxists,” seeing their preoccupation with economics as the consummation of an age of economic determinism (111). Thackeray would surely agree, yet this is ironic since Marx’s philosophy expressly denies the legitimacy of our economic *reality*.

Nevertheless, the Marxist legacy has been to interpret culture purely in terms of its commodification and ideological benightedness. Day imputes to Leavis the objection “that Marxism, like capitalism, addressed itself only to economic matters

not cultural ones and hence there was a profound continuity between the two systems. Leavis, by contrast, wanted to undermine capitalism by promoting a cultural sensibility whose values were opposed to it” (111). This position is consistent with that of Erich Fromm of the Frankfurt School, but also with Williams himself, whose prime early criticism of Marxism was of its reductive account of culture as part of the ideological superstructure—dependent upon the economic base as inspiration and prime-mover. Williams was equally concerned with culture as authentic in its own right, and in terms of its totems and taboos. Day nevertheless asserts that Williams “encourages ... a misunderstanding” of Leavis’s idea of “organic community” in *Culture and Society* by ignoring its complexity and merely denouncing its want of evidence (252).

What Williams objected to was not merely the elitism of Leavis’s “clerisy,” chosen to preserve a select canon amid diachronic social chaos; nor even necessarily the bias reflected in the values embodied in a text chosen for preservation. What Williams objected to in the main was the ostensible elision of the political and material inequalities that pervaded in the tradition Leavis wished to preserve. As Marxists are fond of paraphrasing, after Walter Benjamin, “there is no document of culture that is not simultaneously a history of barbarism.” Thus for Williams,

it is foolish and dangerous to exclude from the so-called organic society the penury, the petty tyranny, the disease and mortality, the ignorance and frustrated intelligence which were also among its ingredients. These are not material disadvantages to be set against spiritual advantages; the one thing that such a community teaches is that life is whole and continuous—it is the whole complex that matters. (*Culture and Society* 260)

Williams's "whole complex" here clearly also alludes to Marx's perceived differentiation between economic base and ideological superstructure, dogmatically adhered to by latter-day dialectical materialists. As we shall see, it was the whole notion of elevating culture above its means of production that Williams objected to in both Leavis and Marx, though for obverse reasons. Leavis aimed to preserve culture in the very fabric of its highest, albeit defunct, incarnation—its living language and literary exultation—while the Marxists of the day tended to peg literature with culture generally as derivative of the economic base, preferring to overturn the whole.

Countering both these projects, Williams saw culture as agential, despite the constraints of its means of production, and wanted to anthropologise Leavis's "Great Tradition," as well democratise culture generally, formularising it as a society's "whole way of life," its living intercourse. Williams thus rejected the notion of cultural immiseration that ostensibly entailed the capitalist mode of production, that is the perceived loss of perennial folk culture and history that immediately attended industrialism and the new capitalist dispensation, indeed which prevails somewhat right up to the modern/postmodern present as a source of similar anxiety, including latterly the total "loss of history" which critics like Fredric Jameson bemoan. Williams argued that "the organic community" has "always gone" (*Culture and Society* 259) and that this should not be seen as occasion for nostalgia, or bemoaning the loss of the more organic culture that capitalism displaced, for as Williams counters, feudal culture was beset by its own species of human misery and injustice. Yet Day contradicts the imputation, asserting that it was "to Leavis's credit that he

did not subscribe to this nostalgia since he was quite adamant that there could be no return to the past” (118).

Indeed, antediluvian culture had probably never attained to the perfect harmony of man and nature that Marx appears at times to invoke—though it is also true that jaundiced contemporary views of cultures-past are often superiority-complexes that fail to appreciate the forms of social cohesion not yet superseded, nor the ills that structure *modern* perspectives and can only be criticised in the light of a progressive futurity. Thus, cultures-past are not only measured in terms of what they lack according to present conditions, but also against idealised conjurations that denounce even the inevitable negatives that structure social existence. Indeed, one of the ways that Marxist thought is often disparaged is by arguing that human culture has never approximated the state of mortal bliss that seems to be pined for. This facile argument is easily denounced in that utopia is inscribed in the revolutionary process as *potential*, rather than revisitation. Moreover communism, for Marx, was to be the *beginning* of human history, lived according to the essential attributes of our species-being, released from an economic yoke humanity had always worn, whose burden had only latterly, under industrial capitalism, become impossible; ergo a condition of possibility. There was then never any notion of a return to the past, only a return to our essential humanity, confounded from the start. Utopia was for Marx a great imponderable, a mythical projection of a cooperative society delivered of economic tyranny of one form, proportion or intensity or another, dedicated to production, as opposed to the bottom line. In this sense Marx was the ultimate progressive-conservative, both bourgeois and romantic.

Indeed, one can appreciate how, in Marx’s conception of the dynamics of capitalism, he conceived his notion of the primacy of “the economic structure of

society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness” (qtd. in Williams *Culture and Society* 266). This foundation was not strictly economic, in the modern sense, as Leavis appears to have thought. Indeed economics *per se* was pure abstraction for Marx who, alluding to the “economic structure of society,” was intent upon material prerequisites—the means by which society, as a going concern, subsists and reproduces itself. Yet it was precisely this derivative notion of society and culture that Williams also, after Leavis, contested in his seminal works. In a new Introduction to *Culture and Society*, written in 1982, Williams says the work began in “the post-1945 crisis of belief and affiliation” and was “a way of finding a position from which I could hope to understand and act in contemporary society” (*Culture and Society* xii).

But this rationale was penned with the benefit of hindsight and Williams did not achieve his aim until several years after *The Long Revolution* was published. At least initially, Williams’s “crisis of belief and affiliation” was a diverse problematic within the narrow confines of literary-critical culture. Indeed, conscious or not, Williams’s *oeuvre* can be conceived as primarily an influential reorientation of an academic discipline—one Leavis had worked hard to establish—a way of staying relevant as much as theorising a dedicated politics of culture. According to Tony Judt’s jaundiced historical perspective, Williams was part of the “great age of Theory. . . . In an age of vastly expanded universities, with periodicals, journals and lecturers urgently seeking copy, there emerged a market for ‘theories’ of every kind—fuelled not by improved intellectual supply but rather by insatiable consumer demand” (398-99). One recoils from this economic rationalisation of Williams’s work—he is named by Judt among the cohort whose scholarship is undeniable and

integrity widely lauded, yet according to his own lights Williams was necessarily part of an historical trend. Such an ungenerous account is arguably uncontroversial in the case of the later emergence, in the United States, of Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicism—it and Cultural Materialism have often been conflated. But Greenblatt's innovation was influenced more by Michel Foucault than Williams, and apart from remaining primarily intent on canonical texts, its political component is more passively deconstructive than radical. Nevertheless, each drew inspiration from the Marxist tradition and it is reductive, indeed heretical, to read them as economically constructed. Williams, as we have seen, was disenchanted with both the perceived elitism of literary criticism since Mathew Arnold—up to and including his own training under Leavis—and what he called the Marxist “application of a new total interpretation of society” (*Culture and Society* 244).

Yet Williams's overall innovation was more in the nature of reforming and reconciling these antecedents than breaking with them. In *Culture and Society* Williams revealed a primarily literary heritage as the binding agent of a post-enlightenment secular age, engineered by Coleridge-through-Arnold, Eliot, and Leavis, among others. Williams posited it as an ever more leavening process of democratisation, which was to shift decisively to a popular mode under Williams himself. Williams was driven at once by his disciplinary training and Marxist precepts to conceive of culture as the inherent dynamic of society, an active force in its own democratic tendency; in concert with, moreover, rather than merely the product of, industrial and technological advances. British culture had developed substantially from within as a proud tradition, reproduced and readily taken up by its disparate masses in the complementary forms of clericism and cultural capital. A gradually eroding but stubborn elitism that reached its crisis during the Modernist

period, whose last dregs dissipated under Leavis's stewardship and fell suddenly—in the context of the Long Revolution—to the latter's own acolyte. Williams enthuses in his own time at a culture of complaint in which every new democratic breakthrough serves merely as a “springboard” for ever greater demands, which he sees as evidence of a momentous but integrated social revolution still underway (*Long Revolution* xiii).

To be sure, the left-Leavisite Williams was not an uncritical celebrant of this essential democratisation process, indeed it remained a hypothesis in these early stages. Williams was of course a Marxist in his ultimate vision of and ambition for humanity, though he differed with prevailing socialist doctrine in Britain. Williams complained, in *The Long Revolution*, at “the common habit of supposing our society to be governed by single patterns,” suggesting three such fundamentalist conceptions; “economic activity, political behaviour and cultural development” (294). In summary, these are the notions of a) a materialism devoid of anything but economic determination; b) dogmatic political militancy devoid of theoretical or practicable applications, and often even conviction; and c) political/cultural reform conflated with the Romantic tradition. Williams decries against much of the Marxist writing in Britain during the “thirties,” a “kind of fools’ gallery which always appears in any general movement,” but particularly the overall “tone of dogmatic infallibility which characterised some of the most popular writings” (*Culture and Society* 269-70). Indeed, Williams goes on to condemn much of this cohort for its “negative identification” (271), a term he draws from George Gissing's characterisation of a type, who owned a “zeal on behalf of the suffering masses [that] was nothing more nor less than disguised zeal on behalf of my own starved passions. ... I identified myself with the poor and ignorant; I did not make their cause my own,

but my own cause theirs” (qtd. in *Culture and Society* 176). This is surely a type easily recognisable, either intuitively or historically, in numerous failed Marxist uprisings. Indeed it could be described as a cultured personality at odds with its real, rather than ideological, determinants.

Then again, this type could also be argued to be a product of the new culture in a precisely deterministic way that fits neatly into Williams’s third criticism; that British Marxism of the day was atavistically conflated with the romantic literary tradition. Williams cites his contemporary, E.P. Thompson, as guilty of this incongruity in his criticism of William Morris, founder of the Socialist League in 1884. Writing in 1937, Thompson states that while Morris’s

dialectical understanding of change, growth and decay was ever-present in his writing, he saw man’s economic and social development always as the master process, and tended to suggest that the arts were passively dependent upon social change ... Morris has not emphasised sufficiently the ideological role of art, its active agency in changing human beings and society as a whole, its agency in man’s class-divided history. (qtd. in *Culture and Society* 273)

As Williams suggests, Morris was an exemplary Marxist if we are to take Marx’s base/superstructure model on faith. Yet Williams goes on if anything to prevaricate on the question. On the one hand he suggests that Morris—who was railing more against utilitarianism—was too dogmatic in his condemnation of commercialised life, retreating instead into “minority culture”—a kind of beleaguered aestheticism—but then he also suggests that the softening of such dogmatism in Britain was due to institutionalised reverence for the Romantic Movement and Coleridgean hyperbole

such that poets were the unacknowledged legislators of the world (*Culture and Society* 152-53). Interestingly, Williams does not discuss the political context of the Cold War or the salient political crises of the 1950s as being influential. Yet Williams's contemporary, Stuart Hall, describes the "suppression of the Hungarian Revolution by Soviet tanks" and, on the other hand, "the British and French invasion of the Suez Canal zone" as "liminal, boundary-making experiences. They symbolised the break-up of the political Ice Age" (Hall "Life and Times of the First New Left" 177).

This is not to accuse Williams of suppressing political considerations in favour of his romanticism hypothesis; the 1930s views Williams discusses clearly obtained, yet there was a great deal of disillusionment among the British Left, born latterly of the Hungarian and Suez crises, which was also formative. Moreover, I would argue, Williams's fundamental objection to British Marxism suggests philosophical neglect. Hall writes:

Retrospectively, I would identify myself as one of those described by Raymond Williams in *Culture and Society* who, following as a student of literature the engagement between the Leavisites and the Marxist critics, was obliged to admit that "Scrutiny won." Not because it was right—we were always critical of the conservative elitism of Scrutiny's cultural programme—but because the alternative Marxist models were far too mechanical and reductive. (179)

Hall adds in parenthesis: "(We did not yet have access to Lukács, Benjamin, Gramsci, or Adorno)." Yet they did have sufficient access to Marx to fathom that

these ostensibly “mechanical and reductive” models were, as we shall see, philosophically defensible in spite of lacking practical political-applications. In any case, to Williams’s credit the theoretical position he attained to was conducive to a radical politics. The problem was “what to do,” how to both subsist in the present and foment in favour of revolution, an untenable situation in the context of the day: socialist corruption and decline, triumphant imperialism, resurgent capitalism and Keynesian economies.

Rather than extrapolating Marx’s premises, which Morris had cleaved to—but from which, indisputably, a “mechanical and reductive” dogmatism, often attributed to Engels, had ensued—and developing a more sophisticated radical position which built on what was in effect Marx’s method, Williams resorted to elaborating a faith of his own: Cultural Materialism. In a later article, “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory,” Williams clarified his Long Revolution thesis. The idea was that culture had a radical momentum of its own within the epochal cycle of Historical Materialism. The Base/Superstructure metaphor, which had become a Marxist cliché, was re-theorised so that the base becomes a “process” rather than a mechanical “state” whose superstructural development is predictably derivative. Williams argues that the process model is especially pertinent in the context of sophisticated cultures, when the labouring social strata transcend easy distinctions between base and superstructure. He cites Marx’s own analogy of the productive-cultural complexity between a piano maker, a distributor and a player to make his point (“Base & Superstructure” 5-6). He then goes on to caution against a monolithic model, however, which fails to maintain some notion of Marx’s base/superstructure differential, in which case it would tend to “exclude the facts of social intention, the class character of a particular society and so on” (“Base & Superstructure” 7-8).

Williams almost defeats his own argument here, noting that to see culture as process devoid of basal economic influence is to invite hubristic notions of institutional self-government, while simultaneously undermining the axiomatic critique of ideological enslavement.

Williams utilises, or rather revises, Antonio Gramsci's idea of hegemony here to maintain his theoretical model, though figuring it as "highly complex" and dynamic rather than Gramsci's "static" conception. Indeed, Williams's dynamic hegemony is obversely reminiscent of Foucault's model of power structures, in that rather than deadlock, it optimistically facilitates a kind of historicised social-dialectic based on "variation and contradiction ... alternatives ... [and] processes of change" (Williams "Base & Superstructure" 8). Williams then complements his hegemonic model with a "selective tradition" which, despite its cultural dominance, is constantly harassed by the fertility of human ingenuity—"human practice, human energy, human intention." The idea is that social being is somewhat chaotic in its use or combinations of the cultural materials at hand, thus notwithstanding the "selective tradition," an infinite range of magpie-like, makeshift alternatives emerge and vie for legitimacy. Williams designates these off-beat experiments "residual and emergent cultures," which are more or less tolerated and accommodated, and sometimes adopted into the selective tradition, which is thus in a constant state of *evolutionary* flux, such that genuine modifications do occur within a range of hegemonic tolerances ("Base & Superstructure" 11-12).

Significantly, regarding this dynamic model of "culture"—which conception tends to supersede "social" being—Williams avers that "our hardest task, theoretically, is to find a non-metaphysical and non-subjectivist explanation of emergent cultural practice" ("Base & Superstructure" 10). This point highlights the

determinedly “materialist” nature of the whole project—I use inverted commas to indicate the equivocal nature of Marx’s materialism apropos Williams’s version, but this shall be prosecuted in the proper place. Plain as Williams’s statement is, I might add, he was driven to re-emphasise the point in a later edition of the same essay, in which he intercalates, “this range [of human innovation] is not the inventory of some original ‘human nature’ but, on the contrary, is that extraordinary range of variations, both practiced and imagined, of which human beings are and have shown themselves to be capable” (Williams *Culture and Materialism* 43). Williams makes a good start at resolving this requirement—a rationalist explanation for emergent cultural practice—in the present essay by extrapolating his concepts of selectivity and process to include the range of excluded possibilities. His evolutionary model—within the adaptive constraints of the mode of production—thus stresses that given the heterodoxy of human ingenuity and cultural adaptation, the range of possibilities is never exhausted, ergo it is effectively an open rather than closed system.

Williams changes tack at this point to “to consider the analysis of particular works of art,” but this is a feint; his real purpose is to theoretically dissolve discrete artworks, along with the whole critical practice of treating them objectively, as if they existed as objects, their formal components available to interpretation and categorisable in themselves. Williams makes the compelling point that what we have, objectively, in works of art are, in effect, “notations”—notations on the conditions of practice in that time and place. As Williams argues, sheet music and literary texts are literally notations rather than objects in themselves. But then, one might observe, even objectified art, like statuary, logically becomes mere notation in stone, discursively constructed; but Williams does not take this reductionist route. In later works he does attempt a “unified theory,” as it were, yet he rationalises cultural

production not as some quantum of textualised reality, but as reality-imagination naively or deliberately represented or configured—that is notated in textual and recoverable form.

Williams thus stops short of reducing perceived reality to Saussure's conception of an automatically registered "imprint" of the signifier, or to Derrida's reducing art, as representation, to a state of infinite textual regress or idea. Neither, though, is representation any longer romanticised as possessed of some "informing spirit." Rather, Williams insists his "sociology of culture" properly recognises "cultural practice" and "cultural production" as, "not simply derived from an otherwise constituted social order but ... themselves major elements in its constitution. ... it sees culture as the signifying system through which necessarily (though among other means) a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored" (*Culture* 12-13).

One can easily trace in the development of Williams's so-called "culturalism" the old formations around which he was intent on navigating: Romantic, elitist and politically reductionist conceptions of culture. The perceived elitism of Leavis was in his minority culture—semantically revisited in the "genetic structuralism" of Lucien Goldman, which traced the evolution and decay of higher cultural forms at the expense of the popular, which for Goldman merely exhibited variation (Williams *Culture* 144). On the other hand, Williams sought to empower radical but reductionist Marxist thought by theorising a dynamic version of cultural materialism—operating within the epochal dynamism of Marx's Historical Materialism—whose fertile culture was capable of spontaneous hybridisation, given only pervasive cross-pollination. Thus rather than objectifying or doting over select cultural productions, Williams wanted to bring the whole culture to the fore, both

anthropologically and politically; to democratise culture and to harness its productiveness in the cause of equality and emancipation. The problem he confronted, however, was that such an effort presupposes a committed pluralist ideology bent on reform. Terry Eagleton asserts in his own *The Idea of Culture* that,

only through a fully participatory democracy, including one which regulated material production, could the channels of access be fully opened to give vent to this cultural diversity. To establish genuine cultural pluralism, in brief, requires concerted socialist action. It is precisely this that contemporary culturalism fails to see. Williams's position would no doubt seem to it quaintly residual, not to say positively archaic; the problem in fact is that we have yet to catch up with it. (*Idea* 122)

According to Eagleton, then, what matters most for Williams is not cultural politics, but the politics of culture—an Eagletonian refrain. Politics are the condition of which culture is the product. Since he rejects any vulgar-Marxist notion of culture as “secondary,” he regards this not as an ontological doctrine but as a practical imperative (*Idea* 122).

This passage includes a characteristic slight by Eagleton against the contemporary forces of “cultural politics”—that is, the reform agenda of various marginalised groups within the organised sphere of cultural materialism. Subservient “identity politics,” prosecuted within an unchallenged political economy, like so many “class actions,” tends not merely to acknowledge the prevailing constitutional jurisdiction, but to pay ultimate homage to it as a higher providence; that is to be “secondary” to economic determinism, to that which provides for the common weal

after profit. Williams was confronting the ideology of libertarianism—by any other name: individualism, aestheticism, Romanticism, alienation—in favour of social democracy; in favour of *collective* self-determination, beside which individualism ostensibly amounts to delusion and liberal hubris. Such a democracy, by definition, acknowledges no master, but defers to its own collective judgement—itself in constant process. Why then should it content itself with the after-profit scrapings of that same collective effort? What is this “spectrum of profit,” this Mount Olympus that is above and beyond the common weal, maintained in reserve by exalted members of that same society? Subsistence is a relatively modest condition, and not to be despised, yet it is exorbitant when endlessly and necessarily exacerbated, indeed cultivated; when supplied for a premium and bought at the cost of lives devoted to drudgery; and when unsustainably derived from finite natural resources. Such a democracy as Williams invokes does not acknowledge any divine order which must be sacrificed for, nor gainsaid. Nor then does it acknowledge an abstract economic order that, like a God, obtains outside and in spite of democracy, inviolable. The purveyors of cultural politics, who have followed Williams, implicitly accept the quasi-divine order of things; their members sacrifice their individual vocations to their respective group; and the groups, by appealing, cede authority to the prevailing economic order. In cleaving to their respective groups, their cultural identities—whether sanctioned by the state or vying for legitimacy—their politics are not radical, but mendicant. If *homo sapiens* (wise man)

is essentially a learning, creating and communicating being, the only social organization adequate to his nature is a participating democracy, in which all of us, as unique individuals, learn, communicate and control. Any lesser,

restrictive system is simply wasteful of our true resources; in wasting individuals, by shutting them out from effective participation, it is damaging our true common process. (Williams *Long Revolution* 100).

Williams here speaks to both his own concern with nurturing a “participatory” democracy, Eagleton’s “politics of culture,” and to the latter’s implicit criticism of cultural politics—of latter-day Cultural Materialism. Where Williams’s project stemmed in large part from his disenchantment with the “vulgar-Marxist notion of culture as ‘secondary,’” modern Cultural Materialism tacitly posits itself as just that. Indeed, one might as well observe, at this point, that as things stand Marx’s metaphorical model, distinguishing the economic base and relegating culture as secondary, has been culturally born out. In place of concerted political agitation, directed from and against the base, cultural politics are practiced in the epiphenomenal realm of the superstructure, where malcontents adopt a various and puerile subaltern stance in the vain hope of compromising the hegemonic centre, while prosecuting the apparently primary agenda of securing petty concessions. More than fifty years on since *Culture and Society*, a more critical assessment—both of Williams’s original formulation and latter-day Cultural Materialism—is due. Cultural Materialism, as distinct from Cultural Studies generally, remains an overtly political enterprise yet, as Eagleton suggests, those politics have yet to be realised on the scale of the transformation of the whole culture that Williams envisioned after Marx. Apart from the comparatively small-beer of identity politics, it is hard to see that anything has been achieved that contributes to an epochal shift in political economy. Fifty years on, Cultural Materialism looks like a political failure, albeit in many ways a social success—certainly, for a time, an academic one.

Williams's political agenda for full cultural involvement and a long democratic revolution can only be deemed a failure, albeit not so much the vision as its viability and implementation. Williams seems to have paid insufficient attention to the logic that cultural beings—including group formations—are intent on their own best interests *within* their society, rather than their society's overthrow. Cultural Materialism is beset by the same logical impasse that Historical Materialism encountered; the system must be ripe for change, while the ripening process needs political synthesis. Moreover, the hope that ongoing reforms would finally lead to fundamental reform, fails to take into account: a) the flexibility of the market to cater for, indeed to patronise and pacify, the sought-for changes at the level of commodity; b) the flexibility and willingness of ideological state apparatuses to accommodate and enunciate reforms at the level of public debate and even ideological implementation; c) the incontestable reality that many ostensible reform movements are more the observance of political correctness than genuinely assimilated or popular ideology—though one does not wish to deprecate what progress has been made on group fronts—and, indeed; d) the failure to account for the elitist underpinnings and tenacity of hegemony. The primary political failure of Cultural Materialism, however, rests on the very premise it sought to contest: Marx's insistence on the primacy of the economic base. As we've seen, Williams conceded the importance of the means of production to cultural development, but he overestimated the formative efficacy of that cultural development, however spontaneous in itself, to effect the requisite ideological shift needed to transform its base. As Marx said, the economic base has to change before the culture "is more or less rapidly transformed." Rather than the "fools' socialism" of identity politics that Cultural Materialism has arguably deteriorated into, it should be agitating on behalf

of the whole group, as Williams envisioned, and against a common ideological oppression—the suppression, diversion and degradation of universal human potential under political economy.

While one might applaud Williams's unrealised political vision, and even approve the domestic politics, the cultural deconstruction and revisionism that has entailed—not just from Williams's seminal work, but the whole era of deconstruction of which he was a part—the vision has not been realised and this dissertation seeks to understand why. A great many other questions also remain to be asked of Williams's evolving post-Marxism. We might logically wonder, for instance, after the nature of the drive, post-Williams—that is post-structuralism—that is precipitating culture and society towards its utopian prospect? This relates to the whole philosophy of materialism. For Marx it was the exploitation of humanity's creative/productive powers, and thus alienation and class conflict, as well as the untenable economics of capitalist society itself that drove his historical dialectic. But what is it, in essence, in Williams's theory and beyond that impels humanity through its “cultural revolutions”? As we've seen, on the face of it, the answer is culture itself: “the essential relation, the true interaction, between patterns learned and created in the mind and patterns communicated and made active in relationships, conventions and institutions. Culture is our name for this [whole] process and its results” (Williams *Long Revolution* 72). Williams grudgingly concedes that we are all also “unique individuals,” but that we do not exceed either our biology or our culture. Just as the meanings of “key-words” are resolved and perennially revised and altered in their varying use, so too do our modes of meaningful existence sematologically develop. What then does Williams's individualism consist in? And what is the qualitative nature of “our true common process”?

2.2 The Path to a Programmatic Materialism

Williams's structural conception of culture and society can only develop via the full creative participation of its members. This condition of possibility simply did not and does not obtain, despite Williams's ingenious theory of dynamic culture, or the optimistic form postmodernism took during the 1990s, when "[p]olyphonic plenitude, the searching out and affirmation of the plurality of different voices, became the leading and defining principle of postmodernism's cultural politics" (O'Connor "Introduction" 14). I will argue that far from facilitating this polyphony, popular culture is a misnomer and the reality in the postmodern West is *representative elitism*, both cultural and political.

Williams's culturalism comes directly from his conflation of Marxism's dualistic metaphor. First Williams identifies key ambiguities in the base/superstructure model, such as that Marx emphasises that the "mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political and spiritual processes of life," which are "More or less rapidly transformed" (*Culture and Society* 266). He goes on to quote an assertion by Engels that "[a]ccording to the materialist conception of history, the determining element in history is *ultimately* the production and reproduction in real life. More than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted" (*Culture and Society* 267). Williams thus builds his case that human culture is vastly complex and cannot be reduced to a literal interpretation of the binary metaphor Marx frequently employed—which became for posterity an item of faith. It is arguable that this was Marx's position all along, and that his metaphor was initially used more as a rhetorical device, deployed

against Hegel's idealism, than it was an economistic reduction of culture. Marx enjoyed inverting his opponents' conceptions, yet resolving philosophical premises into their opposites is more difficult to theorise than to polemicise, as his ambivalence on the question in his later writings demonstrate.

Marx's account of culture is ambiguously dispersed between his early and late writings, much of which Williams was not privy to at the time, and the question of the primacy of culture or production is never finally resolved. Marx's account of culture is necessarily rendered simplistic and dehumanising from the surmise of his epochal perspective, wherein detail is lost, whereas his humanist concept of praxis as being, of nature as "the *inorganic body* of man" (qtd. In Fromm, *Marx's Concept of Man* 83)", restores the balance—without reconciling apparent contradictions between his micro and macro viewpoints. Furthermore, in late Marx, "production" is a social phenomenon predicated on exchange, yet this is preceded in his *Philosophical Manuscripts* by the idealistic concept of production as the essence of species being, devoted to the primary "wealth of human needs" (qtd. in Fromm 113-115)—perennially thwarted by their exploitation and commodification. By the time of writing part three of *Capital*, the "wealth of human needs" has given way to exigency; "[t]he realm of freedom really begins only where labour determined by necessity and external expediency ends; ... though it can only flourish with this realm of necessity as its basis. The reduction of the working day is the basic prerequisite" (958-59). This apparent compromise acknowledges the menial demands of any means of production and its maintenance, but it also restores the individual to him/herself and suggests a place for leisure, creativity and culture independent of artificial social relations. The contradiction only obtains in whether production is expedient or existential, cooperative or co-extensive. Williams's

culturalism may be more sophisticated at the level of the social, but it is reductive apropos the individual human flourishing Marx alludes to, making Williams's materialist overview yet more doctrinaire in the closer context of culture he examines. However superseded the logic of the time, Williams's structuralism is not merely unfashionable; the real deficiency consists in a perspective that remains aloof from the hectic intimacy of cultural involvement. Cultural Materialism stands as a compromise between early and late Marx that the latter himself did not depict as a contradiction.

Let us recall, however, that Williams was not contradicting Marx so much as the Marxism of his day, which embraced so literally an economic dogma that made no provision for effective praxis on the ground, only a formulaic and prescriptive realist literature intended to herald in the new social order. What Williams was proposing then was a theory of cultural materialism, of synchronic cultural agency to complement the diachronic epochalism of Historical Materialism. As we've seen, the means of production is granted as the dominant influence over human destiny, but for Williams it is harassed, helped, and hindered by the myriad cultural forms, practices, and discursive variation of an *inclusive* democracy. The idea is that, potentially, such a democratic process must tend to democratic resolution—that is assuming this cultural process translates into political action—to finally overcome social inequality by its wonted democratic progress. This then was a structural, if not functionalist, apotheosis of Marx's binary metaphor, and granted a kind of concerted material teleology to social development. A mechanical materialism indeed in comparison to Marx, a monist ontology that denies individual essence and grand narratives in favour of cultural being and determinacy that challenged the validity of class domination.

For now, armed with this understanding, let us consider further the implications of Williams's position. Leavis presided over an elitist tradition which in the perennial act of imposition and preservation culled and directed the wanted discursive fluorescence that was thereby suppressed. This would seem to account for the canonical-conservative literary-critical tradition whose roots Williams traces back to the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, and whose latest intellectual foliage was manifest in early-contemporary British culture. Williams styles the period an "interregnum" between a more inclusively rebellious Victorian society—William Morris being the standard-bearer—"and our own period of critical specialism as an historical figure" (*Culture and Society* 161). Indeed the period Williams has in mind, 1880-1914—but in "temper" inclusive of the interwar period—roughly equates to standardisations of the Modernist period. Inasmuch as we associate Modernism with disillusion, resentment, nostalgia, individualism, and elitism, the criticism and sensibilities Williams analyses are of a kind, focussed either on the past or on wholesale cleansing. In an unfortunate diatribe written in the 1880s George Bernard Shaw—an early Modernist, perhaps—is cited for his elitist-aesthetic sensibility which, unlike Morris and the early Fabians, reviled capitalist culture in toto:

Capitalist mankind in the lump is detestable, ... Both rich and poor are really detestable in themselves. For my part I hate the poor and look forward eagerly to their extermination. I pity the rich a little, but am equally bent on their extermination. The working classes, the business classes, the professional classes, the propertied classes, the ruling classes, are each more odious than the other: they have no right to live: I should despair if I did not know that they

will all die presently, ... And yet I am not in the least a misanthrope. (qtd. in *Culture and Society* 180)

As offensive as this is to post-Holocaust sensibilities, in the context of his own comparatively innocent times, the passage is actually no more than ramped-up hyperbole directed at what he saw as the degenerate state of “capitalist mankind.” As Williams shows, Shaw was an uneasy early-Fabian, sceptical of but amenable to a doctrine of utilitarian-inspired socialism, or gradualism that emerged through the 1880s and ‘90s and “culminated in Fabianism” (*Culture and Society* 181). By early 1930, however, having “lived to see Fascism,” Shaw revised his tone to that of solidarity and reconciliation, which had apparently restored itself, iterated among the Fabians a mere ten years earlier by S. Webb. Shaw relapsed, however, and reprised Morris’s revolutionary zeal, but stripped of solidarity or faith in democratic process, reverting back to his former tone of intolerance in the aspirational form of a trenchantly elitist model of socialist oligarchy (Williams *Culture and Society* 183-85). Shaw’s development, as depicted, in fact mirrors much of the intellectual progress through Williams’s “Interregnum” and its aftermath in the interwar years, which included Leavis. This cultural progress ranged from disillusion to reconciliatory aestheticism to hope, despair and nostalgia, all Modernist forms of reactionary cultural protest.

How does Williams explain the development of this cultural elitism, and disenchantment with it? The answer is “ideology”; a narrow tradition that emerged from hubristic Humanism through Romanticism, proceeding under its own momentum, according to its lights—its Enlightenment ideals. The last of the influential “interregnum” figures Williams interrogates is T.E. Hulme, by whose

criticism he was clearly inspired by. In the Humean-contra-Kantian tradition, Hulme rejects the spirit of Romanticism—the poetic “view that ‘man is intrinsically good, spoilt by circumstance’”—as “spilt religion,” and thus the whole tradition as a “false category” (*Culture and Society* 192). But where Hulme sees human nature in a much less exalted or “classical” light, as “intrinsically limited, but disciplined by order and tradition to something fairly decent,” Williams rejects any notion of intrinsicity, or “essential condition of man,” as a “false category”; “It is not that we may not speculate on this, but that if we accept it we are accepting something which no man can ever experience as a fact” (*Culture and Society* 192-93).

Here we find ourselves in classic philosophical territory between Empiricism and Apriorism. For Williams, both the Romantic notion of divine essence and the “classical” or Calvinist notion of human depravity are metaphysical traditions, rationalising contingency according to their own spurious logics as seen through “pseudo categories.” In either case material economic conditions—throughout the period of Williams’s “interregnum,” economic liberalism—are seen as imposing upon and distorting optimal cultural development, whether vested in romantic essentialism and spontaneity, or a “classically” degenerate essence which properly requires authority and discipline to be contained. Williams discounts all such ideologies in favour of real explanations that can be verified; that is, in favour of the manifest and untutored tendency of a whole culture which is ultimately, if mechanically, democratic, since each individual is intent upon its own best interests within that culture. One can appreciate Williams’s point, romantic or classical ideologies are impostures which conjure and serve elites—that group possessed of sufficient aesthetic or ethical authority, respectively, to rationalise blame and dictate polity—at best preventing human culture from being otherwise guided by the whole

process of its reproduction, at worst devolving into totalitarianism. But is that all they are—can romantic or doctrinaire ideologies be consigned *post hoc* to their *late* corruptions? What of their a priori impulse? Cultural historicism generally tends to freeze sophisticated cultural developments as somehow both formative and decadent, in the process consigning the human faculties which made them credible, to oblivion.

There are several problems with Williams's proto-utopianism, prime among them being that the quest for emancipation becomes logically meaningless, because culturally structural rather than idealistic. The emphasis on culture has made notions of individual consciousness merely nominal. The health and prosperity of the colony is governed by the hive mind, which is ideally no mind at all—idealistic concepts of mind being above the merely mechanical adaptation of a species to the challenges presented by its changing habitat or conditions of subsistence. This is not to reawaken notions of a “higher minded” elite class, which Williams rejected, but to recuperate idealism from the mechanically discursive conditions of possibility Williams circumscribes. Williams cites Leavis's literary hero, D. H. Lawrence, to make the point that there is a tendency among moderns, among romantic and conventionally liberal or religious sensibilities, to fetishise consciousness, or spirit, and not to see mind in the interactive context of the whole, with the “base forcing” of the mode of production—here the debasing influence of industrialism—in relief. Williams sees it as Lawrence's unrealised mission to resolve alienated consciousness within the discursive milieu from which it has become reified and estranged. The logic of Marxist materialism rationalises consciousness such that we must conceptually isolate it from its discursive community in order to conjure it into spurious existence, “which has been the most common response of all to the

difficulties of industrialism” (*Culture and Society* 211-14). Williams’s logic, in keeping with Marxist doctrine, is based on the reining-in of consciousness, or ego.

Whereas, hitherto, “self-fashioning” was the privilege and conceit of aristocracies, industrialism inaugurated the common alienation of culture from work, triggering an ideological schism between *practical* consciousness and its pretensions. While Williams’s fellow-historicist, Stephen Greenblatt, has it that self-fashioning during the Renaissance tended to be consciously fictive—“histrionic improvisation” in fact, wherein “the category of the real merges with that of the fictive” (31)—Industrialism, Williams argues, heralded a bourgeois culture of *sincere* self-fashioning. In the text just quoted, Greenblatt is referring specifically to Thomas More. I would suggest he misses the vital point that More’s consciousness of his own self-fiction was in deference to the supervening doctrine of predestination, rather than his own phenomenological scepticism. More importantly, I would argue that Williams and Greenblatt confuse dis/ingenuous self-fashioning with the executive *sense* of self which indulges the conceit/illusion. This dissertation can be usefully conceived, indeed, as taking issue with the thesis—generally, though not directly—that the legacy of early-modern self-fashioning is the hyper-individualism of modernity, which casts it as pathological. Greenblatt goes on to assert that “it now seems clear that both secular and religious impulses contributed to the same psychic structure” (46). That Greenblatt’s “psychic structure,” or Williams’s “structure of feeling,” both fundamentally linguistic, are responsible for faux-individualism is taken as read, yet their deductions proceed from unproven materialist premises which are reductionist and, as I shall argue, inadequate to the task of accounting for *self-conscious* self-fashioning.

Williams prescribes ditching programmatic ideologies in favour of what I would call his “programmatic materialism,” based on the dismissal of individual consciousness and dedicated to the atomistic propensity of the whole culture, based on co-operative equity, to make ultimately democratic progress—in keeping with the same dynamic that structures Marx’s epochalism. Williams’s materialism is as devoid and disabused of *force* and *essence* as are the heavenly bodies in Newtonian Mechanics¹. For Williams, the only real constraints or influences that ought to be brought to bear on culture and enacted are the product of its collective predilection—which is presently restricted to its active members, its elite—negotiated within prevailing physical limits; an organic realm of practical possibility. Such a conception of culture posits it as purely functional, at once devoid of sublime aesthetics and transcendent in its mundane possibilities:

Experience moves within an actual situation, in directions which the forces within that situation will alone determine. A version of man as perfectible or limited, a spirit of humane optimism or tragic pessimism, can be imported into this situation, but as little more than a posture. As interpretation any such attitude may be important, but as programme any is irrelevant. At its worst, such an attitude merely rationalizes the phantasy of being above the common situation, able to direct it by taking thought in this way or that. ... [What is called for is the] acceptance of actual experience, commitment to a real situation from which by no effort of abstraction we can escape. (Williams *Culture and Society* 193)

¹ As we see below, gravity is the force, or essence missing in Newton’s *Mechanics*. This was Hegel’s inspiration for the idea of force animating the dialectic of life generally.

This stirring passage, as he often says himself of others, is Williams at his best, yet does it not itself amount to a commitment to naturalism and an abstraction of the intellectual facts in its rhetorical denial of what moves and motivates human *prescience*? At the risk of descending into cliché, humanity does not live by bread alone, and it is futile to trace the threads of its delusion and present folly in ordinary myths as a corrective. The reduction of all idealism to ideology is only a theory—indeed an ideology—and as I shall argue below, an inadequate one at that. The stories we tell about ourselves may be sublime correctives to brute facts, but why should brute facts alone be allowed to dictate over our sensibilities.

Indeed, surely we should question Williams's eagerness to disparage humanity's "highly evolved" propensity to confabulate and to conceive the world in apparently fantastic terms. It has never been established that we are afflicted with ideology in any comprehensive sense, or that we are *not* in some sense idealistic beings; the philosophy of materialism simply demands it. Similarly, our ideological programmes are not "irrelevant" to the facts of our experience, but are idealistic reactions to worldly facts, which must logically also be allowed to intervene in action and inform any programme. Of course, Williams's premise resides in the fact that we are *cultured* beings, composed by cultural myths, a reductive premise residing in his own faith in naturalism. If poets hitherto were the unacknowledged legislators of the world, is Williams proposing that role now for positivism, with no guiding principles or ideals for humanity to follow, apart from a commodified formula of human rights—which is precisely what we have. In any case, are we not also, as individuals, naturally sceptical of our myths, rather than led blindly? And why should we so commonly prevaricate upon them if they structure our thinking? Nor do we challenge social norms purely for advantage—or in mechanical ways that

incrementally conduce to progress that will ultimately structure an egalitarian order. Such amounts to a passive item of faith. Equity itself is an ideal unprecedented in nature. The very notion of functional determinism makes the idea of purpose redundant and invites the manufacture of pragmatic and/or pseudo-ideologies; indeed the ideology of rationalism should be critiqued as such an instance. International Realism and the doctrine of self-interest are held implicitly as far more sacred than scriptures which, contrary-wise, are commonly dismissed as allegorical. As we shall see, structuralist accounts generally reduce the phenomena of spirituality, aesthetics and other qualitative register to delusion—to nothing more than evidence of the unequal distribution of social production—when they are far from understood, let alone disproved². The idea is tantamount to treating the idea of culture as an evolutionary mistake that has led the species into an existential realm of thwarted ideologies, which the sooner it casts off the better. Since human beings have consciousness which is yet to be explained the materialist conception of history is the basis of historical explanation, but not historical explanation itself.

Marx saw society as an organic whole driven ultimately by the economic base, its institutions and cultural superstructure conforming more or less to the requirements of the mode of production. But this seemingly simplistic model was merely born of his historical materialist zoom-out perspective, and is complemented by Marx's idealistic concept of the human condition as coextensive with nature. Twentieth-century Marxists conflated this, Marx's holistic perspective, as also synchronically valid and immanent. Williams correctly identified the incongruity and sought to supplement historical materialism with a cultural-historicised version.

² This kind of qualitative register was discredited by Kant in favour of reason and the transcendental method, which draws from all such a priori content, without succumbing to it. The danger in our modern rational age is in taking this unconscious "dark matter" for granted (Simpson 8-11). As we shall see below, Žižek's theoretical edifice is devoted to theorising upon it.

Marx “never fully developed a cultural theory,” Williams avers, and clearly saw such a theory as a legitimate extension of Marx’s treatment of political economy, making it his own mission (*Culture and Society* 265). But where Marx employed the quasi-mystical dialectical method, derived from Hegel, to conceive his historical model of the gradual decay of social relations of production, punctuated by revolution, Williams tried to theorise culture as constantly in flux, a structurally evolving phenomenon. Catherine Gallagher credits Williams’s idea of “culture” for vitalising “inorganic” sociology (312), yet while Williams’s Cultural Materialism is on the surface a model of organic culture, it is nonetheless a dead materialism in that discourse takes the place of nature, and the dynamic is structural rather than essentially human, or even *cultural* in any sympathetic sense. Williams’s dynamic culture is predicated on its infinite propensity to invent and elaborate on current ideological formations, yet he gives no account of a priori categories, ontology, or of what essential dissatisfaction drives cultural development. Like Ernesto Laclau’s similar project, examined below, the idea seems to be to abandon human culture to its own spontaneous devices. Be that as it may, Williams’s laboratory model does not tally with the manifest reality. The “whole culture” does not contribute to the production paradigm as Williams insists, and by and large it consumes rather than produces culture. At the very least we need to give Williams’s idea of culture another name, one that distinguishes the concept of a whole culture from its discrete cultural industries, and more importantly one that explores the critical condition of possibility, at least, of transcendentalism—long since abolished by the left. These at least are some of the questions this dissertation is bent on disinterring.

2.3 Masses and Elites

Our postmodern capitalist cultures in fact remain trenchantly elitist in their arts, their sports, their professions, and their politics. Writing around the same period as Williams, Joseph Schumpeter saw consumption as the fuel of modern democratic capitalism, but not the dynamic. Nor was the dynamism provided by culture, in any divisible sense, but by a few innovative entrepreneurs, who essentially ran the farm. For Schumpeter, representative democracy mirrored capitalism: “It is propelled by mass consent, but this is mobilised and driven by political leaders and elites, who are the equivalents of entrepreneur-innovators; leaders and elites are the vital actors in democracy” (Best and Higley 3) By comparison with Schumpeter, Williams’s conception of democracy was naïve in his vision of the “whole culture” as dynamic, rather than largely passive. Indeed elites are also the producers of culture—*within* Williams’s “whole culture”—while the rest merely consume it. In the wake of the popularisation of culture Williams helped to foster, however, the elite class is now much more “embedded,” diverse and so broadly representative, drawn from across the spectrum of cultural production. Simultaneous with what I can only describe as Williams’s fantasy of an inclusive democratic culture, a body of work in recent decades, deriving from Schumpeter’s theory of democracy, describes the latter in terms of a “duality of citizens and elites” (Engelstad 61), hence the oxymoronic title of a collection of essays, “Democratic Elitism.” According to Frederick Engelstad, two debates have emerged around democratic elitism; one concerns the remove between the electorate and elected representatives, and the former’s redundant or otherwise involvement in democracy; the “second debate concerns the interrelationships of political and other elites in democracies’ day-to-day decision

making processes” (61). Neither debate is particularly contentious in itself, I would hazard, and it is only debatable *how* compromised our so-called democracies are in the final analysis. My thesis here is that the “culture industry”³ presents as grounds for a third debate concerning the celebrated concept of the “whole culture” apropos its elitist composition and the social/political effects.

In *Culture and Society*, Raymond Williams theorised democracy and culture, at least ideally, as more or less synonymous. His argument is mounted against Leavis’s “pamphlet” *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture* (252), challenging the tautological logic implied by Leavis’s condemnations of “mass democracy”; the latest in the tradition Williams traces from Edmund Burke to Leavis himself. Williams justifiably observes that disparagement of “mass democracy” is disparagement of *democracy*, in favour of elites and oligarchy (299)—this was Bernard Shaw’s default position. In his efforts to democratise culture, so as to cultivate progressive democracy, Williams rationalises the epithet “mass” as an irrational expression of the dying prejudices and general intolerance of high culture and its defenders. There is strictly no “mass,” except perhaps from the point of view of any one of its members, all of whom perceive themselves as distinct from the mass. But the specific attitude that Williams was bent on refuting was that criticism of democracy was justified given the manifest decay of aesthetic standards and high culture under democratic rule:

The fact is, surely, that a way of seeing other people which has become characteristic of our kind of society, has been capitalized for the purposes of political or cultural exploitation. What we see, neutrally, is other people, many

³ Adorno’s phrase, which is far from redundant, seems apposite.

others, people unknown to us. In practice, we mass them, and interpret them, according to some convenient formula. (*Culture and Society* 300)

“High” culture, Literature with a capital “L” and aesthetics *per se* have, from the left-wing perspective, been dirty words ever since. High culture was arguably made the scapegoat for the snobs and elitists who preferred it as threatened under democracy. Terry Eagleton admits to a degree of reductionism in the concept of the aesthetic mooted as a political solution to the dilemmas faced by the eighteenth century bourgeoisie; “the political contradictoriness of the category [of the aesthetic] is itself testimony to the mistakenness of such a viewpoint” (*The Ideology of the Aesthetic* 4). It is worth noting that Harold Bloom has long argued against Marxists who “chant the litany that literature is best explained as a mystification promoted by bourgeois institutions” (18). That argument aside, *great* literature enjoys ongoing patronage among all the other elitist forms that were then and are even more so today the staples of modern culture. Elitism appears to be democratic. The high aesthetic, with its mysterious power to inspire, is only one of these elitist forms. Yet deconstructed, the whole category of aesthetics was dispensed with by the left, not merely as elitist and ideological, but as qualitatively untenable, in any case, from the resolutely materialist perspective. Yet the category of the aesthetic, beyond its individual appreciation, which Bloom champions, arguably amounts to the broad or social spectrum of the phenomenology of qualia; the collective equivalent of the hard problem of consciousness we shall deal with below, and cannot be easily dismissed as socially constructed.

For Williams’s conception of the whole culture there was also the sheer effrontery in the implicit condemnation, as crude or irrelevant, of the kind of

traditions and way of village-life he grew up with in Wales. Williams's time in adult education also gave him the benefit of familiarity with a broad range of the unique experiences and cultural diversity of his charges. His time at Cambridge, too, afforded him an insight into the depth of the prejudices of the sophisticated and privileged classes—indeed the “downright snobbish culture that he encountered as a Welsh working-class scholarship boy” (McGuigan 22)—and not just the comparative banality of rural life in Wales, which he revisits in his novel, *Border Country* (1960). *Border Country* was Williams's first novel, based on his own life and theory, part idyll and part social analysis, but conveying in the vernacular a strong sense of a *living culture* worthy of equality. The idea that *Culture* was the reserve only of the doyens of high society, or Leavis's select clerisy, was justifiably abhorrent and (arguably less justified) led Williams to consign it to the melting pot of the whole culture. Yet the intellectual position he carved out for himself, both at Cambridge and personally, was also somewhat inflexible, and arguably led him to dismiss important considerations, even within the materialist purview.

The Frankfurt School, especially Jürgen Habermas's work, has often been cited as compatible with Cultural Materialism (Eagleton *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* 409), but I am more interested in reflecting on the incompatibilities between Culturalism and the first generation Frankfurt School—for whom the proletariat was defeated and progressivism was merely the propaganda of “mass deception” (Horkheimer and Adorno 120). Williams and Cultural Materialism in general have given the Frankfurt School short shrift and, in Williams's case at least, arguably for the wrong reason. In a review of Herbert Marcuse's *Negations* (1968), a collection of old and new essays, Williams emphasises the distinction between Marcuse and his own thought on culture as residing in their respective and

contradictory diagnoses “on the condition of the proletariat” (Williams “On Reading Marcuse”); in stark contrast, Marcuse emphasises its pathological nature under late capitalism and Williams its emancipatory potential. Initially, Williams is terse and somewhat dismissive of Marcuse’s latter attempts at a fusion between Marx and Freud—for essentially the same reason he was dismissive of a union between Marx and Lacan; the incompatibility of a wholly speculative regime of thought inseparable from the discursive environment it professes an incisive critique of—because it is at odds “with the historical emphasis which is the most critical element in Marx” (“Reading Marcuse” 366). It is a short review and Williams’s comments are allusory rather than explicit, but his greater point of difference is that Marcuse’s jaundiced view of late capitalist culture is at odds with his own valorisation of the working class, indeed with his reification of the whole culture as progressive.

Williams then switches tense from the late Marcuse of the 1960s and the New Left, to his earlier writings penned in Germany during the 1930s with the Frankfurt School, citing solidarity with what Marcuse then called “affirmative culture”: “the historical form in which were preserved those human wants which surpassed the material reproduction of existence” (Williams “On Reading Marcuse” 367). We see here an apparently concise formulation of how Williams also conceived of culture in a structurally dynamic sense. Francis Mulhern calls their agreement a “conceptual homology” and attempts to historicise it (Mulhern), though Marcuse’s meaning is more idealistic. The greater point, however, is that Williams distinguishes the thought of the early and late Marcuse as founded in his experience first of the “use,” then of the “rejection of culture by the specific authoritarianism of Fascism” (“On Reading Marcuse” 368). In effect, Williams rationalises that the latter Marcuse’s attacks on democratic culture amount to an incongruous extrapolation of his

experience in National Socialist Germany, wherein dissent was ruthlessly put down. Williams was a structuralist and it is ergo all too easy to assign any polemic to its discursive environment, its “structure of feeling.”

However this was, and is, arguably not the case; a discourse analysis is neither inclusive nor preclusive; it is a matter of context but ought not be seen as rigidly so—such is only the logical extrapolation of materialist metaphysics and doesn’t constitute evidence in itself. Marcuse, Adorno et al were also historicists first, seeing knowledge as conditioned by the context, but they were classical idealists in recognising human reason as capable of extemporaneity, critical distance and impartiality. In any case, the considerable cross-disciplinary intellectual power brought to bear by the Frankfurt School on the question of “independent culture,” produced a much more sophisticated critique than one merely conditioned by national circumstances. The pre-eminent first-generation Frankfurt Schoolers came to an impasse in that the hitherto subjective spirit—Hegel’s Reason, Marx’s vitalism, or however mind and culture are conceived as quasi-independent—was relinquished in favour of “instrumental reason,” an objectivist paradigm wherein reason itself is constrained (rather than transcendent) within and dedicated to what Adorno called an “administered world” (deriving from Max Weber’s figurative “iron cage”), one devoted to Positivism as the *posited* human condition, rather than the humanism, subjectivity and aesthetics of *genuine* culture. In such a world, qualitative emancipation became essentially *non-sequitur* and “the Frankfurt critical theorists could only walk away from the enigma of modernity with seemingly the full conviction that the best they had done in the circumstances was to ‘prove’ that the case was beyond resolving” (Olga 218-20). In short, humanity was found hegemonically committed to its positivistic mode of production and

commodification and all that that entailed—namely the dormancy of reason, creativity and aesthetics as independent and cultivated sensibilities⁴. For Horkheimer and Adorno, “A technological rationale is the rationale of domination itself”; whereas even “Kantian formalism expected a contribution from the individual, who was thought to relate the various experiences of the senses to fundamental concepts” (121, 24). Following Kant, Hegel, and the philosophical tradition, Marcuse argues that “[f]reedom is the formal element of rationality, the only form in which reason can be” (“Philosophy and Critical Theory” 137). For Erich Fromm too: “*The right to express our thoughts ... means something only if we are able to have thoughts of our own*” (*The Fear of Freedom* 208 original emphasis). Reason is not reason which defers to a “bad facticity,” an administered world as the ground of being, but can only be founded in the genuinely *given* necessity of the naked human condition, in itself and not artificially prescribed.

This is not to suggest some kind of primitivism, or deny mediation, but to recognise the process via which reason manifests and accumulates. Like his comrades, Adorno adapted his materialist conception of reason and aesthetics from Hegel and the dialectic via which human reason apparently evolves by trial and error. As is detailed below, Hegel argued that experience of the world conditions reason, which is not passive, but dynamic; as experience accumulates, reason necessarily becomes more sophisticated. *Reason*, as opposed to superstition, or Hume’s gormless passions, is systematic in its negations and necessarily proceeds by discarding that which is by and by found redundant or superficial. For Hegel, reason is immanent and potential, while “knowledge is only actual, and can only be expounded as Science or as *system*,” via its own self-mediation and interrogation

⁴ In the tradition of German idealism, such “cultivation” does not indicate merely fashionable discrimination, but cultivation attuned to Kant’s unity of understanding.

(13). Yet because Hegel's Reason is fired by spirit—as J.N. Findlay interprets it, from the “*consciousness of sense*” (in Hegel 498 my emphasis), an important distinction we shall revisit in my conclusions—it is not the province only of scientific method or professional philosophers. Rather, for Hegel, reason is inherent in humanity, whereas the “anti-human, the merely animal, consists in staying within the sphere of feeling, and being able to communicate only at that level” (43). Hegel's animal consciousness is akin to the conception of humanity Horkheimer and Adorno had in mind as conditioned by an “administered world” and its “culture industry.” Unlike Hegel's idealistic or teleological historicism, Adorno's materialist historicism dominates reason, except in the spheres of philosophy and art—themselves given over in the modern era to specialised commodification—which are properly aspirational and deemed relatively aloof from social conditioning. So whereas “Hegel sees ‘unthinking inertia’ as inevitably challenged by the ineluctable demands of thought, Adorno argues, in effect, that contemporary consciousness is sustained by that very inertia” (O'Connor “Introduction” 12). The culture industry obviates, and so robs the individual of the power to build on authentic experience and develop aesthetically. The Frankfurt school remained materialists but retained a modified version of Hegel's idealism as, ideally, a happy synchronicity thrown up by the contingent forces of nature. Thus, unlike Hegel there was no necessity in aesthetic development and the current dystopian order they theorised was so overwhelming that there was, for Adorno and the Frankfurt School, nothing to be done but bemoan the fact and let it play out.

The spontaneous faculties of consciousness and culture were being allowed to shrink and diminish under total patronage—consumption and commodification. Even Williams, reflecting pessimistically in 1975, excoriates the “celebration of the

‘affluent’ society, and of happy consumption, [which] looks sick enough now, from a time of deep economic crisis and a million and a half unemployed. But it was always sick, beyond its lively cosmetic effects” (*Communications* 181). Williams here betrays a moralising mode of ascetic *anti*-materialism—in the worldly rather than philosophical sense of the word—common to many post-Marxists, whether acknowledged or not, wherein Williams’s parody of “happy consumption” is bedevilled by an “unhappy consciousness.” This is reminiscent of Stoic philosophy, which is a founding discourse of Marxism “and holds that spiritual freedom is independent of external conditions. The essence of this freedom is thought in general; thought withdraws into itself, relinquishes the attempt to assimilate the object, and declares itself indifferent to the question of natural existence” (Kolakowski 54). By the mid-1970s Williams and the early Frankfurt School were equally disenchanted with the late-capitalist saturnalia, not only with the disparity between the haves and the have-nots, or the gross spectacle of consumption-for-its-own-sake, but the exploitative subjection and/or dormant state of human potential, be it social, artistic, or philosophical. Unlike the Stoics, though, Williams saw freedom of thought as little more than improvisation, while the Frankfurt School saw it not as aloof, but as a condition of possibility, if only potential. Unlike Marx, who in his “Theses on Feuerbach” dismisses the “contemplative materialism” of the young Hegelians, the Frankfurt School asserts the fundamental importance of the interplay between objective conditions and subjective interpretation (Held 210). Notwithstanding this vital faculty, Horkheimer and Adorno despaired that, “The need which might resist central control has already been suppressed by the control of the individual consciousness” (121).

Right or wrong, this statement is born-out in the sheer incredulity, indeed effrontery, via which it would typically be interpreted today in rationalist quarters; that is, a conflicted sense both of outrage that modern rationalism should be impugned, and an opposing incredulity that unassisted-reason is even possible, or more than hubris.⁵ Yet as I shall argue, reason and discrimination are the indispensable counterparts of empiricism; only qualitative consciousness is capable of analysing sense-data in a spirit approximating objectivity. There are no purely empirical findings; nor is utter mediation (structuralism) plausible. For the Frankfurt School, consciousness is not simply conjured-up by culture—though it may be suppressed by it—but precedes it as an evolved capacity. Culture is the *medium* within which individual consciousness and reason are commonly emergent in optimal conditions. In the same way that the hard problem of consciousness consists in the want of an explanation for consciousness *of* conscious content—supervening consciousness—the hard problem of qualitative reason consists in its *free* rather than *pre*-determinations. The impasse for the Frankfurt School thus consisted in a weak emergentism suppressed within an administered world.

Conditioned by this pessimism and bringing a more youthful radical energy to bear, Jürgen Habermas refused to acknowledge the impasse and struck out anew. His innovation, a paradigm shift and decisive break with the older members of the Frankfurt School, was vested in his argument that objectivity itself is *non-sequitur* and inevitably contingent upon the Enlightenment project and human interests generally as the very *framework* of putative objectivity, and thus also of instrumental reason (Olga 221-24). There was no iron cage, or at least it was the construct of old values; instrumental reason was itself only a mode, and contingent upon the same

⁵ We encounter this attitude in the work of Thomas Metzinger, touched on below, and commonly among the cohort of so-called “New Atheists”.

“necessity” his comrades lamented as bad facticity. Habermas stole a march on his former mentors and has had the running, along with Cultural Materialism, for much of the time since. Horkheimer and Adorno’s conception of the “culture industry” was sympathised with by Williams, but his criticism was vested in commodification rather than a general degradation.

Williams defended the integrity of the “mass” in mass democracy, but failed perhaps to appreciate its wretchedness and ineffectuality. *Culture and Society* is at times a paean to the struggle of the working class, most evident in its chapter on George Orwell and Williams’s rejoinders to Orwell’s disillusionment and defeatism. “Socialism, in its developed form is a theory confined entirely to the middle class,” according to Orwell, and “all left-wing parties in the highly industrialized countries are at bottom a sham, because they make it their business to fight against something which they do not really wish to destroy”; for Orwell, “the energy that actually shapes the world springs from emotions—racial pride, leader worship, religious belief, love of war ...” (qtd. in *Culture and Society* 287). Williams cites these and several other of Orwell’s vituperations; he then summarily asserts “that his conclusions have no general validity” (*Culture and Society* 294), defending British socialism in all its forms, from the grassroots to unionism to the British Labour Party (*Culture and Society* 286-88). What makes the term “mass culture” so offensive for Williams is that it rudely dismisses the culture behind the industrial and political action that seemed so prominently afoot. Yet this working-class struggle was purely representative, rather than inclusive, was commonly disingenuous (opportunistic) and often corrupt.

With the benefit of hindsight it can be cogently argued that even the progressive political achievements, the democratic largesse experienced during

Williams's time—welfare and industrial reform, negotiated by governments and born by the private sector—was a luxury afforded by the unprecedented prosperity during the post-war economic boom, rather than exacted by the Labour movement—a prodigality, indeed, that has been long-sufferingly curtailed ever since. According to Wolfgang Streeck,

The quarter century immediately after the war should be recognizable as truly exceptional. Indeed I suggest that it is not the *trente glorieuses* but the series of crises which followed that represents the normal condition of democratic capitalism—a condition ruled by an endemic conflict between capitalist markets and democratic politics, which forcefully reasserted itself when high economic growth came to an end in the 1970s. (5-6)

Williams's valorisation of Britain's working-class movement was unjustified and its post-Marxist legacy, in Cultural Materialism and Cultural Studies generally, is just as unrepresentative of the motley mass it empathises with *intellectually* and feigns to represent.

Indeed, the champions of the working class, like Williams himself, are an elite band, possessed of the best of intentions perhaps but subject to the same patronage and co-option as all other elites. The point is made by Simon Critchley and Jeremy Gilbert in their contributions to *The Truth of Žižek*; that Žižek's "celebrity" status and intellectual commodification point to "the hegemony of neo-liberalism almost throughout the non-Islamic world," rendering him politically impotent (qtd. in Žižek "With Defenders Like These" 199-200). Žižek refutes this, with some justice ("With Defenders Like These" 200), but the further implication seems lost on them all: it is

not merely that Cultural Studies, or academic radicalism generally, has been compromised, co-opted, or lost its subversive edge—which Williams himself warned against (Rodman 154-55)—but that it is and *always was* exclusive.

By “elite band” I refer more broadly to those strata of society which are *productive* of Williams’s “whole culture” in its myriad form. Williams’s Cultural Materialism rests on the premise that all culture is productive, indeed inseparable from the mode of production. But this needs qualitative analysis and I would refute it in favour of a hypothesis, broadly, of cultural elitism, though not the kind of elitism—“high culture” in its various forms—that Williams attempted to invalidate. The cultural elite abides today *within* popular or mass culture which, like *democracy*, is only representative. Like democracy, postmodern culture is by definition inclusive, yet just as so-called democracy is divisible by its representatives, so too is the “whole culture” roughly divisible by the minority that produces it in some commodified form which is paid tribute by the whole. Tribute is paid via popular consumption and the riches and celebrity-status that accrue, along with the honours that commonly flow therefrom. The cultural elite can thus be distinguished from elite cultural forms, as well as from those who merely consume culture as the salient fact of *their* lives.

This latter *dedicated* consumer class may also be productive, as Williams insists, but its output is functional or menial and can only be designated *cultural* production in the attenuated sense Williams gave the term. Members of this nominally-productive class earn kudos by embracing a work ethic and converting earnings into “conspicuous consumption,” in Veblen’s original sense, so as to make a display of economic power and social status—though Veblen’s “leisure class” has long since burgeoned and made a mockery of his quaint “general principal ... that

the base, industrious class should consume only what may be necessary to their subsistence” (61). Members might otherwise merely seek diversion in consumption. But then their self-esteem, or want of it, is pegged to some form of display of, or conformity with, contingent social norms. The work ethic in particular remains a sacred cow, perennially exploited by politicians who use it to drive a hegemonic wedge between the working and non-working consumer class, to manipulate the one and to marginalise the other. Veblen’s leisure class, wherein the “unproductive consumption of goods is honourable” (61), has been inverted—grown flabby in numbers and lean in terms of productivity. The piebald productive elite is the new aristocracy, while the qualitatively unproductive mass descends into consumptive sloth (this antiquated term used in this context is relevant to a later argument). Conspicuous consumption is now deemed honourable only when proportionate to cultural status, or when rudely earned. Of course we all consume and to reiterate the point, my conception of the consumer class is the mass whose members do not produce culture in any qualitative, recognised or popular sense which earns common tribute. Whereas the professional elite produces as well as consumes culture, enjoying stimulation from the former and a sense of worthiness from the rewards, the *common* man or woman, nearly devoid of artistic or philosophical freedom of expression, gleans only vicarious pleasure from consumption and obsequious satisfaction from paying tribute. Put brutally, postmodern hegemony consists in the pathological fawning and hubris of the masses and elites respectively, whose members each feed unwholesomely off the other as the rationale of their existence; in Hegelian terms, a stultifying master-slave *non*-dialectic.

This differential within Williams’s “whole culture” is, according to this argument, crucial to an insightful critique of the late-capitalist condition and its

hegemonic stasis. The producers of culture are diversely representative across the cultural and political spectrum, but their productivity amounts to an *investment in the whole culture*, which builds the common stock and pays *them* dividends, both tangible and intangible. This productive elite, without necessarily having direct influence on political decision-making, passively and doubtless generally naively, cultivates hegemonic support via popular appeal, while skewing vicarious involvement by the unproductive mass. As Gramsci argued, we are all intellectuals and an ex-soldier, footballer, scientist or film star is now just as readily co-opted into the power structure as those dedicated *tout court*. The productive members of a culture are the professionals who perform a prestigious, popular, or otherwise respected function.

Of course this respect is itself cultivated, drawing-off both kudos and remuneration. The productive cultural elite helps maintain hegemony by the sheer fact of instancing and defending the good-life as if it *was* populist—broadly realised from the bottom up. By the same token, unproductive consumers are invoked not merely to consume but, perversely, to celebrate the *mass*, as it were, of this *democratic* reality: a whole culture divided within degrees of celebrity, prominence, anonymity and abjection—material/spiritual wealth, orgiastic-consumption, and poverty (at least of demeanour). A vital element to the new spirit of capitalism is that the mouthings of the State are tacit and populist in their cultural forms—no longer perceived as aloof, authoritarian, elitist or unrepresentative, but broadly *representative* given its popular forms. Thus postmodern culture is often celebrated as egalitarian, and so it is in terms of its representative heterogeneity, but this makes for a closer-knit hegemony which is neither inclusive nor easy to differentiate and criticise.

Williams's concept of the whole culture, what he calls a "constitutive human process" (*Marxism and Literature* 20), avoids the problem of the representative, that is elitist, nature of culture by crediting all social practice as essentially cultural and productive. Williams follows the etymological history of culture through its various historical phases, but its root meaning associated with agriculture, "the growth and tending of crops and animals, and by extension the growth and tending of human faculties" (*Marxism and Literature* 11) is his default position, one which allocates a kind of natural order to the various practices within culture, validating even the lowliest stations as productively inclusive. There is scope to deplore an inequitable society based on its own professed morality, and there is scope for the wretched individual to resent it and or seek to better him/herself, but materialist logic dictates that there is no scope for a culture of one or for critical distance in any objective sense. The whole-culture concept comprehends all its members' contributions as both valid and contingent; critical distance, like hermeneutics, obtains only as comparative or cultural variation. And since postmodern cultural formations are ideally inclusive, the individual has no vantage-point from which to be critical, the only option being to embrace some congenially commodified form.

Representative culture's modern motley of professionals enjoy (while often feigning to despise) a degree of celebrity status forevermore. The cultural elite are vaingloriously commodified in the form of myriad celebrity media, both popular and professional, and are pampered and patronised ad nauseum. Cultural representatives win the lion's share of honours and tributes bestowed by the State, domestic as well as professional and not restricted to their respective fields.⁶ Subsequent to their primary careers, members of the cultural elite gravitate into other high-profile,

⁶ I recall as a widower with very young children when ex-cricketer Steve Waugh was named "Australian Father of the Year." Upon consulting the list of recipients I found that like other such awards it is a who's who of the cultural elite, rather than based on any criteria implied by the title.

honorary and celebrity positions, across culture or into business as well as government office, generally enjoying the trappings of recognition, wealth and status. Our diverse cultural elite is thus perennially ushered in to the hegemonic superstructure, in turn renewing the ideology of elitism that nurtured them, and so maintaining a genuinely polarised, though thoroughly scrambled, class structure. Gramsci's hope of growing "organic intellectuals" among the working class, a grass-roots movement to compete with institutionalised intellectuals mouthing hegemonic ideology, is confounded in the late-capitalist era of popular culture. Popular culture is not the heterodox movement Williams hoped for; indeed, it has become the very fabric, rewoven, of our ideological state apparatuses, while discontent is headed off by popular culture's own smug heroes and the worship of their fans generally. The vanished working class remains, but should be redefined in Williams's terms as that section of society that does not produce culture (in any qualitative or celebrated sense), but only consumes it. By way of hypothesis I suggest in fact that mass culture could be described, in every sense of the word, as "consumptive."

2.4 Laclau and Populist Reason

It is worth touching on the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe at this point, who brilliantly re-theorised Williams's notion of hegemony along strictly political lines. As John Storey observes, in Laclau and Mouffe's seminal work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, first published in 1985, they use the word "discourse" as virtually synonymous with Williams's more arbitrary concept of hegemonic "culture" (40). Williams's culture is somewhat vaguely made to do duty as a structuralist account of discursive cultural flux and radical momentum. Laclau

and Mouffe reduce the whole culture to its political discourses as the, respectively, “constitutive ground or ‘negative essence’ of the existing, and the diverse social orders as precarious and ultimately failed attempts to domesticate the field of differences” (95-6). Historicist sedimentation and institutionalism are thus disbursed as foundational and society is conceived as in constantly agitated flux. The implications, as Laclau argues in his later work, *On Populist Reason* (2005), are more incisive and a political partiality within the universal (of the whole culture) might supersede any merely marginal discontent of a radical minority. In a compilation of essays by Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (2000), Žižek takes Laclau to task for theorising an “illegitimate short circuit”: “the jump from a critique of the metaphysics of presence”—a denial of reality outside discourse—to anti-utopian ‘reformist’ gradualist politics (101). Žižek criticises Laclau for discrediting or abandoning *essential* Marxist grounds for the overthrow of capitalism, including the legitimacy of the proletariat—diluted by if not dissolved in the postmodern wash of subaltern dissent he valorises—and political economy as the real field of battle, quitted in the hope of propitious diplomatic configurations in the hegemonic matrix, rendering Laclau’s radical agenda devoid of purpose or agency.

In a Lacanian rejoinder to Žižek,⁷ wherein hegemony follows the same logic as the psyche, Laclau has it that a minor culture (comparable to a subjective drive, desire), following the logic of the *objet petit a*, might be “elevated to the dignity of the Thing” (*On Populist Reason* 234). Laclau sees radical transformative effects to the whole, within its constitutive hegemonic tension, as a real possibility. Nor are such possibilities passive or spontaneous contingencies, as in Culturalism, but

⁷ Laclau complains that he had no opportunity to defend against Žižek’s criticism in the compilation volume (*On Populist Reason* 267-68 n. 8)

partial political acts. For Laclau, the reality of “*globalized capitalism*” subsumes the “historical terrain where the proliferation of heterogenous points of rupture and antagonisms *require* [my emphasis] increasingly *political* forms of social reaggregation” (*On Populist Reason* 230). Inclusivity is not prerequisite and hegemonic tension, political “demand,” is the very ground of possibility for the reform of the whole. “*Globalized Capitalism*” moreover—as opposed to Williams’s relatively stable historicisms and cultural formations—provides that universal tension, is for Laclau the very “frontier” which is “the *sine qua non* of the emergence of the ‘people’: without them the whole dialectic of partiality/universality would simply collapse” (*On Populist Reason* 231).

Ironically, Laclau’s socialist theorising has much in common with marketing strategies whereby popular take-up of new innovations occurs once a critical mass is achieved. In his *Diffusion of Innovations*, Everett Rogers describes “*Critical Mass*” as occurring “at the point at which enough individuals have adopted an innovation so that the innovation’s further rate of adoption becomes self-sustaining” (313). The radical difference Laclau theorises, however, lies in the unresolved and “antagonistic” dialectic he plots within the logic of the market:

(1) in the world market, a growth in the demand for wheat pushes wheat prices up; (2) so wheat producers in country X have an incentive to increase; (3) as a result, they start occupying new land, and to this end they have to dispossess traditional peasant communities; (4) so the peasants have no alternative but to resist this dispossession, and so on. (*On Populist Reason* 84)

Except that point 4 stands as the logic of rupture rather than sublation in this apparently dialectical sequence. Moreover, Laclau argues the resultant antagonism is built into the social dialectic in a way that is lost in say the dialectic of reason.

Unlike Rogers' logic of market penetration and passive assimilation, the creative destruction of capitalism breeds malcontents, whose losses are not merely rationalised, but resented, breeding an "antagonistic" class at a remove and unreconciled with the ever renewing order (*On Populist Reason* 84-85).

In *The Parallax View*, Žižek rejects Laclau's logic as relying on antagonistic poles to structure hegemony, when Žižek has it that despite the evident antagonism, the antagonists are already conditioned by and dread the logic of the "Master Signifier," which is the logic of the market all along, which cannot be gainsaid. Once the fear is realised, however, rather than antagonism directed at capitalism, a new Master Signifier is nominated and projected onto—Žižek instances anti-Semitism, for instance, as the scapegoat of Germany's devastated economy between the wars (36-37). Thus, for Žižek the Proletariat, disabused of their fears (false consciousness), remains the best hope of the overthrow of the system—which must remain the non-negotiable object of Marxist theory. For Žižek, the hope of a populist revolt is tantamount to Marx's looking to the *Lumpenproletariat*, or herding cats. Žižek and Marx are as one in insisting on the self-conscious withdrawal of the proletariat from all normative ideological relations:

The proletarian is without property; his relationship with his wife and children has no longer anything in common with the bourgeois family-relations; modern industrial labour, modern subjection to capital ... has stripped him of every trace of national character. Law, morality, religion, are to him so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests. (Marx, *Communist Manifesto* 72)

The problem with Žižek's Marxist stand is that no such proletariat any longer exists in consumer and welfare culture, where property and property relations, or the want

of them, are foisted upon us as the norm, whose Master Signifier is economic growth. On the other hand Laclau's hopes, pinned on the antagonistic relations between owners of property (consumers), are also optimistic. Having invested body and soul in the system and failed, it seems improbable that such dedicated citizens shall condemn their lives in toto.

Laclau's "populist reason," whereby the "construction" of the "people" emerges as a "*political category*" or "*demand*," derives from the social premise of "the universality of the partial and the partiality of the universal" (*Populist Reason* 224), which describes the "logic of hegemony" (*Populist Reason* 226). In other words, traditional notions of class conflict are strictly obsolete and the heterogeneous whole, or "*universal*," riven by partialities yet systemically interconnected, is prone to the spread of interests that are inherent as overall vulnerability (*Populist Reason* 223). Citing Mouffe, Laclau endorses the idea of abandoning "the dream of a rationalistic consensus," which is the hallmark of Liberalism, whether institutionally ratified or vested in the individual (*Populist Reason* 168). Rationalism is an artificial construct which suppresses the possibility of the emergence of the "people," vested organically/discursively, in a "'way of living' where political subjectivity is constituted" (169); that is, as opposed to our dystopian and obverse reality, where institutional reason perennially puts down those "passions," which ought to inform the way of life. Laclau is here idealistically at one with Raymond Williams in that "the construction of a 'people' is the *sine qua non* of democratic functioning" (*Populist Reason* 169), their common problem being that while "the very possibility of democracy depends on the constitution of a democratic 'people,'" (171), no such democracy exists.

I have suggested above that the cultural elite, including the intellectual *avant-garde*, is ushered in to the hegemonic order; yet co-option does not amount to straightforward corruption. In *The Truth of Žižek*, Žižek complains that his critics attack his celebrity status, which they say both renders him ineffectual (commodified) and demonstrates the sheer dominance and justified indifference of neo-liberalism and its discursive inclusivity (“With Defenders Like These” 199-200). Žižek denies his institutionalisation and anoints himself marginal within academe, though he fails to address the proposition of neoliberal dominance and patronage that he cites. Williams, Laclau, and Žižek all formulate their radical theories apparently oblivious of the hegemonic orthodoxy that welcomes it in and drowns it. All political persuasions are welcome; none can raise a flag and heterodoxy redounds to the credit of individualism. But Williams et al are yet more oblivious of the deeper problem, which is not the secondary phenomenon of cultural elitism but the primary one of the abject condition of the mass that supports it by consumption.

Laclau comes dangerously close to obscurantism in his theorising of the “people,” the legitimacy of which is only rescued by the materialist metaphysics as first principle—which this dissertation holds in contention. Laclau’s ideal is a discursively embodied collective marked by “emptiness”—that is the “absent fullness of the community,” invisibly alive and “embodied in a hegemonic force” (170). Do we not in this conception run the risk of abstracting hegemony beyond the prevailing and concrete conditions of possibility such as I have outlined above? This is not to say that Laclau’s brilliant analysis *is* obscurantism; his dialectical logic soundly proposes this idealistic embodiment as a necessary *attenuation* of the logic of embodiment generally, whether vested metonymically in the crown or in democratic embodiment. Strictly, the embodiment of a people can only consist in its

substantial (yet insubstantial) discursive agreement, rather than humanist verities or economic rationalism. It seems to me however that Laclau, like Williams, pays inadequate attention to the disparate economic reality that underwrites so-called democracy, and the way this pre-emptively conditions hegemony, such that democracy only exists *ideologically* and by common uncritical consensus.

Hegemony, as we know it, has an economic base with a discursive superstructure, which is spun between the cultural elite, however, and *not* the whole culture.

Discourse is not inclusive, not even among groups, but representative, orchestrated and elitist. How to free the minds of, empower, give a voice to, the “people,” the grass roots, remains the problem, whereas Laclau enthuses over “popular demands” as if they indicated a genuine democratic groundswell or *spontaneous* discursive uprising—without economic determinants and more than the rhetoric of a noisy and heterodox *minority*. “At some points in time—as happens today quite frequently in the international scene—defence of human rights and civil liberties can become the most pressing popular demands. But popular demands can also crystalize in entirely different configurations, as Lefort’s analysis of totalitarianism shows” (Laclau *On Populist Reason* 171). This is certainly true. In Australia at present “popular demand” is running counter to human rights on issues such, for instance, as how to “stop the boats.” As distinct from reason *per se*, populist reason’s first concern arguably remains self-interest. More to the point, altruistic “crystallisations” are not so much *popularly manifested* as *partially manufactured*—while *support* is *cultivated* in the same way as Orwell’s despised jingoism. Patriotism and hero-worship belong no more to human nature than Fascism belongs to popular demand; both, whether lip-service or sincerely felt, are born of the discursive *exploitation* of a timorous and degraded commonality. Laclau

attempts to rescue the category of *lumpenproletariat*, pointing out the incommensurability of actually existing democracy with its ideal as the condition of possibility, but rather than manifesting as “demand” (except in extremis), in an “administered world” the unproductive masses lack the wherewithal to move dialectically beyond the contradiction in modern democracies—and in any case are palliated by consumption. This was Adorno’s point, not so much that the aesthetic was degraded, but that popular culture was bereft of authentic experience from which to extrapolate reason and critique.

My own view is that Laclau’s optimism is nevertheless valid, in that globalised capitalism is increasingly beset within by structural contradiction and partisan conflict—thus constituting the very condition of possibility of overall reform, as opposed to political partialities fomenting agendas somehow independently—and that political partialities in all likelihood proceed from that. Attempting to theorise the people as a political agenda however, is redundant, and Laclau does relinquish any unilateral socialist agenda in favour of populist spontaneity. Beyond that, Laclau’s theory seems to me, unconsciously, merely to flesh-out (so to speak) the classical Marxist formulation of “the epoch of social revolution” as condition of possibility, and not to *precipitate* it. Advanced, globalised capitalism as *sine qua non* only reiterates Marx’s dictum that “a social system never perishes before all the productive forces have developed for which it is wide enough; and new, higher productive relations never come into being until the material conditions for their existence have been brought to maturity within the womb of the old society itself” (qtd. in Fromm, *Marx's Concept of Man* 169). Globalised capitalism is precisely that stage at which productive forces *must* ultimately reach their limit, and the social relations of production are thus most agitated. In this light, Laclau’s political

partialities are at best merely *symptoms* of capitalism in crisis—representing a passive and belated rather than aggressive *avant-garde*.

My further point of dissent, against both classical and post-Marxist structuralisms, is that radical change thus only occurs as part of the aftermath of the singularity inherent in a paradigm of infinite growth within finite limits—in this case the inevitable collapse of political economy upon reaching the limits of growth, material and economic. More to the point, the logic of the inevitable collapse of capitalism, in a global context, implies a comprehensive fall from which rather than a new political order (reaggregation) or mode of production arising, the general degradation of the planet, and depletion of resources, points towards general strife and anarchy, rather than regeneration. To borrow the title of one of Žižek’s recent books, Laclau is theorising a kind passive-political hopefulness of *Living in the End Times*, rather than plotting socialist strategy. The destructive nature of globalised capitalism demands a theory of political *intervention* rather than hopefulness. Plotting global capitalism’s natural limits as the *sine qua non* of its own transcendence, is a mode of capitulation. In my view, any viable intervention must occur before the self-destruction of the system sets in, and therein the impasse remains.

Like Žižek, Laclau is a Lacanian; likewise, his discursive social theory has its closest analogy in pathology—the study of the antithetical biological forces at war within an organism and their effects. Žižek’s psychoanalysis obtains at the level of the decentred subject, while Laclau’s subject is the discursive collective. Laclau fleshes out his theory with reference to social pathologies such as Fascism. He most certainly does not condemn these phenomena from the point of view of the “healthy” social organism, since to castigate any social movement as “aberrant” is to isolate it

and to white-wash the “normal” relations which ostensibly obtain otherwise (*On Populist Reason* 249-50). Laclau prefers analysis to moral condemnation and might well paraphrase Terrence to the effect, “I am a social being. I consider nothing that is social alien to me.” But it is only his reification of populist reason that makes it a comparative subject of empathy and analysis. According to my argument, Laclau’s schematising of the social order both ignores the *representative rather than inclusive* nature of “‘actually existing’ populisms” (*On Populist Reason* 175), and implicitly dismisses, or else ignores, the possibility (indeed the documented cultural record) of individual discursive transcendence. Moreover, just as liberal individualism consists ultimately in abstract humanism, or metaphysics of the soul, so too theories of collectivism and hegemony follow from materialist metaphysics, premises also held in faith—that reason cannot be independent of its conditions of possibility. For the Frankfurt School, reason can at least improvise transcendently, though in a decidedly qualified and materialist sense that likewise refuses to contemplate other possibilities which no *evidence* has yet made redundant.

It is the business of this dissertation to explore and defend such assertions, which I hypothesise here from the cultural perspective as “sick culture,” or what I call, *The Halls of Angst*. The Halls of Angst may be conceived of precisely as the “whole culture” in its myriad demotic form. Rather than Williams’s or Laclau’s *sine qua non* of emancipation—neither Williams nor Laclau can logically believe in emancipation except in structural/discursive terms—I suggest that the current hegemony commonly indicates a pathologically consumptive state of human degradation, at the subjective level, and concomitant social inertia. This was the more important polemic espoused by the Frankfurt School, and suggested by Orwell in the quotations above. Orwell’s misanthropic diagnosis, that “the energy that

actually shapes the world springs from emotions—racial pride, leader worship, religious belief, love of war,” describes only the overall caricature of humanity under hegemonic influence—and commonly not the individual, who’s condition is just as commonly one of self-destructive dissent. Stuart Hall stated that, “the problem of ideology ... concerns the ways in which ideas of different kinds grip the minds of masses, and thereby become a ‘material force’” (“The Problem of Ideology--Marxism without Guarantees” 30). This is precisely Laclau’s positive conception of hegemony, along with his complementary attempt to, as Hall put it, “better comprehend and master the terrain of ideological struggle” (30). Yet Williams is correct to argue that the “mass” does not exist. Nor does hegemony so much seize the collective imagination as seduce and/or oppress it. Adorno asserted that “[h]uman dependence and servitude, the vanishing point of the culture industry, could scarcely be more faithfully described than by the American interviewee who was of the opinion that the dilemmas of the contemporary epoch would end if people would simply follow the lead of prominent personalities” (O’Connor *The Adorno Reader* 237-38). And so they do.

2.5 On the Institutionalisation of Capitalism

Prefatory to a discussion of materialism vis-à-vis idealism, it is both pertinent and apt to briefly revise the (epi)phenomenal progress and critique of capitalism since Marx and Engel’s day. In light of the fact that a great deal of equivocation over the terms “materialism” and “idealism” is necessarily requisite below, it is meet to observe the way economic “reality” mirrors these concepts and shimmers between those ostensible poles. Materially, capitalism is entrenched, while idealistically it

now occupies a phase of institutional embrasure that renders its dynamics inevitable and largely unquestioned in the popular, and academic, imagination. This section of the dissertation shall show that to criticise capitalism today is often tantamount to institutional and intellectual heresy. It will then go on to reprise Marx's critique of capitalism and ascertain wherein, if at all, it remains valid.

Modern capitalism is as much at risk today as religion was hitherto and international realism is currently, of being conflated with divine or natural orders. Like all institutions which frame the present, which transcend living memory and imbue spontaneous consciousness, capitalism, having gone largely unchallenged in recent decades, has all but attained its apotheosis. According to the authors of *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, the designation has for sociology long been reduced to an “indecent swearword—because it implied a Marxist terminology that many sociologists wished to forget, but also because it referred to something too ‘large’, too ‘bulky’ to be immediately observable and describable via the observation of specific situations” (Boltanski and Chiapello xi). Of course neither Marx nor Engels invented the terminology, they politicised it and Marxism ensued, stalking capitalism antithetically, dialectically, as it succeeded through its economic crises and spontaneous or opportunistic adjustments. By the 1980s the global institution of capitalism was all but unassailable. Even while the world was still ostensibly divided between East and West, the material battle was won and Marx's theory of Historical Materialism, which was supposed to have transitioned through socialism and culminated in communism, had never eventuated. In fact, Marxism and its acolytes never escaped pariah status in the West. Ideologically at least, Francis Fukuyama's parodic evocation of Hegel, upon the fall of the Berlin Wall, pronouncing “the end of history,” was not immodest. Engels's naturalised Dialectical Materialism was by

then commonly a subject of ridicule and “the disappearance of a sense of history” had already been recorded by a voice from the other side of the political spectrum: “our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past” (Fredric Jameson “Postmodernism and Consumer Society” 125). Fredric Jameson was alluding to the culture of postmodernism, which he conceived as the complement, or “cultural logic of late capitalism.”

Capitalism seems an unassailable institution, even while its material hold on the world arguably was and remains tenuous. As the second clause of the Boltanski and Chiapello quote above suggests, “capitalism” has become an instance of what Jacques Lacan called a “pure signifier”—coming to occupy for the denizens of the new capitalism the enduring context of their angst, thus inciting the “repetition automatism” of critique (Lacan “Seminar on “the Purloined Letter”“ 12)—or what Max Weber rationalised an “elective affinity,” in the modern case associated with welfare and consumerism, as opposed to Reformation individualism and the Protestant work ethic. In the latter-day context of the at once disillusioned, assertive and celebratory postmodern-present, capitalism, like all grand narratives, is too imperially oppressive a concept and thereby devalues the newly ascendant legitimacy of the “lay understanding of contemporary social transformation and privileged ahistorical perspectives of social change” (Doogan 40-41).

Postmodernism, informed by its poststructuralist philosophy, more or less precludes totalising conceptions of its myriad discursivity, despite the obvious structural dominance political economy exercises within postmodern culture. Capitalism is as omniscient and omnipresent as any divinity—everywhere and nowhere, exercising profound influence over every aspect of intrapersonal, discursive and power relations. Perhaps it is the very ubiquity of late capitalism that tends to dematerialise

or *etherealise* its overweening capacity to both manipulate and accommodate human responses. According to Ernest Mandel,

the captive individual, whose entire life is subordinated to the market—not only (as in the 19th Century) in the sphere of production, but also in the sphere of consumption, recreation, culture, art, education, and personal relations, it appears impossible to break out of the social prison. “Every-day experience” reinforces and internalizes the neo-fatalist ideology of the immutable nature of the late capitalist social order. (502)

Mandel was ahead of his time, writing at the peak, before the fall of the golden period of Keynesian reformist capitalism, by which time economic prosperity had funded a generation of social largesse and complacency. According to Immanuel Wallerstein the “world economic boom led entrepreneurs to believe that concessions to the material demands of their workers cost them less than interruptions to the productive process” (135). This extraordinary period marked for Wallerstein, according to his zoom-out “world system” perspective, the zenith of the achievements of the “Old left,” “composed essentially of the Communists, Social-Democrats and national-liberation movements,” which emerged “slowly and laboriously across the world system, primarily throughout the last third of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth” (135). Those achievements, which Wallerstein goes on to say, “reached the summit of their mobilising power in the period from 1945 to 1968,” were in fact dubious; being reformist, they were more in the nature of capitulation than proto-revolutionary, and were facilitated via the confluence of permanent war economies and emergent consumer capitalism, a

system of patronage and pseudo-socialism. The reforms and momentum gained marked the *anti*-climax, then, of all those years of radical dissent and optimism, fallen into decadent compliance for Marxists like Mandel and the first generation Frankfurt School. Yet that same despoiled ground, lamented by Mandel, Adorno et al, became fertile ground for Williams and Habermas and other post-Marxists to recuperate, notwithstanding that, according to Eric Hobsbawm, “just how and why capitalism after the Second World War found itself, to everyone’s surprise including its own, surging forward into the unprecedented and possibly anomalous Golden Age of 1947 -73, is perhaps the major question which faces historians of the twentieth century” (*Age of Extremes* 8).

However that may be, according to Hobsbawm’s thesis in *Age of Extremes*, the real threat to the economic-liberal world order during Wallerstein’s designated years of Old left ascendancy, 1840 to post-war, was fascism, which presented as a much more visceral response to the crises of *laissez faire* than the agonised theoretical work of latter-day Western Marxists. Despite the ideological paranoia of Cold War rhetoric, according to Hobsbawm “the threat to liberal institutions came exclusively from the political right” (*Age of Extremes* 112). Indeed, outside the Soviet Union— itself beset by Stalinism, and insular rather than expansionary—a reactionary-ideological cum proto-fascist era was mounting between the wars, its political crescendo being Hitler’s ascendancy, the catalyst for all other significant fascist movements to emerge outside Italy in the lead up to World War Two (Hobsbawm *Age of Extremes* 112-16). The period, whose cultural corollary was high Modernism, could be readily conceived as a compelling and fascinating example of ideological impulses driven by the economic base, both in the form of popular reactionary *materialism*, and *idealistic* discontent or critique—distilled as fascism and

communism respectively. Fascism was only the extreme *political* form, opportunistically cast, of anxieties bred in the new Enlightened-politico-economic order, naively manifest as nostalgia for a more stable world, later exploited and adapted to supremacist ends.

As Marx foundationally asserted, humans crave protection and security above all else, and the social contract, with its relations of production, is only as strong as the *fibre* of that provision. The roughly thirty-year post-war boom was a watershed in the history of capitalism, on either side of which economic liberalism has driven both popular uprisings and, more discriminating but less popular, Marxist critique. The Keynesian revolution and economic boom consolidated a timely and stabilising intervention in the West, but neo-liberal economics are entrenched once again and popular discontent appears to be following a familiar path. In a recent interview, and historical redux, Hobsbawm laments the rise of xenophobia, “which, for most of the working class is, as Bebel once put it, ‘the socialism of fools’: safeguard my job against people who are competing with me. The weaker the labour movement is, the more xenophobia appeals” (“World Distempers” 134). True to form, neo-nationalist and protectionist discontent among the working classes—which are often optimistically and euphemistically lionised by intellectuals and hopeful radicals as progressive anti-globalism or grass roots socialism—but also religious fundamentalism and a backlash against policies of multi-culturalism and “political correctness” in general—are in the ascendency. Indeed, Hobsbawm himself, long an advocate of national distinctiveness, writes, “the xenophobic element in nationalism is increasingly important. The more politics was democratized, the more potential there was for it. The causes of xenophobia are now much greater than they were before” (“World Distempers” 142).

In light of this reactionary predilection of popular movements and their political forms, Marx's alternative vision of an ethical utopia was and is incredibly inspiring. But it remains an intellectually-elite and idealistic prospect whose proof and realisation resolutely await its historical-materialist apotheosis—which cannot be wished into existence. According to Marx, when the time is ripe, when the means of production no longer satisfy political economy, a dynamic system of mutual cooperation, capitalism will be overthrown. In the meantime dissent is popularly expressed in the negative and insular terms Hobsbawm laments. Ironically, liberal democracy is thus the prime difficulty confronting the development of genuine radical dissent, as opposed to reformism or confused and reactionary popular movements bent effectively on the preservation of an untenable, unsustainable and unconscionable political economy. The key to this political impasse was the postwar boom and the consumer culture that facilitated it, politically and economically, and commodified the cultural-political present so comprehensively. Divide and conquer! The political crisis, forestalled by the Keynesian revolution, has re-emerged, but the late capitalist order is infinitely more flexible, while consumer culture is now far more dependent, both materialistically and ideologically, than it was before. Neo-liberalism has thus made a spectacular comeback, often despised but ultimately untrammelled in its progress. Marx's mode of production is now popularly indistinguishable from a *mode of consumption*. The popular, *democratic* mindset cannot conceive of an acceptable alternative from the lifestyle to which it is predisposed to aspire; yet neither can it make either qualitative or quantitative assessment of that same pathological system.

2.6 Champions of Capital

The doctrine of Historical Materialism, for all these reasons, has thus largely been abandoned; not merely Engels's naturalised, dialectical version of it, but the economic critique as well. The dynamics of capitalism, which are the bedrock of Marx's critique, and not speculation about the *longue durée*, remain compelling but are swamped by neo-liberal ideology, utterly unself-critical and oblivious to vital questions as to its sustainability or ethical legitimacy. Marx's critique, more cannily pertinent today than ever, remains an item of faith to the cognoscenti, the "lunatic left," deserted by lapsed and disillusioned Marxists, and demonised by apologists for capitalism; more often than not simply ignored. The prevailing academic position, or rationale, among those not wholly supportive of the free market seems distributed, rather than torn, between apolitical compliance and Panglossian resignation; that is deferral to the built-in corrective mechanics of capitalism. James Fulcher, for instance, reasons that there are several kinds of capitalism, and thus that the system is innately mutable (58). He acknowledges that the "true capitalist is motivated by the amoral accumulation of money and this frequently drives particular individuals to bend or break the rules." On the other hand, this is rationalised by the fact that the nature of the system will inevitably disclose miscreants "and governments then punish wrongdoers and increase regulation" (124). Nor need we concern ourselves with economic crises, "which are one of its [capitalism's] normal features"; we may simply observe in due course capitalism's "astonishing capacity for the resumption of growth when the crisis has passed" (125)—such economic voyeurism overlooks the misery wrought by these crises as part of an unravelling dispensation in which we may all place our faith. The history of capitalism, Fulcher implies, is testimony to

this sublime mechanism by which it has shown itself to be capable of reform—ergo reform is built into capitalism. In any case there is for Fulcher and his cohort no alternative to capitalism, apart from ostensibly alternative *capitalisms*:

The search for an alternative *to* capitalism is fruitless in a world where capitalism has become utterly dominant, and no final crisis is in sight or, short of some ecological catastrophe, even really conceivable. The socialist alternative has lost its credibility, while contemporary anti-capitalist movements seem to lead nowhere, because of their failure to provide a credible and constructive alternative that is compatible with existing patterns of production and consumption. (126-27)

On the face of it there seems to be some logic to these assertions, especially for those eager to be persuaded, but in the withering context of Marx's thought, they are breath-taking specimens of syllogistic and partisan reasoning, devoid of human context. Fulcher's "existing patterns of production and consumption" vary drastically between the haves and have nots, and can never be reconciled in terms of the planet's finite resources—even supposing they could, I would argue that the product is cultural malignancy. Fulcher wrote his book before the Global Financial Crisis, but yet the phenomenon of globalisation, associated pillaging and stateless corporations was long established. Fulcher criticises hyperbolic use of the term "globalisation," insisting that capital continues to gravitate to the West: "In 1820 the five richest countries in the world were three times as rich as the five poorest. By 1950, they were 35 times as rich; by 1970, 44 times; and by 1992, 72 times. The world has become steadily more divided by international differences in wealth" (98).

Kevin Doogan cites similar statistics (36), but who are they trying to reassure in tabling these grotesque disparities—wealthy countries of their continuing dominance and corporate loyalty, or poor countries with the heartening news that though they continue to be exploited and have no hope of attaining parity, the system’s logic is undeniable? Fulcher and Doogan are of course taking the part of wealthy nations. The same unquestioned bias that rationalises the domestic exploitation of the worker by the capitalist extends to the exploitation of poor, by wealthy nations.

Both authors’ analyses imply utterly capitalist and Western-centric thinking in their blithe accounts of international disparities, designed to bolster Western insecurities and worker discontent, rather than to reflect on the enduring inequity itself. The overwhelming logic in Fulcher’s analysis of capitalism is the logic of the free-market—the unimpeded and amoral indulgence of market forces begets the best of all possible worlds, since no other world is possible. This “no alternative to capitalism” mentality is precisely the angle that facilitates this utterly parochial attitude, thus Allen Wood observes that if we consider the matter “from a detached standpoint or even from the standpoint of the exploiters” we might feel justified in wanting “to know not merely what is bad about capitalism, but what is *wrong* with exploitation” (259). One can always use accounting banalities to objectify the real-world impacts of systemic economic governance, but this points-up two facts: a) that the system amounts for the vast majority to subjection to the owners of capital; and b) that the Marxist critique is a politico-humanist philosophy rather than an economic-rationalist anti-philosophy.

What Marx, and optimally Marxism, brings to the negotiating table is an equally obsidian parochialism; just as Marx refuses to criticise capitalism on ethical grounds, “due to his critique of morality as ideological” (Wood 259), Marxism

refuses to objectify, that is to *reify*, the current economic order, which is precisely what the apologists do, and are thus able to do *in good conscience*. Marx resolutely takes the part of the exploited, and rather than reifying capitalism, he refuses to acknowledge its exploitative dynamics as tantamount to natural law, as is the common tendency. Marx mocks any conception of capitalism as,

a very Eden of the innate rights of man. ... When we leave this sphere of simple circulation or the exchange of commodities, which provides the ‘free trader *vulgaris*’ with his views, his concepts and the standard by which he judges the society of capital and wage labour, a certain change takes place, or so it appears, in the physiognomy of our *dramatis personae*. He who was previously the money owner now strides out in front as a capitalist; the possessor of labour power follows as his worker. The one smirks self-importantly and is intent on business; the other is timid and holds back, like someone who has brought his own hide to market and now has nothing else to expect but—a tanning. (Marx *Capital: Vol. One* 280)

It is in any case nonsensical to claim there is no alternative to capitalism, or to defend its exploitative dynamics on that score; such reasoning indicates a want of imagination at best, and rationalisation in its stead. In similar vein the ancient Greeks were unable to conceive of a world without slavery. “Perhaps capitalism is even the most exploitative social system the world has ever known. The view that ‘there is no alternative’ to capitalism doesn’t deny any of this, though it may try to distract us from it by changing the subject and describing in lurid detail the failure of attempts to replace capitalism with something better” (Wood 263). Doogan describes an

utterly polarised geo-economical world wherein, however, workers in Western countries may legitimately feel empowered by the actually conservative and nationalist nature of big business (210). Rather than questioning the fairness of an exploitative and non-reciprocal globalism, Doogan sees neoliberalism as “a more intensely ideological form of capitalism” (211)—by which he means manipulative—but also as nationalistically and domestically conservative, and so, true to form, ripe itself for exploitation. In the interest of *fairness* Doogan thus concludes that “A very different bargaining environment might pertain if unions accepted that capital is relatively immobile, and not inclined to relocate overseas in search of cheap labour” (214).

One wonders at the need for an ideological offensive, but this also fails to take into account that neoliberalism is hardly going to be confronted *within* the ideological hegemony it has established, or by shrunken, dismantled or neutered union movements. It is not only the executive and managerial classes that have been largely incorporated with share options, but what amounts to token financial interest, in the form of shares in the modern company, discounted or distributed as largesse, have for decades been distributed down the employment chain by savvy corporations. Governments meanwhile have commonly dumped accords in favour of contract labour or contract bargaining—often ludicrously one-sided negotiations between management and representative employee committees. And as Boltanski and Chiapello observe, old authoritarian regimes in the workplace have been abandoned in favour of skills-based employment and pseudo autonomy and empowerment:

Considerable effort is made to organize them [workers] into ‘autonomous teams’ responsible for the whole of some output as regards quantity and quality. The requisite skill levels are therefore markedly higher for new entrants—a professional diploma is often demanded—with internal training programmes to advance established workers and redundancy for those deemed ... incapable of keeping up ... Blue-collar workers are supposed to emerge as winners from these organizational changes, less ‘alienated’ than before, because they become wholly responsible for some output, their work is thereby ‘enriched.’ (82)

The more calculated effect of these innovations is to make workers “dedicated,” thus exploitation is taken to another level wherein the human need—in a competitive system—for purpose, recognition, and self-worth is harnessed. No blue-collar employment in savvy companies today is so repetitive or menial that it does not indicate a level of professionalism and occupy a step on a structured and ingratiating career path. Specialisation, contract labour, and the modern meritocracy have effectively fetishised the workplace and made unions largely redundant, so that the very notion of solidarity is all but archaic. Even supposing this calculated manipulation of labour did not render it impotent, and it could be roused in its own behalf, how does Doogan suppose it could match the heavily financed and concerted efforts of corporate, academic and governmental polity specifically designed to pre-empt such a contingency? Citing other sources, Doogan reports himself that in the United States, “The Business Round Table, an organisation of CEO’s, ‘committed to the aggressive pursuit of political power for the corporation’ ... together with the US Chamber of Commerce,” were central to the mobilisation of “a veritable

constellation of think tanks, pressure groups, special interest foundations, litigation centres, scholarly research and funding endowments, publishing and TV production houses, media attack operations, political consultancies, polling mills and public relations operations” (35).

One can only acknowledge the success of this neoliberal offensive; capitalism’s canonisation and institutionalised ascendancy has become entrenched since Ernest Mandel published his seminal work in the early 1970s, so that today a tacit atmosphere of self-censorship, at best, prevails across the intellectual spectrum. It is not that capitalism may not be criticised, or that “reforms” may not be mooted, but it *may not be condemned* without attracting ridicule, or the negative, militant and failure connotations historically associated with the Marxist critique. Indeed an atmosphere of silent ridicule can befog Marxist sentiments espoused at conferences, while “leftist” publications are generally produced by dedicated and marginal publishers. To be anti-capitalist today is to be slightly unhinged, neurotically nostalgic and probably unemployed—such, according to Stephen Zelnic (282-84), was the experience of Ronald Schindler, brilliant author of *The Frankfurt School Critique of Capitalist Culture*. Indeed, according to Tony Bennett even the designation “capitalism” has been boldly rehabilitated in preference to the euphemisms that have been generally preferred in recent decades, such as “free enterprise” and “market society”; “the social and geographical dominance achieved by the capitalist system seems to have rendered the term [capitalism] less controversial” (23). Even critics of so-called “new capitalism,” like Fulcher and Doogan, who disclose its vast global inequities, implicitly accept them in the call for renewed political vigour in the face of the neoliberal ideological onslaught, based on the logic that “there is no alternative,” and that capitalism might be reformed.

Yet the statement, “capitalism *cannot* be reformed” is far more plausible and easier to defend based on its immutable dynamic alone—capitalist exploitation. An end could be put to capitalism simply by putting an end to the endless accumulation of wealth currently vouchsafed enterprising and/or *fortunate* individuals. A universal cap on individual wealth and assets, for instance, would spell the demise of capitalism and put paid to the myth that capitalism can be reformed—an ingenious ideology via which it has perpetually adapted and strengthened its hegemony. In fact, capitalism’s institutional standing has always been precarious—hence its heavy ideological investments—domestically in as much as it serially falters in maintaining an unwieldy and unsustainable level of consumption, and internationally in as much as it does so by exacerbating the polarisation of rich and poor. Nor can enduring inequalities be rationalised as the slow but inevitable growth of wealth that shall ultimately capitalise a global system—a closed system not amenable to endless growth. Indeed, since the Global Financial Crisis, anti-capitalism is on the march again, just as it was after the Great Slump, saved then by the era of social capitalism and consumerism now under general collapse; “At the beginning of the second decade of the new century, the post-Cold War complacency is over. The economic crisis has matured into a full-fledged political crisis which is delegitimizing political systems and distancing people from capitalist ideology” (Douzinas and Žižek vii).

It is beyond the scope of this dissertation however to pursue that argument any further, as the aim here, rather, is to expose the cultural manifestations of exploitation today, which is a far more sophisticated social phenomenon than the indisputable and rudimentary exploitation of labour which dominated industrial capitalism’s formative years. Despite assertions of the end of history, or that there is no alternative, hegemony, as Williams argued, is not monolithic but vital and subject

to constant criticism. Indeed, either there is an alternative to capitalism and it will be realised, or human beings are an essentially and perennially morbid and dissatisfied species. While a perfect form of social life, utopia, is surely an impossibility, given the human condition, it is difficult to credit that reformism, Williams's long revolution, is driven by nothing more than a whole culture's endless capacity for piecemeal adjustment. On the contrary, a large part of capitalism's success is arguably *due* to critique and capitalism's complementary reflexivity—that is, the commodification and co-option of dissent. But criticism is not always asserted in so many words. As Boltanski and Chiapello argue, there are two dimensions to critique; that which they designate “indignation” always precedes the second dimension, “articulation”; “the work of critique consists in translating indignation into the framework of critical theories, and then voicing it” (36). Indeed, Marx wrote himself that, “its [criticism's] essential pathos is indignation, its essential work is denunciation” (“A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right”).

Yet I would argue that indignation is not necessarily a creditable source of critique. The indignant ingénue personifies weakness, particularly in a competitive capitalist context where indignation presupposes status anxiety. In perhaps its most effective mode, indignation might be usefully employed merely as leverage, thereby provoking as much cynicism as sympathy in its articulated version. Boltanski and Chiapello point out that anti-capitalism is as old as capitalism itself, and they reduce the perennial critique of anti-capitalism to two categories—the “*artistic*” and the “*social*”—and four salient themes (37-38); they see these articulations of “*indignation*” as well-nigh universals of the capitalist order, “particularly prevalent among young people, who have not yet experienced the closure of the horizon of possibilities that goes with growing older” (36). Given that these critiques are then

long familiar to both sides down through the ages, at least in their articulated form—however spontaneous their indignation—it is surely the case that they may be deployed and negotiated in knee-jerk fashion. As I have already suggested, capitalism has benefitted enormously from critique, has patronised and exploited indignation for its own ends. Similarly, critique is often voiced rhetorically and for short rather than long-term gain or heartfelt indignation. The union movement for instance, which Williams and post-Marxists have had a tendency to vaunt uncritically, has generally reduced indignation to mantras chanted in picket lines. Such orthodox or popular dissent amounts to compliance, to the clumsy manipulation—as opposed to the consummate prestidigitation of capitalists—of the dummy levers of an oblivious free-market default. In 1994 Perry Anderson observed that the historical trajectory of social democracy was once “dedicated to the overthrow of capitalism. Then it pursued partial reforms as gradual steps towards socialism. Finally it settled for welfare and full employment within capitalism. If it now accepts a scaling down of one and giving up of the other, what kind of movement will it change into?” (qtd. in Glyn 33). Wolfgang Streeck has recently argued that democratic capitalism has been a political illusion all along, wherein our representatives are the go-betweens of the antithetical pleas of socialist and capitalist interests, a tug-o-war that’s inevitably won by the latter, since “a lasting reconciliation between social and economic stability in capitalist democracies is a utopian project” (24).

To be fair to the authors of *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, they are intent on the *deep* indignation that critique represents, but it is as well to observe that critique is simultaneously a set of hackneyed phrases within popular culture. It is impossible to ignore the fact that vast sections of modern Western culture, perhaps majorities, are

overtly content *enough*, despite the thematic indignation that putatively invests the new spirit of capitalism. It is indeed debatable whether critique is half so compelling or poignant within modern bourgeois culture as it is without, amid the complementary human poverty and the general devastation of the biosphere that supports it; to quote Boltanski and Chiapello ironically, “it is a long way from the spectacle of suffering to articulated critique” (36). By comparison with the conditions *outside*, amid by analogy what the character, Morpheus, in the film *The Matrix*, calls “the desert of the real,” the state of thematic indignation Boltanski and Chiapello cite amounts to what could be regarded as little more than a set of intangibles:

- (a) capitalism as a source of *disenchantment* and *inauthenticity* of objects, persons, emotions and, more generally, the kind of existence associated with it;
- (b) Capitalism as a source of oppression, inasmuch as it is opposed to the freedom, autonomy and creativity of the human beings who are subject, under its sway, on the one hand to the domination of the market as an impersonal force fixing prices and designating desirable human beings and products/services, while rejecting others; and on the other hand to the forms of subordination involved in the condition of wage-labour (enterprise discipline, close monitoring by bosses, and supervision by means of regulations and procedures);
- (c) Capitalism as a source of *poverty* among workers and of *inequalities* on an unprecedented scale;

- (d) Capitalism as a source of *opportunism* and *egoism* which, by exclusively encouraging private interests, proves destructive of social bonds and collective solidarity, especially of minimal solidarity between rich and poor. (37)

Boltanski and Chiapello argue that the artistic critique (a and b above) and the social critique (c and d) are often incompatible as modes of indignation within the capitalist order. A good illustration of this point is Williams's distinction between the authentic Marxist critique and the Romantic contaminants he traces in the British radical tradition. Williams was motivated initially by his disenchantment with the failed dogma of Dialectical Materialism, which was to become the straw man of Western Marxism, and subsequently with Romantic confluences of that tradition. What Williams confronted in the British tradition was an incongruous admixture of (a & b) and (c & d), that is a classic contradiction between idealism and materialism. True to form, Williams sought to differentiate these, and at the same time to establish culture as a dynamic influence within social reproduction—a structural materialism within the basal dynamics of political economy. Jürgen Habermas tried to do much the same thing, but more directly, for sociology, while the earlier Frankfurt Schoolers were also torn roughly between idealism and materialism in their conceptions of culture. Anthropocentric or not, it is within the realm of these human intangibles that this dissertation operates, the aim being to begin to recuperate a humanist critique of the human condition under capitalism. To this end I will in the next part first critique and revise important concepts as *representatively* conceived in Marx and Engels and Williams—by which I mean I am obliged to minimise the focal range of the lens brought to bear in this critique, though I shall employ a prismatic

range of other primary and secondary sources to argue for the validity of *indignation* in the cause of *emancipation*. The project here then is not to articulate the perennial or *universal* critique of the capitalist system, but in the first instance to elaborate and defend the *grounds* for indignation, and in the second instance to diagnose its pathological manifestations in the culture of the new capitalism.

Chapter Three: Marxism qua Materialism

3.1 Marx's Materialism

Marx's materialism was seminal, even miraculous in its conception, such that when the implications are fully grasped the effect may justifiably amount to an epiphany and the acolyte, then or now, is at once disabused of the sophisticated strata of ideological subjection and rallied to the cause. The corporeal human condition abruptly takes precedence over the canon of idealistic reality acknowledged hitherto. Yet while such *enlightenment* was and is achieved by many, Marxism has arguably never gained hegemony; in its various theatres force has been the mainstay. The effect of conversion is redoubled, perhaps, in that Marx's materialism is so commonly, indeed popularly, misunderstood, incongruously lending the *revelation* a quasi-mystical quality when it *is* apprehended. It need hardly be said of course that Marx is probably the most demonised thinker in the West in the modern era, and this must account somewhat for the general ignorance, instinctual barriers and non-engagement with his anti-philosophy. Yet even when Marx's materialism *is* understood, resistance and denial are again understandable since it demolishes not merely the hackneyed institutions we pay lip service to, or blithely take for granted, it turns to sand the very foundations upon which the fabric, the cathedral, of human culture is built. God, civil society, the nuclear family and the self are all constructs, ideologically glued together. It is testament either to the tenacity of the glue, or to our idealistic commitments, that these troubled institutions still hold sway in the popular imagination.

In what follows I shall first give an account of Marx's materialism, I will go on then to discuss briefly his intellectual inspiration, before arguing that Marx's materialism was both derivative and hyperbolic. By derivative, I don't simply mean to historicise Marx, but to argue his radical materialism was dialectically *conditioned* rather than inspired, and that thoroughgoing scepticism of Marx's materialist premises is long overdue. The sceptical premises I shall argue are that Marx's materialism fails to give an account of his own epistemological reasoning, indeed that he denies epistemology and bases his materialism on a metaphysic that has not and possibly cannot be substantiated, yet continues to be an article of faith among Marxists—and rationalists—to this day. Marx's materialism is actually banal, it is only its wholesale demolition of the tacit articles of faith that commonly underwrite both religious and secular sensibilities that is impressive. Being obsessively thinking beings, with each individual and its generation born into "the conversation," or at least the social context as it is currently ordered, it is no mean feat dismissing the frame upon which all else depends.

Modern philosophy begins its critique with Descartes's *cogito ergo sum*.
Descartes sceptically,

decided to feign that everything that had entered my head hitherto was no more true than the illusions of dreams. But immediately upon this I noticed that while I was trying to think everything false, it must needs be that I, who was thinking this, was something. 'I am thinking, therefore I exist' was so solid and secure that the most extravagant suppositions of sceptics could not overthrow it, I judged that I need not scruple to accept it as the first principle of philosophy that I was seeking. (Kenny 36)

While Descartes was perhaps justified in crediting his existence to himself, for Marx he was credulous in supposing he existed *as a thinker*, that is that thinking, philosophising, idealism, is the fundamental aspect of human being—a theme which Kant, through Hegel and the Frankfurt School, continued to defend. In contradistinction to Hegel, Marx saw the fundamental aspect of humanity in our corporeal interaction with nature and exigency, superimposed upon by religion and ultimately thought to produce,

an *inverted world consciousness* ... Religion is the general theory of that world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in a popular form, its spiritualistic *point d'honneur*, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, its universal source of consolation and justification. It is the *fantastic realisation* of the human essence because the *human essence* has no true reality. The struggle against religion is therefore indirectly a fight against *the world* of which religion is the spiritual *aroma*. (“Abstract from the Introduction to Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right”)

Marx's signature rhetorical flourish is plainly evident and seductive here, as when he continues, insisting that “Criticism has torn up the imaginary flowers from the chain not so that man shall wear the unadorned, bleak chain but so that he will shake off the chain and pluck the living flower.” There is as much emphasis on rebellion as there is on edification, the former being incited by the latter. “Criticism,” for Marx, is an epoch of rationalism that turns on itself, whose sublation, or negation of negation, is an earthly existence where the ideologically-interposed subject/object

split is exposed as illusion. Post-Hegel, Marx nevertheless used his dialectical method to criticise Feuerbach's pseudo-materialism for only grasping reality in idealised form (Henry 119). "The main defect of all hitherto-existing materialism — that of Feuerbach included — is that the Object, actuality, sensuousness, are conceived only in the form of the object, or of contemplation, but not as human sensuous activity, practice, not subjectively" (Marx "Theses on Feuerbach"). Marx's phrase, to "pluck the living flower," is thus meant to suggest to us an idyllic state of "organic subjectivity" divested of its illusions of otherness. A true materialism, after all, implies a natural, spontaneous and experiential consciousness—rather than one conjured and belaboured by economic convention, compliance and diversion.

And Marx does insist that our vaunted *consciousness* is *conjured* by economic reality, rather than being a naturally occurring state and that economic reality is no *reality* at all. Economic reality is the subjection of *customary* life by economic custom, just as our modern conception of "property" is an economic debasement:

originally *property* means no more than man's attitude to his natural conditions of production as belonging to him, as the *prerequisites of his own existence*; his attitude to them as *natural prerequisites* of himself, which constitutes, as it were, a prolongation of his body. In fact, he stands in no relation to his conditions of production, but has a double existence, subjectively as himself and objectively in these natural inorganic conditions of his being. (Marx "Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations")

The only subtle change in Marx's philosophical materialism was possibly his conception of humanity's being at peace with nature, to its being at odds with it—

what has been styled a shift from his “species humanism” to his “prometheanism,” ostensibly discernible between his earlier and later writings (Bhaskar *Reclaiming Reality*). We have the flavour of the former in the quote above, derived from Marx’s early philosophical manuscripts, wherein he does some conjuring of his own to assert a utopian image of materialist subjectivity; of man and nature as one rather than empirically estranged. The shift in perspective is arguably slight, though, and the former perspective continues to inform the latter; Marx’s “species being” would seem to conjoin the two conceptions, being a blend of ontological communion within nature and transformative activity upon it. Humanity’s adaptive strategy, akin to Aristotle’s conception of *techne*—creativity and craftsmanship born of necessity—is based on dynamism, rather than natural attrition and survival of the fittest, making the human species naturally progressive and positivist, at least in the short term.

In geological terms—to pursue the materialist perspective and its analogue in Darwinian evolution—humans are doubtless as subject to scarcity and attrition as all other species, the difference being merely a novel adaptive strategy. Namely *techne*, or Marx’s nearly identical notion of praxis. The concept of praxis brings together Marx’s ontological materialism as a reality, or “living praxis”; what Marx variously calls “organic subjectivity,” in the early works, and “the subjective force of labor,” “living labor,” “subjective labor,” “real labor” and so on in the economic texts (qtd. in Henry 121). Yet, again, there is no qualitative difference between the ideas of species being and living labour; the former implicitly obtains in a primitive age, before the first surplus was traded, and the latter in the communist age to come when,

The supersession of private property [inaugurates the] ... complete emancipation of all human senses and attributes; but it is this emancipation precisely because these senses and attributes have become human, subjectively as well as objectively. The eye has become a human eye, just as its object has become a social, human object, made by man for man. The senses have therefore become theoreticians in their immediate praxis. They relate to the thing for its own sake, but the thing itself is an objective human relation to itself and to man, and vice versa. Need or employment have therefore lost their egoistic nature, and nature has lost its mere utility in the sense that its use has become human use. (Marx "Third Manuscript: Private Property and Labor")

Here we have then what we can call the Marxist metaphysic, an item of faith since its conception is founded a priori on materialism—the denial that anything but matter and its naturalistic movements have any influence in the universe—while its realisation is transcendental. Alienated humanity is at variance with nature and its labours are artificially devoted to the profit motive, via tradable surpluses, rather than to *techne*, for the sake of praxis, or, logically, to art and culture *per se*, as in Marx's idyllic mode of production quoted above: "subjectively as himself and objectively in these natural inorganic conditions of his being." The Brecht slogan, "Grub first, then ethics"—"ethics" understood by Marxists as "philosophy," "culture"—insists on culture as by-product of material production, sometimes reductively so, as in "of the superstructure," ergo aesthetically redundant. Yet surplus production not realised as capital, but as husbandry and leisure, could surely only manifest, indeed flourish, as culture. The realisation of capital is an alchemical conversion, a corruption of alchemy—the decoction of culture into the base metal of

coin. Williams's positive conception of culture as "mode of production," and therefore transformative, has its parody in the *consumption* of culture as production—consumerism—effectively, the exploitation of our *will to culture*, if you like (evoking the other Marxist/psychoanalytic troping of "desire"). Whereas for Marx, ideally, culture is praxis—organic, salubrious and inevitable—alienated culture is both forced and compulsive; predicated on desire and mass consumption and so generic and exploitative—consumed and converted into "property" of another kind: cultural capital. And whereas "cultural capital" is originally a pejorative term invoked to discredit aesthetics, and "High culture" in particular, cultural capital, like social capital, has arguably become normalised as a healthy mode of cultivating self-worth. Marx's reductive ontological materialism, which in its effects is more akin to liberalism, implicitly assigns more or less infinite (nihilistic) scope to humanity's adaptive capacity.

For now we shall satisfy ourselves with a partial roundup of Marx's materialism, since it has proved less influential in any case than Engel's Dialectical Materialism which immediately superseded it. Marx's materialism is overtly rhetorical rather than philosophical—or indeed naturalistic—since its whole object was to make philosophy redundant; indeed it is surely as justifiable to call it "Rhetorical Materialism" as "Historical Materialism," especially since in our postmodern times history is discredited, and rhetoric is pre-eminent as the voice of anti-foundationalism. Historical Materialism was thrown in the teeth of German idealism, and conceived under the influential dominance of German positivist historian, Leopold von Ranke. However much Marx may have despised Ranke's elitist history and its slavish devotions to the "material interests of the dominant class," preferring to revise history "objectively" as the "dialectic of forces and

relations of production ... through research into the economic structure of past societies without reference to the subjective utterances of historical personalities” (Tosh 169), Ranke’s pedantic resort to the primary record—long since exposed as selective—was Marx’s template. Moreover, Marx was just as partisan in his rhetorical/historical perspective: whose

premises are men, not in any fantastic isolation and rigidity, but in their actual, empirically perceptible process of development under definite conditions. As soon as this active life-process is described, history ceases to be a collection of dead facts as it is with the empiricists (themselves still abstract), or an imagined activity of imagined subjects, as with the idealists. (*The German Ideology*)

Marx’s premises were not so much “men” as “class,” and not so much the real activity of men as their abstracted, collective and historically-remote “relations of production.” Men and women are reduced to nothing more than puppets controlled by their epochal illusions. Marx was a brilliant scholar, in the classically disinterested mould, who conceived a historiographical schema not merely for the purposes of writing history, but *exposing* it. Historical Materialism was to wipe the slate clean. Yet however compelling the dialectic of the forces and relations of production is as the dynamic of history, the concept of proletariat was its rhetorical edge and made Historical Materialism just as stilted as Ranke’s, in its favouritism, and nearly as idealistic as Hegel’s, in its conception of its hero. The proletariat after all is, *en masse*, a Romantic figure who has never properly emerged and lived up to expectations. Just as the French (“bourgeois”) Revolution descended into

viciousness, according to Marx the “proletarian revolutions, like those of the nineteenth century” fell into prevarication (*18th Brumaire* 19). Similarly, modern democratic socialism (institutional prevarication) and its unionised working classes have been filled with the spleen of xenophobia, and more concerned to wrest their share of the spoils than to create an equal society. The problem for all, according to Marx, is that they have “first to create ... the revolutionary point of departure, the situation, the relations, the conditions under which alone modern revolution becomes serious” (*18th Brumaire* 19). One wonders how they are to solve Marx’s own historical/epochal impasse, or to “create” or exacerbate the right conditions for revolution, at the level of class, when it comes down to “each man for himself” and paranoia reigns.

Marx was a man of his times—though certainly not a pedestrian thinker—scientific and Darwinian, provoked into a comprehensive deconstruction of idealism in favour of a brilliantly theorised materialism. But just as idealism is inferred and has *intangible foundations*, so too materialism rests merely on the conviction that no other reality *can* obtain beyond matter and its temporal manifestation. I would argue that, at the level of history, Marx is reductionist in that his central premise—that epoch’s turn primarily upon dysfunctional modes of production, unto what is tantamount to an evolving egalitarianism, or anthropocentric “levelling out,” as Malcolm Bull has called it (5)—remains a metaphysic. Moreover, Marx’s reading of history—as in *The 18th Brumaire*, where he diagnoses the failure of the mid-nineteenth-century social revolution in France—is perused through the monocle of this metaphysic. In *The 18th Brumaire* Marx gives a journalistic account of how the bourgeois revolution unfolds and why it fails according to his theories on class, whose divisions, he implies, are not well enough established in the present “phase ...

in the development of production” (139). The urban proletariat is a minority—a clique which doesn’t include the rural peasantry—and dupe to the hectic sequence of corruption that succeeds in the aftermath. While all along it is for Marx the patronage of the middle classes, the power base, that is both reviled and nurtured, Bonaparte being the hapless puppet of popular revolutionary nostalgia and contemporary politics. Rather than a pivotal figure in a *mature* social revolution,

he is somebody solely due to the fact that he has broken the political power of the middle class and daily breaks it anew. Consequently, he looks on himself as the adversary of the political and literary power of the middle class. But by protecting its material power, he generates its political power anew. The cause must accordingly be kept alive; but the effect, where it manifests itself, must be done away with. (Marx *18th Brumaire*)

The argument is more persuasive than demonstrable, as contemporary events are subjected *post hoc*—albeit breathlessly—and inflexibly to Marx’s class *algorithm*; what Engels calls “the great law of motion of history” (in Marx *18th Brumaire*), and Marx claims to have “proven.” To wit, “1) that the *existence of classes is only bound up with particular historical phases in the development of production*, 2) that the class struggle necessarily leads to the *dictatorship of the proletariat*, 3) that this dictatorship itself only constitutes the transition to the *abolition of all classes* and to a *classless society*” (Marx *18th Brumaire* 139). According to the first clause, classless society is the norm throughout history, which, given prevailing inequities down through history, suggests the vast majority in any epoch is content to be lorded over. But the legendary proletariat is even more precious, given that we have still

never seen a *legitimate* proletarian revolution. And while it is tempting to sympathise and be persuaded by Marx's argument, that the French Revolution of 1848 to 1851 was doomed to fail—indeed helped “perfect the machine rather than smash it”—superimposing his class algorithm looks like reification and is far removed from the chaos and immediacy of events. It is surely just as compelling to say, based on the evidence, that history is contingent—just one damn thing after another—and that civilisations, however vicious or advanced, decay or self-destruct via a kind of pathological forbearance, within, and increasingly ponderous neglect, without. There seems to me to be little evidence that a genuine proletarian revolution will smash the bourgeois state any time soon, indeed the bourgeois revolution era is still underway, and its only pressing threat seems to be (un)natural attrition. Be that as it may, my more pointed criticism, to paraphrase Marx and turn the tables, is that the dispute over the reality or non-reality of Historical Materialism, which is remote from social practice, is a purely scholastic question and, like Hegel's dialectic of spirit, remote from the cares of the teeming generations that pass rapidly under its sway.

Of course we are less concerned with the validity of Marx's theory of history and cannot interrogate it in more detail here. We may readily reverse the subject and predicate, however, and conclude that Marx's materialism demanded a historical narrative to avoid the charge of futility incumbent upon it, and to compete with Hegel's systemic idealism. In Marx's schema a reductive materialism is the given and historical progression is optimistically appended, but the millennial gyrations of historical materialism are so diachronically remote from the cares of our synchronic lives as to render utopian promises futile just the same. The theme I wish to emphasise here and throughout is that Marx's materialism is as dogmatic in its foreclosure of other possibilities as Hegel's idealism is optimistic. And yet, Marxist

materialism since Marx and beginning with Engels, “has normally been of the weaker, *non-reductive* kind” (Bhaskar *Reclaiming Reality* 121). Raymond Williams’s work was designed to provide a corrective for the lapsed-materialism which affronted him at the time.

The next section shall analyse Williams’s designated “Problems of Materialism,” since his own materialism is finally as reductive as Marx’s, indeed undercuts it, and so provides more scope for critique. Williams was a new broom, sweeping away the idealistic accretions in the British Marxist tradition—just as Jürgen Habermas was purging them on the Continent and, like Williams, proffering his own mechanism of social evolution. As it transpires, Williams’s Culturalism was only a brief materialist interlude and more “idealistic” versions of Marxism are again in the ascendency. But we shall consider them separately. For now we must consider the problems of materialism.

3.2 Problems of Materialism: Marx to Raymond Williams

I can think of no better title for this section than that which Raymond Williams bestowed upon his own meditations on the problems of materialism, as he saw them, in an article in the *New Left Review* in 1978, written in response to works on the topic by Sebastiano Timpanaro. I begin with Williams’s preliminary remarks, which admirably expound the problematic as he saw it. I will go on, however, to show why this was both a one-sided problematic and entrenched in the positivist polemic of the day, and indeed thereafter—namely C.P. Snow’s assertion of the two cultures. Quite correctly, Williams does not define materialism in the stark terms given by the *Oxford English Dictionary*—“the theory or belief that nothing exists except matter

and its movements and modifications.” Rather, materialism derives from and was the antithesis of idealism, resting “on a rejection of presumptive hypotheses of non-material or metaphysical prime causes, and defines its own categories in terms of demonstrable physical investigations” (“Problems of Materialism” 3). The first clause of Williams’s progressive materialism seems banal enough, yet it is hardly a legitimate premise, since it rests on the rejection, more or less, of presumptive premises theretofore, rather than on its own established ground—as we shall see, even the grounds for a thoroughgoing materialism are shaky, to say the least, since they insist on purely physical derivation and causes of all phenomena. As reasonable as this may seem to modern sensibilities, it is actually an article of faith, based on expectation, that is far from established, and indeed confounded by the evidence as currently understood.

Williams’s materialism is a derivative tenet of Marxism, an article of apostatic-faith, yet it is also a reactive ideology vested in *atheism*, rather than a materialism born effectively of a “negation of a negation”—or synthesis of contending premises. This latter Hegelian formula for a resolved problematic was Marx’s own *aspirational* premise for materialism, yet not one he ever compellingly expounded or demonstrably achieved. Extrapolating from Denyse Turner’s analysis of the problematic, Williams’s stated materialism derives from Feuerbach rather than Marx. Where Feuerbach saw atheism as the antithesis of theism—and I am using atheism here as synonymous with materialism—Marx “appeared to believe that simple atheism—atheism that rests on the straightforward negation and reversal of what theism claims—is as ideological as the theism it all too simply rejects” (Turner 336). That is, theism is replaced by humanist philosophy as something essential that presides over and above human endeavours. In contradistinction to Williams’s

preliminary definition, Marx was radically overthrowing idealisms of every stamp as the *ignes fatui* of the human condition. Thus even a humanist incarnation is yet another idealism overlaying material human and social responses to exigency that were for Marx the real driving forces and determinants of human social development. Rather than the reactive materialism Williams posits, Marx refused to acknowledge the former transcendental premises at all, and Historical Materialism was its own self-realising of Humanity's social and creative autonomy: "for socialist man the *whole of what is called world history* is nothing more than the creation of man through labour, and the development of nature for man, he therefore has palpable and incontrovertible proof of his self-mediated *birth*, of his *process of emergence*" (Marx qtd. in Turner 336). We can then apparently affirm that Marx was a materialist in the stark terms given by the *OED*, but also that his materialism was ostensibly more than a "theory or belief" about human history. Marx aspired to establishing Historical Materialism as humanity's radically-edifying *pre-history*; a history that constituted the *real* rather than the symbolic (big other)—we may invoke Jacques Lacan here since he has been extensively appropriated by modern Marxists, whom we shall be interrogating in a later section—an ignoble edifice to transcend as well as a method by which to plot humanity's emancipated developments.

Unlike Williams, then, Marx refused to so much as acknowledge the theistic premises he had inherited from his culture, and he despised the absolute idealism in which Hegelian philosophy had allegedly framed and thereby elided the material exigency through which human social history had always travailed. Thus Marx opens *The German Ideology* with a parody of the *heroics* of German philosophy and the epic "putrescence of the absolute spirit" (58) as a fallen idol merely superseded by the subsequent confabulations of the New Hegelians. As the most prominent

“Left-Hegelian,” devoted to the overthrow of the Prussian State, the young Marx was intent on theorising a materialist consciousness, and so inciting a conscious materialism; not merely trumping the ongoing history of *abstract* philosophising, but making it redundant as a political force that tended, perennially, to rationalise and confirm the *status quo*.

In ironical hindsight, it ought to be admitted by Marxists not only that he failed, but that this, his own idealistic project in its conception, did not *admit* of success, in that it fomented revolutionary ardour but in the event denied the means of securing its object. Revolution was theorised as the consummation of the remote and slow attrition of socio-historical processes that could not be precipitated. In the 1859 preface to *A Critique of Political Economy*, Marx attributes the critical transformation of the ideological superstructure—“legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic”—to the immanent crisis within the material base, the finally dysfunctional mode of production that engenders revolutionary consciousness. In effect, society’s minions are preoccupied contentedly and in the abstract, as it were, with the diversions of the superstructure until its basal/material inconsistencies reach a critical point, at which time:

men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. Just as one does not judge an individual by what he thinks about himself, so one cannot judge such a period of transformation by its consciousness, but, on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained from the contradictions of material life, from the conflict existing between the social forces of production and the relations of production. No social order is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior

relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society.

(Marx *1859 Preface* 8)

There is a paradox here that has been the bane of revolutionaries ever since. Historical Materialism represents both a non-ideological alternative human narrative that cadres may interrogate and extrapolate at their leisure, and it forecloses on precipitous action. A recipe for the history of frustrated avant-gardism ever since. Historical Materialism offers nothing less than a form of *enlightenment*, in the Buddhist sense of freedom from ideology/delusion, and in the positivist sense that ideology/delusion obfuscates real individual/social development. Of course as Slavoj Žižek points out (*Less Than Nothing* 108-09), the Buddha's *individualised* enlightenment only fetishizes the self, whereas Marx was intent on social enlightenment. Historical Materialism offers a narrative path, moreover, that may be followed forward and back, thus transcending historicity and presenting as an effective means of propaganda—that is of appraising the working class of its dupery and the harsh realities and *real* provenance of the present epoch. The doctrine of Historical Materialism holds all this and more in prospect. Yet it cannot transcend the impasse of its own conclusions: that the relations of production can only be finally exacerbated unto revolution via tedious and mechanical process, in human terms by social attrition. Marx theorised Historical Materialism as an accumulating tendency-to-crisis within an epoch, born of the mechanics of social-development pegged to an ultimately untenable mode of production, within and despite prevailing ideologies.

The irony is that Marx wanted a genuine alternative to the State-affirming idealism of Hegel et al, yet what he theorised was a force of history, cum nature, as remote from human recourse as divine providence. Marx insisted the revolution of society must proceed via the development of proletarian consciousness; conscious dissatisfaction with the disparity between the demands of species-being and the cultured sophistry of ideological being. Yet Marx's Historical Materialism was underwritten by the philosophy of Fichte—as much as Hegel—who exchanged ontology for ethics, ethics founded that is in human *practice*, and inaugurated the subsequent Marxist refrain that the point was not to understand the world but to change it, so as to be in keeping with the real foundations of reason—practical being. Fichte crossed Kant's *Pure Reason* with his *Practical Reason*, but was unable to disabuse it of the idealism it emerged from, and so it retained “a prodigious amount of speculative invention in transforming the details of Kant's understanding of transcendental philosophy into a practical project” (Dunham, Grant and Watson 117-18). According to Jeremy Dunham, Iain Hamilton Grant, and Sean Watson, so-called “materialism,” to this day, has no theoretical foundation, yet it is precisely this that Williams takes for granted. At the level of activity-praxis the failure of the proletariat is due either or both to ideological entrapment and an inability to escape it—or, there is something fundamentally important about idealism as a mode of practical life. It was Hegel's great innovation to theorise this.

We are still dealing with the first clause of what we may now call Williams's *idealistic* materialism; based on his “rejection [after the fact] of presumptive hypotheses of non-material or metaphysical prime causes.” But to begin with what Hegel espouses in the *Philosophy of Right* is not the passive fatalism it is often taken to be. Rather, it is rife for the kind of immanent critique later developed by the

Frankfurt School. Frederick Neuhouer explains that for Hegel our reconciliation with the institutions of the State should not be based on their flawed representations in reality but on their “actuality”: “Actuality [*Wirklichkeit*], as Hegel conceives it, is not to be identified with whatever exists; it is, instead, the *unity* of existing reality [Existenz] and its rational essence. Applied to the social world, “actuality” refers to the existing social reality as reconstructed within philosophical thought” (Neuhouer 228 my emphasis). In the first instance one might object to Hegel’s ambiguous terminology here, but his idealised “actuality” is arguably the only comprehensible form that representations *in* reality can take; that is, the contemplated reality can only be a crude approximation of the “ideal” that conceives it, and, in any case, the tawdry, geographically-dispersed reality could not be surmised comprehensively or critically. Hegel was merely indulging idealistically what is now common practice empirically—in climate science, for instance, and in modelling a phenomenally-complex reality. It is worth noting too that to “actualize,” according to the *OED*, can mean “to represent or describe realistically.” The material point is that *actualised* or modelled reality affords an insightful/critical gaze of the whole, precisely how Marx conceives of Historical Materialism, or Engels his dialectics of nature. Neuhouer concedes that Hegel was idealistically defensive of the institutions—the ideal of freedom vested in “the nuclear family, civil society (the market-governed realm of production and exchange), and the modern constitutional state” (205)—but he was also, by implication, in a position to be critical of their corrupted realisations in the world.

Perhaps more importantly, apropos the apparent failure of Historical Materialism, Hegel respected these institutions not merely as a bourgeois subject, but as one whose identity derived essentially therefrom. For Hegel, since subject-identity

derived from the social order, institutionalised in the State, radical criticism was inconsistent with that fundamental loyalty—the modern constitutional State was *ideally* humanity’s consummation for Hegel. For Marx it was, in hopeful prospect, the penultimate stage of humanity’s pre-history. But even supposing Hegel was dissatisfied with the modern constitutional state—and well he might be as matters have transpired—he was opposed to, or sceptical of radical or deliberative interventions that contravened or conflicted with respective subjective formations. According to Neuhausser this is “due to his belief that fundamental historical progress is never the direct result of human planning but takes place behind the backs of human participants, via the ruse of reason” (229). This seems like fatalism, or even Buddhist-like renunciation of the world, but of course for Hegel it was more akin to faith in an infinite teleology that the finite subject played only a transient, experiential role in realising. On the one hand Historical Materialism is in theoretical agreement, since the “men become conscious of the conflict” were formally oblivious, and Historical Materialism is similarly out of phase with the aspirations of its epochal denizens. On the other hand Marx grants his cadres revolutionary consciousness when the social relations of production become exacerbated. This seems rather dubiously to serve the purposes of the revolutionary era Marx believed was at hand, but more importantly, I would venture that Marx failed to take historicised-subjectivity (hegemony) sufficiently into account.

Indeed, while historicism is an abiding feature of Hegel’s thought, it is arguably minimal, in fact conditional, in Marx, however prevalent it became and has remained for later Marxists. As Althusser has argued, historicism pertains only to *ideological* history and not to what I’ve called above the “materialist consciousness” or “virtual enlightenment” proper to Marx; what Louis Althusser calls “the

unsurpassable present of Absolute Knowledge.” Whereas, “In absolute historicism there is no longer any Absolute Knowledge, and hence no end for history. The project of thinking Marxism as an (absolute) historicism automatically unleashes a logically necessary chain reaction which tends to reduce and flatten out the Marxist totality into a variation of the Hegelian totality, and which, even allowing for more or less rhetorical distinctions, ultimately tones down, reduces, or omits the real differences separating the levels” (Althusser). This goes a long way towards explaining the impatience evinced by modern Marxists like Terry Eagleton with Postmodernism, and even with deconstruction, which tend to establish an endless equivocation. As already suggested, Marx intended materialism, writ large, as a kind of oracle—or “totem,” as in the film *Inception*—that might be consulted in rude outline by its acolytes as a means of verifying and so transcending the ideologically-enslaved epochal determinism that otherwise holds sway. The incongruous simile I employ is not to suggest Historical Materialism could for Marx be couched in terms of natural law—as Engels’s Dialectical Materialism scientistically professed—or that Marx was in any way given to divination, but that a kind of proto-materialist enlightenment was attainable once the ideological glasses were removed. Historical Materialism was *conceptually* nothing less than an alternative and verifiable history of exploited labour, a heuristic via which the edifying truth of human history might be properly resented, rewritten, redirected and thus, to some extent, the future pre-empted. Marx did not and logically could not subscribe to a variation of Hegel’s historicism because Historical Materialism was not actuated from within according to some teleological imperative. Historicised subjectivity was and is a dystopian formation presiding over alienated being; recognising the historicised subject as inevitable is tantamount to denying the conflicted tenacity of the promethean

species-being in prospect. Historicism is implied in Historical Materialism, and even stipulated within its epochal periods, but unlike Hegel, for whom subject identity is utterly derivative and indelible, for Marx it is historically, that is perennially, a cultivated distortion, an ideological orientation rather than dyed in the wool. Thus Marx can write in a letter to Arnold Ruge in 1843 that the goal is, “The reform of consciousness consist[ing] entirely in making the world aware of its own consciousness, in arousing it from its dream of itself, in explaining its own actions to it” (Kolakowski).

The proletariat was thus charged with the task not merely of rising up and overthrowing the capitalist order, but of attaining spontaneous enlightenment. The problems with this agenda are several, though we shall only mention the prime difficulty here. Marx, and modern followers like Williams, Althusser, Eagleton and Žižek, may *refuse* to accept absolute historicism and the spiral into relativity and constructivism (as do I), but what are the grounds for their obstinacy? Must they not make some concession to idealism and individual agency? But I digress and we shall revisit this conundrum elsewhere. The mania for historicism that ensued in Marxism was born of inspecting the entrails of failed revolutions and theorising the cause in a wholesale “return to Hegel,” notably via Georg Lukács and Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci repeatedly declared Marxism an “absolute historicism” in his Prison Notebooks, and his sociological notion of hegemony is now an institution which, as we shall see, was optimistically converted by Williams from an impasse to the very means by which the long revolution proceeds. Withal the pessimistic fanfare that attends it, historicism is a logical absurdity apropos Marx’s thought, accounting only for subject formation, or “false consciousness.” It is not the subject that is

historicised, but the prevailing ideological institutions within which the subject finds its bearings.

Returning to Williams and his, introductory, “problems of materialism.” What he initially adumbrates are the superficial, indeed ideological, problems of a *materialism* he wishes to suspend pending its final, or at least more rigorous, resolution. Williams’s problems with materialism amount only to the irrationalities that accumulate around it in popular form; the fact, for instance, that scientific method is a quest based on hypotheses; on trial and error, rather than a fully-mapped and plotted reality it may describe at its leisure. Whereas, according to Williams, critics too often attack it based on superseded findings or inconsistencies pending, rather than on its successes and rigorous mode of development. Williams thus seems to allude to the philosophical problem of historicity—of culturally-discrete constructions placed on reality—whereas, in fact, his progressive view of empirical-endeavour is that it cuts through cultural constructions, and that errata is its refining process, rather than eccentric constructions built on the data. Williams thus clearly conflates a philosophy of materialism with empirical science, as though the latter could be an ideology-free zone.

Another problem cited is that materialism is perennially associated with, “radical forms of social and political struggle. In Marxism, especially, this connection has been raised to the level of a conscious alliance” (Williams “Problems of Materialism” 4). And of course this alliance was and is associated with dogmatic notions of an assertive materialism not merely discredited by history, but emotively associated with war crimes, nihilistic-atheism and sundry evils sanctimoniously catechised by the West during the then on-going Cold War. This kind of spurious condemnation of materialism, “by association,” was then and remains rife, and it is

rightly beneath Williams or any serious thinker to engage with it, except perhaps in changing the subject from propaganda *to* materialism proper. Williams does so presently, but not before effectively casting popular prejudice against materialism in stone, implicitly attributing vulgar usage to the word's pedigree. In *Keywords* Williams gives a condensed account of the etymology of "matter" and "materialism," which in popular English usage came to be used mainly to distinguish them from "form" and "spirituality" respectively (*Keywords* 198). Materialism was thus popularly contrasted with established theological conventions, the implication being that we're all slaves to language and so this popular binary has accordingly endured as part of consciousness. This is a good instance of Williams's structuralism, wherein popular ignorance is defended in token of sensibilities fashioned by the etymological record. In the United States, in 1961, Erich Fromm, of the Frankfurt School, more usefully released *Marx's Concept of Man* (which included the first English translation of Marx's Philosophical Manuscripts), giving the lie to popular prejudices. In it, quite apart from offering a counterpoint to the prejudices of the day, the author peremptorily cautions readers against conflating Marx's materialism with an insatiable and implicitly sinful preoccupation with material gain and comforts as humanity's prime motivations (*Marx's Concept of Man* 8)—a bastardisation, if not reversal, of Marx's "humanist position." Marx's materialism alludes to the primordial ground outside ideology and is philosophically distinguishable from popular usage.

After these preliminaries Williams does canvass some of the more subtle problems of materialism alluded to above, which we shall take advantage of in following his reasoning. Once again, Williams is concerned with the complexities of language and takes Timpanaro's usage to task accordingly—as though the

difficulties raised may be dispelled with some judicious editing. Williams is defending a rigid materialism he finds wanting among Marxists generally, and even in Marx's original conception, and though Timpanaro is of a like mind, Williams finds his writings littered with paraphrases. Thus Timpanaro consistently alludes to natural reality in "passive" and "negative" terms, figuring it in dualist senses as other-to, or at-odds with human hopes and aspirations, as if these existed outside nature. Williams insists that a materialist properly refuses, at least intellectually, to indulge any ideological distance between subject and object. Thus Timpanaro's "responses" to the criticisms of materialism he cites in turn betray their own devotions to the prevailing ideological order. For instance existentialist concerns with "anguish, isolation and 'the absurd'" are countered by Timpanaro with "socialist emphases of comradeship, solidarity and 'the future', or with more general emphases of love, relatedness and 'community'". Each emphasis is a version of *response*, but is presented as an account of the true 'human condition'" (Williams "Problems of Materialism" 8). Timpanaro unconsciously conflates organic subjectivity with its alienated counterpart, while his Marxist alternative-responses look like knee-jerk reactions, proffered against the same stimulus and so reifying the ideological-order he contends with broadly.

But Williams goes on to interrogate the very premises upon which even Marx theorised his materialism, rhetorically posing three questions addressed to the source;

First, what is the effect of scientific evidence of a physical kind, notably that of the solar system and of our planet and its atmosphere, on the proposition (ideology?) of the 'conquest of nature' which has often been associated with Marxism? Second, what factors, if any, in our evolutionary inheritance qualify

the project (ideology?) of absolute human liberation? Third, what is the real relation between projects of human liberation cast in collective and epochal terms and the physical conditions which determine or affect actual individual human lives? (“Problems of Materialism” 8)

On the first question it has to be said that Williams initially elides Marx’s view that the fundamental characteristic of humanity is transformative labour in the face of exigency. The “conquest of nature” is, undoubtedly, of a piece with the Enlightenment, the industrial Revolution and Bourgeois consciousness generally, as Williams asserts, but that doesn’t alter the fact that humanity is adapted to the hardships of nature by recourse to its own premeditated interventions and ingenuity in prevailing over nature to secure its survival. Williams does credit humanity’s naturally terra-forming behaviour, but only after having already tainted Marxism, from its inception, with the same “conquest of nature triumphalism.” Ultimately Williams lays this triumphalism, in all its variants, at the door of “the specific ideology of imperialism and capitalism,” via which, in his periodising way, Williams “infects” the field, including Marxism. Williams asks, “How then did Marxism, at any stage, come to be compromised by it [the ideology of triumphalism over nature]? In part by the infection of its formative period. In part, also, by failure to carry through its own fundamental restatement of the ‘man’-’nature’ relationship” (“Problems of Materialism” 9). I find Williams’s nascent environmentalism commendable and labour the point primarily to illustrate Williams’s structuralist preoccupation with the ideology of language, indeed “language as sociality,” as he calls it elsewhere, and his impatience with careless constructions that are apt to colonise consciousness; or, apropos a “properly materialist history,” corrupt it.

Williams seems to have no patience for rhetorical flourish either, such as Timpanaro's rounding up of "nature's oppression of man," because it is rhetorically offensive and opens an ersatz separation between humanity and nature, notwithstanding that primal man *is* oppressed by and within nature. In any case it is surely just as valid to speculate that *natural*, evolutionary processes *passively* initiated humanity's conscious remove from it, as it is to insist that consciousness is the artificial burden of a dehumanised humanity—ideological and born of language and of the division of labour and economic exploitation. The Marxist metaphysic, wherein subject and object are organically one and consciousness is inferred as pathological, alienating us from nature and from ourselves, is a theoretical dogma sustained among its congregation more by mutual resentment, within an exploitative system, than by its own tendentious logic. This is not to denigrate Marx's brilliant conception of Historical Materialism, or to deny it is compelling, but to remind us that it is not proven, and to take account of both the dialectical and rhetorical structures that are fundamental to the fascination it continues to exert. Further, to assert that Williams's intolerance of rhetoric is part and parcel of his structuralist view; rhetoric now being recognised as fundamental to post-structuralism and, indeed, to a mode of praxis with the power to disrupt discursive formations (Bernard-Donals and Glejzer 3). Marx was patently an early exponent of this mode in the modern era.

But to continue with Williams's own sceptical reprise: "Second: what factors, if any, in our evolutionary inheritance qualify the project (ideology?) of absolute human liberation?" William begins by reviling "an extraordinary revival of some of the crudest forms of Social Darwinism, with emphasis on the inherent and controlling force of the aggressive instinct, the territorial imperative, the genetically

determined hunter, the lower 'beast' brain, and so on," all of which offend against the obvious supervening power of cultural and social development, tending also to rationalise, "the crises of the imperialist and capitalist social order" ("Problems of Materialism" 10). He goes on to acknowledge "another kind of triumphalism, in which the emphasis of human history and human culture simply ignores or treats as a preliminary banality the relatively stable biological conditions which are at least elements of much human cultural activity." This opens the way to canvass the body and our biological heritage as fundamental to art, yet commonly neglected (at the time) as the root of our aesthetic experience, all art being necessarily physical; structured within the space/time continuum, and created and mediated by bodily mechanics. Williams here reiterates "a very significant amendment of orthodox Marxist thinking about art"—a central plank of his Culturalism—"that art work is itself, before everything, a material process" ("Problems of Materialism" 10). This is dubious to say the least since; as we shall see below, the creative imagination and art appreciation are also part of qualitative consciousness (qualia) which routinely transcends the physical in a way, possibly, that neither neuroscience nor the veil of ideology can account for.

Williams goes on to sketch the problem of the frailty and brevity of human life in the context of emancipation, both at the historical-materialist remove and in consideration of the negligible benefits to be gleaned—or confounded and crushed—in the prevailing worldly circumstances. Once again, though, Williams questions the ideology that prompts us to regret our infirmities and want of longevity, tacitly condemning the extropian mentality that is increasingly a refrain in our technocratic age. Williams reminds us that to lament our own mortality is tantamount to denying our organic subjectivity—the Marxist metaphysic—and that we are irredeemably of

nature and only nursing an illusion. This is a very telling point that Williams doesn't take full advantage of; that this elaborate illusion alone is arguably sufficient grounds for a determined emancipation. Instead, Williams offers the consolation, "that this condition offers us abundant opportunities of physical fulfilment" ("Problems of Materialism" 12), failing to make the Marxist point that in our alienated condition this is more in the nature of escapism and fantasy and disappointment, than *natural* fulfilment. How much more fulfilling would "sexual love, the love of children, the pleasures of the physical world" ("Problems of Materialism" 12), which Williams cites, be if they were not commodified and enjoyed only in the abstract of our alienated condition? The fact that human desire is perennially frustrated and *unfulfilled* is powerful subjective evidence against our dystopian order and in favour of Marxist critique—although other scriptures have other interpretations and modes of emancipation/escapism, and with much larger followings.

This last comment need not be interpreted merely as facetious, but as common ground for reconciliation between materialism and idealism, and even Marxism and religion, if each side were prepared to compromise on their beliefs and find solidarity. But Williams's style, forged in the conviction of its own manifest-truth—faith in the Marxist metaphysic—is thus flat and wanting in suitable rhetoric. Marx's emancipatory-materialism was tantamount to evangelism in the context of the industrial squaller and free-market exploitation that prevailed in his day. But Williams's uninspiring, academic, even ascetic materialism was contrasted by quite the opposite, a golden economic period and the welfare state. In such a context his qualification for "absolute human liberation," finally vested in Marx's "practical consciousness" itself and utterly irreconcilable with idealistic or religious sensibilities, but only with itself, couldn't hold a candle to the cornucopia of late

capitalism, or failing that the alternative flame held aloft by religion in its various guises. By the time of writing his “Problems of Materialism” (1978) Williams had witnessed the failure of the 1968 revolts and of the evangelising wing of the Frankfurt School—in the writings particularly of Herbert Marcuse and Erich Fromm. With considerable justice, Williams was optimistic about his much more sober alternative—*The Long Revolution*, whose central essay he republished in *Towards 2000* (1983)—a cumulative Culturalism enacting change behind the backs of its heterodox denizens. With the benefit of hindsight it is doubtful Williams’s optimism would have lasted till the present day when Culturalism, like Historical and Dialectical Materialism, is surely a political failure.

The rest of Williams’s account of the “problems of materialism” in this essay are fairly superficial and more in the nature of a book review—which indeed is what the whole essay essentially is. Williams moves on to a sceptical account of “psychoanalysis and materialism,” casting the whole field in a similar light to that which was once shone on literary eclecticism—and indeed the myopic formalism that followed. Thus Williams prosecutes a sceptical resume of a field whose “findings” are derivative and unreflective, resting on no rigorous foundation or method at all. Tellingly, Williams credits his own discipline as more “directly scientific,” since it deals with “necessarily historical” texts and discursive formations, whereas for psychoanalysis no critical distance obtains between its motley of specialised idioms and clichés and the discursive field that rapidly appropriates them (“Problems of Materialism” 14). Psychoanalysis quickly becomes *part* of a social discourse that has no critical prospect or purchase. Williams thus finds psychoanalysis and materialism an incongruous match and more a conflation of science and ideology, since it presides inside the mythic and linguistic consciousness

it presumes to diagnose. Williams's great advantage, as he sees it, over psychoanalysis and within linguistics and post/structuralism generally, is his resolute materialism, his *totem*, by which he weighs and measures contending analyses—the same mode by which he discredited and superseded Leavis's "great tradition" as idealistic and elitist. Materialism is Williams's sure footing, vested in the conviction that it must finally prevail as the enveloping category, the singularity, that initiates and subsumes all else—that is, that idealistic and quasi-mystical institutions must finally and inevitably be recuperated and resolved in materialist terms, restituting human culture within its emancipated organic origins. Returning thus to his opening gambit, in which he finds professed materialism is often tainted with idealism, or found wanting for what it is unable to explain *yet*. Williams sees materialism, rather, as an inevitably accumulating and increasingly sophisticated understanding of a reality that can *only* admit of materialist explanation and reconciliation. This necessarily means constant revision and, if necessary, extension of the borders of the category of materialism while any mystery remains. In fine there are for Williams *no* problems of materialism that cannot be finally resolved and it obtains immaculate, beneath the rationales and ideologies that contaminate the field, as the abiding logic of the universe—a somewhat vulgar and reductive sample of inductive reasoning, based on materialism as first principle, or so I shall argue.

3.3 Interlude: The Empirical and Epistemological Problems of Materialism?

I have called this section an "interlude" as a nod to the philosopher Slavoj Žižek who, after Lacan, is wont to intercalate interludes in his own monumental texts (sometimes one after another); an amusing practice as there seems no good reason to

designate them as such, the prose continuing as richly through its interludes as its chapters. I however do have a few good reasons to call this part an interlude. Just as Williams was reviewing texts by Timpanaro, *On Materialism* (1975) and *The Freudian Slip* (1976), so in this interlude I review a recent collection of essays under the title *The Waning of Materialism* (2010). It is primarily an interlude since the collection is from a group of Analytic philosophers of mind, whereas the more congenial repository of knowledge exploited by literary theorists is the Continental tradition of philosophy—later, we shall also examine why this is so. It is an interlude as well since before we can proceed it will be helpful to consider what these philosophers see as the *real* problems of materialism apropos consciousness. After a short critique we shall juxtapose these analytic problems of materialism with those within the Continental tradition.

It turns out that Williams has much in common with the scientific community by and large, and his “Problems of Materialism” is aimed at resolving the residual conflict between Marxism and the scientific establishment. The *only* real conflict for Williams is that the mainstream scientific community fails to reflect on its own ideological commitments, otherwise they are as one in reducing the idealistic quotient of phenomena to purely functional and/or ideological status. The lion’s share of the blame for the rift, for Williams, goes to the conflation of materialism and idealism in the Marxist tradition. Idealism can only be an illusion of consciousness and culture beyond their mechanical derivation. Which is to say that however impressive or supervenient the secondary product, it cannot be independent of its production, its physical primacy. Supervenience thus stops short of despising consciousness, such that one could say Culturalism is a theory of social supervenience. To offer a distinction, also useful to this interlude, one could say that

the vulgar Marxism Williams is so often critical of—exemplified in literal interpretations of Marx’s Base/Superstructure metaphor—is more in the nature of “epiphenomenalism,” wherein “Consciousness is regarded as a superfluous apparition or phenomenon which unaccountably crops up at a certain stage in the course of material processes” (*OED*). Epiphenomenalism is synonymous with Marx’s materialism; to paraphrase Plotinus, making soul an affectation, a disease (ideology) of matter. Supervenience and epiphenomenalism, like causal and nomological closure, functionalism, and their nemesis, “qualia,” are all concepts generally associated with philosophy of mind and the so-called Mind-Body problem—which is the primary subject of this interlude.

As the introduction to *The Waning of Materialism* makes clear, the title is only meant to indicate that reductive materialism is not so common as might be supposed. The editors cite a long and impressive list, running in order of their birth from Bertrand Russell to David Chalmers, whose members either rejected or doubted the ultimate viability of materialism, such that “Materialism plainly has not achieved hegemony when it comes to philosophers of this high calibre” (Koons and Bealer x). There have of course been many versions of materialism apropos the Mind-Body Problem during the same period, ranging from behaviourism and functionalism to eliminative materialism generally, including weak and strong versions therein that qualify to some extent as reductive. Within supervenience theories too there are weak and strong versions of the theory that mental properties are secondary, even while they apparently supervene over primary physical properties. “Metaphysical superveniences,” for instance, more or less attribute to mind a capacity to transcend its physical determinants, which nevertheless facilitate the transcendence. It is thus not *metaphysical* all, but akin to hermeneutical transcendence of the experiential

horizon that *contains* our intellectual capacity to range. The hermeneutical version, theorised by Hans-Georg Gadamer, has it that transcendence is attained via a “fusion of horizons,” encountered via discordant textual analyses since human cultures, however remote from each other in time and space, are to some extent textually connected. Hermeneutical fusion extends the horizon in a mode of “historically effected consciousness” (Gadamer 306-7).

Like supervenience, this theory has the *virtue* of relying on notions neither of universalism nor objectivisation—the latter being a self-forgetting ability to empathise in earnest and thus to *actually* transcend. Metaphysical supervenience is akin to this in that a kind of magic trick is pulled off by which we simultaneously rationalise and exceed our natural limits through logical reduction. The whole point of *The Waning of Materialism* is that we *cannot* account for mind in this syllogistic fashion; that this kind of logical supervenience is a formal-rhetorical mode tending, rather, to eliminate the problem by neutralising it in formal terms whose underlying logic is reductive materialism (Koons and Bealer xiii). Seemingly to compensate, supervenience is thus often popularised in pseudo-Romantic terms in an attempt to compensate for the unromantic reality attributed to it. A recent tome by Nicholas Humphrey, *Soul Dust: The Magic of Consciousness* (2011), is a tedious example of the genre, wherein readers are treated to the hyperbolic consolation that they “live in soul land ... where the magical interiority of human minds makes itself felt on every side” (193). A more sober version is *The Ego Tunnel: The Science of the Mind and the Myth of the Self* (2009), which cautions us to gird our loins against both our fear of reductionism and the temptation to “mysterianism”: “a beautiful rainbow continues to be a beautiful rainbow even after it has been explained in terms of electromagnetic radiation. [But what makes it beautiful?] Adopting a primitive

scientific ideology would be just as bad as succumbing to mysterianism” (Metzinger 18). As we shall see, this makes no allowance for *qualitative* consciousness and arbitrarily forecloses on *exotic* explanatory possibilities. This amounts to a censorial version of analytic philosophy’s own “genetic fallacy”—so that reductive materialism is rigidly (rather than rigorously) enforced from the outset. *The Waning of Materialism*, on the other hand, is dedicated to other possibilities, including that consciousness is not a reductive but an emergent, complementary or dualistic mode of idealism. Neither are such hypotheses arbitrary, but based on the signal failure of materialism to account for consciousness in its own terms. We need not concern ourselves further, then, with weak and strong variants of supervenience, as the authors are primarily concerned with countering the rhetorical mode of reductive materialists generally, for whom “Supervenience is just a trivial corollary of their views” (Koons and Bealer xiv).

It is precisely that conviction, maintained as first principle, that is in question; the argument, by elimination, that there can only be material causes. The principal is called “causal closure,” which asserts “that material things are never causally affected by anything non-material.” A statement of “principle,” moreover, is generally invoked when philosophers are inviting “their readers to accept it as a basis for further argument, even though no clear defense of it has been offered” (BonJour 5). David Chalmers has argued that the “hard problem of consciousness” is a complete mystery and will remain so long after the “easy problems” have been solved. “The really hard problem of consciousness is the problem of *experience*. When we think and perceive, there is a whirl of information-processing, but there is also a subjective aspect. As Nagel (1974) has put it, there is *something it is like* to be a conscious organism. This subjective aspect is experience” (Chalmers). There are

properly no grounds for dismissing any possibility when the best efforts of materialism fail. Neither, of course, should reductive materialism be dismissed as a possibility—though it is shown in the volume to be exceedingly problematic accounting for consciousness—it is just not allowed as an item of faith, or to censor the exploration of other hypotheses. The problem for materialism, of qualia, is too often dismissed as an old chestnut—by materialists like Daniel Dennett, who calls those who credit the phenomenon “qualophiles” (386), wittily alluding to their endless equivocations on materialism, which is precisely what the *The Waning of Materialism* contains.

Laurence Bonjour kicks off with *Against Materialism*, in which he deals with the problem—for materialism—of “intentional conscious content.” He argues that materialists tend too easily to assign intentional states to acquired beliefs or desires, since these have conventional roles as explanations of behaviour, but “such a focus tends to neglect or even ignore the existence of *conscious* intentional states” (15). Bonjour takes consciousness at face value, considering it as the inwardly-unified agent it *apparently* is; whereas the materialist views consciousness from the materialist perspective, as something that has to be accounted for in acceptably reductive terms, however much a higher order of complexity may be conceded. Bonjour argues that this kind of premeditated “belief,” in materialism, “also has the unfortunate effect of making externalist accounts of intentional content seem more plausible than they possibly could if the emphasis were on conscious intentional states” (16). *Conscious* thought is qualitative in a way that even Derrida’s *différance* is unable to obfuscate. It is not merely thought that’s mysterious, but the whimsical consciousness *of* thought, seemingly beyond anything reducible to physical causes or linguistic slippage. “When I think that the trees outside my window are bare, I

consciously understand that it is certain *trees* that I am thinking about (and along with this, what sort of thing a *tree* is, and *which* trees I have in mind)” (BonJour 16). It is interesting that BonJour employs classic structuralist imagery, yet the arboreal allusion to the unstable signifier is never established. The important point though is that the problem of consciousness is not about the content, but the intentionality that differentiates it.

It seems to me that Derrida’s essay on *différance* is saying much the same thing about the limitations as well as the lack of stable signification (nominally the phonetically indistinguishable “a” in “différance”) as BonJour, pointing to the lack of a current analysis to make common sense, and thus accessibility, of the *phenomenon* of consciousness. “How do we conceive of the outside of a text?”, Derrida asks (Jacques Derrida “Différance”). He does not deny what is outside the infinite play of the signifier, indeed he thereby throws it into relief, “when, in the most general way, they speak of determining difference as the difference between Being and beings. Older than Being itself, our language has no name for such a difference ... because there is no *name* for this, not even essence or Being. ... It must be conceived without *nostalgia*; that is, it must be conceived outside the myth of the purely maternal or paternal language belonging to the lost fatherland of thought” (“Différance” 297). This (commentary on Heidegger’s philosophy) would no doubt sound to many an analytic philosopher like wilful obscurantism, but the “ontological difference” (294), *consciousness*, Derrida *alludes* to, what he “shockingly” calls “Heideggerian *hope*” (297), is a precise analogue of that elusive sense of *consciousness* BonJour also struggles to evoke with words—since signification always gravitates down familiar channels, an infinite delta, the remainder being ineffable. Writing against the “contemporary talk about the closure of ontology”

(294), “Différance” thus includes, for Derrida, a shimmering “affirmation,” of that which defies linguistic rationalisation and logic, including the suggestion, the “Heideggerian *hope*” Derrida finishes with, of ontology outside (supervened by) the text: “Being / speaks / through every language; / everywhere and always /” (“Difference” 298). Derrida alludes to excess, remainder, “secretive traces” and the like, whose enemy is the automatic reductionism of *language*, and this is what philosophers have to come to grips with. “Is not the whole thought of Nietzsche a critique of philosophy as active indifference to difference, as a system of reduction or adia-phoristic repression” (290). This is beautifully succinct, for Derrida, and it could be that qualitative consciousness cannot be comprehended within the systematised cogitations of latter-day Continental Philosophy, enslaved as it is to its systemic preoccupations and its reductive premises.

Within the Analytic tradition, on the other hand, Stephen White argues that the real problem of qualia consists largely in virtue of the fact that it points towards the limitations of rational analysis. It is one thing to object, as BonJour does, to materialists cleaving to their reductionisms on faith, but the real point is that the very incapacity to *conceive* of other possibilities, of alternative or meta-physics, informs and spuriously bolsters the doctrine of materialism as putatively unproblematic. “It is the lack of an *analysis* of qualia in terms that would make it a suitable explanandum of a causal/physical explanation that is crucial, and not the lack of an explanation itself” (White 112). Thus it is a kind of involuntary self-censorship at the level of hypothesis, born of the paucity of an empirical chain of evidence—though, voluntary-wise, surely born also of wholesale modern apostasy, wherein antediluvian metaphysics are indiscriminately abandoned—that forecloses on exotic explanations. There is indeed a mode of “orientalism” at play within modern rationalism that is

every bit as eccentric and exclusive as Said's geopolitical colonialism. Any deviation from strictly physicalist accounts of spatiotemporal phenomena tends spontaneously to acquire the tag "mysticism." As for qualia, White's intention is to demonstrate that qualitative perception is not identical to physical register, using the classic example that C-fibre firing is not identical to the qualitative sensation of pain. He infers therefore that each is qualitatively independent of the other and that "irreducibly mentalistic properties" exist (112-13).

This assertion derives in contradistinction to the sequential conjunction of identity theory and functionalism, commonly employed to explain the disjunction between neurobiological register and its qualitative manifestation across species, and thus the spectra of physiological types. Identity theory posited that mental properties are identical to brain processes. In hindsight—thanks initially to the objections of Hilary Putnam—this untenably assigned mental states to impossibly diverse physiological causes, since pain is a common biological register; functionalism saves the day by designating qualia, "*second-order*: they consist in being *other* properties, namely, first-order *realizations* that have appropriate interactions with one another and the external environment" (Bealer 138-39). George Bealer argues that the identity theory/functionalist tandem is question-begging and logically tautological, finessing the problem rather than solving it (140-41). Bealer cites numerous challenges to this *articulated*, or makeshift, theory but says none of them is conclusive. Whereas he claims to render the question moot by asserting the inherent "circularity" of "self-consciousness" as the final insuperable objection to functionalist reduction. Quoting Bealer at length, I would assert that the same objection logically applies to Williams's *cultural* functionalism, and indeed to Marx's Historical Materialism, whose formulations it tends to mimic:

The error of functionalism as traditionally formulated was to think that mental properties and relations are in one way or another *constructible* from ontologically prior realizations. They are not. Functionalists evidently have no alternative but to adopt non-reductive functional definitions, thereby abandoning their primary tenet (that mental properties are definable wholly in terms of ontologically prior realizations). The phenomenon of self-conscious thought teaches us that mental properties must be antecedently given ontological primitives already there waiting to constitute the content of our thought; they must be part of the primitive make-up of the world. Indeed by virtue of their primitive self-reflexive loops, mental relations might well stand as our very paradigm of irreducibility. (156)

Such would be to turn reductive materialism on its head. How could “mental relations” precede organic structure?—bearing in mind that an organism is only ever in evolutionary stasis. Yet how could the organism at any stage of its development negotiate danger, or navigate, or secure its elusive prey without mental relations, or *intending* upon it? In Charles Darwin’s last book on *Worms*, he concludes that “despite their rudimentary sense organs, they show complex, flexible behaviour.” Bealer’s conclusions indeed seem modest in terms of validating mental relations and he is satisfied in positing that there is a “law of nature,” yet to be discovered, that can account for our primitive self-consciousness. Yet if Bealer’s argument is to be credited, and it seems hard to refute, he also beautifully illustrates the point I’ve suggested above, that the rationales of art and religion and myriad antiquated mysticisms and parables, and even modern philosophy, have been far too eagerly

dismissed. Which is not to say we need cherish these as viable solutions, but that rather than insult the intelligences that conceived them, we ought to respect them as dedicated responses to a genuinely “hard problem”—one which we are only now beginning to appreciate anew—rather than dismiss them as superstition. There is a complacent and dismissive tendency among modern neo-Darwinian materialists that is as obsidian in the face of *all* evidence as any similarly reductive religious orthodoxy that preceded it.

Indeed a reductive materialism based on elimination, which cannot be substantiated, is worse than superstition—throwing out the baby with the bath-water—and less worthy of respect than that which it peremptorily displaces. The record of our “irrational” past is replete with cultural evidence of the phenomena and phenomenology that inspired it—which ought to provoke us in our turn to at least consider the evidence of conscious human experience at face value, rather than rationalising it away as irrational or delusional—this indeed is what Hegel did. As Bealer suggests, “perhaps functionalism’s major conceptual attraction for cognitive science was that it promised a materialistically acceptable solution to the Mind-Body problem” (156). And yet acknowledging reductive materialism as empirically untenable, as Bealer et al insist we must, no more justifies nomological closure than it does a retreat into mysticism. This ultimatum remains ambiguous, however; according to the OED, in this context “nomological closure” relates to or denotes “certain principles, such as laws of nature, that are neither logically necessary nor theoretically explicable, but are simply taken as true.” Thus, “any set of rules (with the implication that these rules are natural, or physical) is fundamentally consistent, and closed. Meaning that other sources cannot impinge on a closed rule system; there is no outside influence possible. Put another way, “this view is an attempt to define

scientific understanding in such a way as to preclude mysticism and supernaturalism (“God did it”)” (Omestes). Bealer concedes that “in the actual world” it may after all be that “mental properties have only physical realisers ... But this (contingent) scientific thesis does not, on its own, illuminate the nature of the body-mind relationship” (157). Indeed it peremptorily forecloses on it. For Bealer, it comes down to discovering a missing law of nature that might provide a “theory of everything” to account for the apparent mind-body mismatch—much like the ambition of theoretical physicists to reconcile classical and quantum mechanics in their own theory of everything. Bealer’s co-editor, Robert Koons draws this very comparison, quoting Steven Weinberg at length on the aesthetics, qualia and idealism of theory in his, *Dreams of a Final Theory*:

It is when we study truly fundamental problems that we expect to find beautiful answers. We believe that, if we ask why the world is the way it is and then ask why that answer is the way it is, at the end of this chain of explanations we shall find a few simple principles of compelling beauty. We think this in part because our historical experience teaches us that as we look beneath the surface of things, we find more and more beauty. Plato and the neo-Platonists taught that the beauty we see in nature is a reflection of the beauty of the ultimate, the *nous*. For us, too, the beauty of present theories is an anticipation, a premonition, of the beauty of the final theory. And, in any case, we would not accept any theory as final unless it was beautiful. (286)

Bealer concludes that the “only casualty [of his analysis] is materialism, a metaphysical doctrine to which science was never committed in the first place”

(158). And yet the implications of a “primitive self-consciousness,” perhaps universal, are surely profound. If materialism is the only “casualty” in the “nature” of the Mind-Body problem, isn’t the solution merely a more sophisticated version of the same thing? If so, how does it account for qualia as an aesthetic and penetrating idealistic capacity? How does it rationalise this apparent teleology in nature?—which Hegel, with the benefit of hindsight, may turn out to have been much closer to idealising. In a final footnote, Koons alludes to a “fascinating argument” developed by Michael Rea, “to the effect that any form of anti-realism entails the truth of something in the neighbourhood of theism” (306).

But this is to anticipate him (Koons), and whereas Bealer’s only casualty is a “metaphysical doctrine,” Koons complements him with a formal denunciation of the doctrinaire metaphysics of materialism, parodying its logical absurdity in “Epistemological Objections to Materialism.” Indeed the syllogistic procedure Koons adopts is an ironic mode given the subject matter, and in that it demonstrates what Derrida was at pains to show, that such a procedure remains rhetorical, rather than final. Koons offers a four-part thesis he contends is vital to an affirmation of materialism:

- (1.1) Everything that exists and has real causal efficacy or an inductively discoverable nature can be located within space and time. Nature forms a causally closed system.
- (1.2) All genuine causal explanation has a factual basis consisting of the spatial and kinematic arrangement of some fundamental particles (or arbitrarily small and homogenous bits of matter) with special intrinsic natures. All genuine explanation is bottom-up.

- (1.3) These intrinsic natures of the fundamental material things (whether particles or homogenous bits) are non-intentional and non-teleological. The intentional and teleological are ontologically reducible to the non-intentional and non-teleological.
- (1.4) The existence, location, persistence-conditions, causal powers, and de re modal properties of the fundamental material things are ontologically independent of the existence or properties of minds, persons or societies and their practices and interests. Ontological and metaphysical realism.
- (281-82)

Koons points out that if these premises are true a range of epistemological objections entail, such as that human knowledge, or knowledge of specific subjects, is impossible, consequently that the truth of materialism is impossible, and belief in materialism “violates against the no-defeater conditions for knowledge of subject matter” (282-3). There follows a complex sequence of pages of propositional logic in which the defeasibility of belief in materialism is pursued in a kind of endgame, such that even the last refuge of the materialist, nomological closure—whereby “the cat [is prevented] from jumping on the game and messing up the pieces (Omestes)—is disallowed. Koons finally concludes that materialism and epistemology are mutually exclusive, that is that his thesis 1.2 and 1.4, above, cannot be separated, “ruling out the hybridizing of materialism and idealism” (306), which is precisely what materialism must consist in.

In a recent contribution to the reductive materialism controversy, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False* (2012), prominent philosopher of Mind, Thomas Nagel, goes

considerably further. Nagel finds neo-Darwinian reductionism is driven more by orthodoxy than evidence, specifically finding no satisfactory explanation for either the genesis of life from dead matter, or the extraordinary fit between mind and cosmos—the puzzler that the latter produced the former and is accessible to it. Nagel likens reductive rationalisation of such anthropic coincidence to a “just-so story,” the problem being to,

explain how innate mental capacities that were selected for their immediate adaptive value are also capable of generating, through extended cultural evolutionary history, true stories about a law-governed natural order that there was no adaptive need to understand earlier. The evolutionary explanation would have to be indirect, since scientific knowledge had no role in the selection of the capacities that generated it. (76)

Nagel’s hypotheses include the possibility of a “teleological rather than mechanistic” universe, an area of research stymied “because almost everyone in our secular culture has been browbeaten into regarding the reductive research program as sacrosanct, on the ground that anything else would not be science” (7). There is in fact more than a little Hegel evident in Nagel’s theorising; he calls himself an “objective idealist” since “pure empiricism is not enough” (17). Nagel makes the point that the momentum of rational thought was largely established in recoiling from theistic explanations. Nevertheless he is not a theist and claims we, “can continue to hope for a transcendent self-understanding that is neither theistic nor reductionist” (29).

The critical burden both of Nagel's *Mind and Cosmos* and *The Waning of Materialism* is that materialist philosophies cannot account for the hard problem of consciousness and so, on the constructive side, rather than resorting to reductionism they are obliged to explore other possibilities. And yet it is extraordinary that other materialist possibilities, from the Continental tradition of philosophy for instance, are not considered—though Koons does implicitly dismiss much of Continental Marxism, vested in constructivism, en passant, asserting that some “doxastic or prescriptive intentionality is ontically prior to all social conventions, practices, attitudes, preferences etc. (since the existence of social conventions, practices etc., depends on certain beliefs and intentions on the part of the participants” (298). This seems conclusive and yet there are sophisticated accounts from “the other side,” so to speak.

Marx himself, as we've seen, afforded scope for species being as “ontically prior” to his theory of ideological-subjection. Indeed the Marxist tradition is an ongoing theory of materialism fraught with idealism—Williams was more the exception than the rule. Similarly, Freud's psychoanalytic materialism has come a long way under the stewardship of Jacques Lacan. The materialist philosopher Slavoj Žižek has perversely conflated Hegel and Lacan to theorise his own materialism-cum-negative-idealism. Adrian Johnston has conflated Žižek and neuroscience for his version. And yet none of these materialisms are taken to task in *The Waning of Materialism*. By the same token, neither are Hermeneutics, phenomenism, or post/structuralism canvassed, which offer accounts of pseudo-subjective transcendence and even, as Derrida above, suggest the possibility of the real thing. None of these theories are any more seemingly fantastic than the alternative hypotheses these analytic dissenters nominate, which range from “minimal

emergentism” to various forms of dualism; from a theory of teleology based on redundant DNA, to one based on “psychophysical causation or interaction”; and culminating in a revival of the Thomistic theory of “soul” as nexus of the mind/body relation, and an account of “substance dualism,” which denies causal closure and demurs from nominating the body or any of its parts as “a plausible candidate for an entity with the persistence conditions of a person” (Koons and Bealer xxvii-xxix).

From an ideological perspective it is this “individual” “person,” or “entity” that these rogue analytic philosophers are infatuated with, notwithstanding the sophisticated social accounts offered within the tradition of Continental Philosophy. In this sense these analytic dissenters are not dissenters at all, since like reductive materialists from the analytic tradition they are generally disinclined to venture beyond this infatuation with individual consciousness, excised from its socio-historical context. It is arguably the reductionists who are the real dissenters from what could be figured philosophical Toryism, preferring libertarianism to a cogent model of conservative individualism, vested hitherto in an *unexamined* qualitative consciousness. It is these modern reductionists whose foundation is most precarious, and the analytic dissenters from reductive materialism who promise to be their saviours by arguing for transcendental consciousness. They need not even substantiate their case, only that an impasse prevails which prevents a fall into anarchy and preserves the status quo. Analytic reductionists have more in common, in terms of their materialist premises, with the Continental Philosophy they tacitly anathematise, while the dissenting cohort can be readily conceived as reactionary. Next we shall consider the problem of qualitative consciousness from a Leftist perspective, perhaps the greatest innovator on the mind-body problem from the psychoanalytic and Continental philosophical traditions, Slavoj Žižek.

3.4 Lacan, Žižek, and Poststructuralism

Raymond Williams's work might well be described as a campaign against the enemy of freedom: idealism; not idealism as such, since Williams denies its validity, but its discursive ideological deployment. When Williams criticises psychoanalysis as part of that milieu, whose "findings" are no more objective or empirically verifiable than prevailing critical evaluations of novels or films ("Problems of Materialism" 13), he evinces a devotion to rigour—founded in the infallibility of materialism, his trusted *totem*—that in its more generally liberal form manifests as complacency. I allude here to the scientific establishment, to the neo-Darwinist orthodoxy, which simultaneously denies the primal legitimacy of consciousness yet inhabits and wittingly or unwittingly defends its ideological epoch. Williams could surely not have anticipated the Wildean character of Slavoj Žižek, whose paradoxical materialism is perversely composed, a dialectical synthesis, of German Idealism and the neo-Freudian psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan. Matt Ffytche problematises the conflation of Psychoanalysis and Romanticism as "not so much Freud's, but Freud read through the lens of Lacanian and postmodern continental theory" (5). Yet Žižek is a necessary supplement to Williams's reductive cultural structuralism, that is if we are to credit the arguments just examined for qualitative, unified and enduring consciousness. Williams and his followers do not deny the idealistic complexity or aesthetic brilliance of culture and its *auteurs*, but prefer to see them as promethean within it, and ultimately transformative. Williams's concern was essentially with that process of cultural evolution via material process, and not with its aesthetic by-product or its denizens in themselves. For all Williams's oft-repeated attribution,

“vulgar materialism,” by comparison with the transcendental materialism of Slavoj Žižek, Culturalism itself is vulgar.

For Cultural Materialism aesthetics and individualism are dirty words, inevitably associated with elitism and conservative hegemony. During the era of identity politics that Cultural Materialism transitioned into, the aesthetic was qualitatively redundant and personal subjectivity was relegated to its respective groups:

The essentialist-humanist approach to literature and to sexual politics depends upon the belief that the individual is the probable, indeed necessary, source of truth and meaning. Literary significance and personal significance seem to derive from and speak to individual consciousness. But thinking of ourselves as essentially individual tends to and, in the same movement, leads us to imagine ourselves to be autonomous, self-determining. (Sinfield *Faultlines* 37)

In terms of the arguments in favour of qualitative consciousness, this analysis glides too easily over the “hard problem,” failing to take stock of the fact that individual consciousness *is* a singularity. This is not to “efface processes of cultural production,” but to assign them their proper place, as secondary and contingent upon a unified and enduring *consciousness of* that which it is subject to in its turn. Cultural Materialism and its own form of reductive “constructivism” fails to adequately account for the discursively organising principle, as if the hailed subject spontaneously assembles itself from within its structural matrix thereafter—its interpellational genesis—which is tantamount to a computer’s central processing unit spontaneously printing its circuit boards as the data comes in. Construction, “as the

scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible” (Butler, qtd. in Sinfield *Faultlines* 38) seemed like a shrewd move, politically. While its cousin, New Historicism, succumbed to the Foucault-inspired “entrapment model,” Cultural Materialism opted for the empowerment of minority identities within conservative hegemony (Sinfield *Faultlines* 38-39). The intangible product is a more politically-correct society whose political economy goes unmolested—as if its moral institutions were paramount and the mode of production—consumerism—was a secondary rather than the fundamental factor. The political achievements of identity politics amount to securing ideological-patronage, while political economy earns kudos by association with the State’s condescension. For Žižek the Marxist imprimatur is, refreshingly, to

repoliticize the sphere of economy, I also remain unabashedly philosophical in my opposition to any reduction of the proper philosophical stance to a form of social or cultural criticism. The historicism of cultural studies and the evolutionism of the cognitive sciences are for me the two complementary forms of the betrayal of this philosophical stance (The Zizek Reader “Preface” x).

Žižek’s stance perfectly matches Lacan’s, whose own project as provocateur came out of surrealism, including a “neo-Romantic view of madness as ‘convulsive beauty’,” and hostility towards reductive science, which “murders nature by dissecting it” (Macey “Introduction” 15-16). Adrian Johnston begins his account of *Žižek’s Ontology* by defending the charge, made by Manfred Frank, that Lacan—by extension Žižek also—was a “neo-structuralist.” Žižek’s innovations attract negative

comment perhaps also by association with Althusser and their similar theoretical attempts to (re)construct a formative model of the self. We shall thus bare the question in mind, below, as to whether Žižek's "ontology," his "transcendental materialism," amounts to anything more than structural sophistication, and whether it is nonetheless adequate to expounding the subject and explaining idealism in materialist terms.

If post-structuralism is the aporetic sequel to structuralism—which amounted to the under-determination of consciousness—Culturalism was gradually reigned-in by the equivocations and celebration of postmodernism, though this was arguably only a rarefied intellectual celebration and otherwise merely a blind commodification. Postmodernism is both a denial of the fraught Modernist subject and its parody. Intellectually, it can be sublimated as a shift from etymological subjectivity to discursively nebulous ontology—in literature it may thus be grandly conceived as "concerned with the relation and interrelation of worlds of being" (Connor 66). Postmodernism on the ground is more a carnival; an oblivious state of Mardi Gras wherein the popular subsumes the political discourse of privilege and privation; class-consciousness is suspended in favour of post-Modern pap, taking little cognizance of the void beneath the palimpsest, or consolation from the dazzling photoshop of postmodern consciousness. Even at the self-consciously political and performative level, postmodernism cannot sustain a plausible agenda when "the truth value of any and all representations" is radically questioned (Auslander 110). Postmodernism logically has no purchase on the economic reality *within* which it is inscribed. This is not to say postmodern pastiche is oblivious, but to deny it is any more discursively consolidated than the few cohorts—now largely disbursed— assembled in the name of identity politics. Myriad individual, experiential

consciousness remains the atomistic and characterless fabric of postmodern culture, which is arguably little more than consumerism, a reification of choice and superficial personality. Terry Eagleton suggests postmodern culture is only a degree of sophistication, of commodification, above the orgiastic drive it sequesters, which prevents carnival from descending into saturnalia (*Holy Terror* 42-67), but this is tantamount to structuralist logic, denying the self-*conscious* factor that presides over the performative.

Structuralism sought to deny the subject, to reduce it to so much verbiage, whereas post-structuralism, as practiced by Derrida, unable to dispose of it, suggests not a subject of the gaps so much as *Being as the gaps*, the very bone of contention. Derrida distinguishes himself generally from Lacan in terms of his “teachings” of the “truth” of interpretation, and specifically from Lacan’s invocation of the subject as aporetic tension; Derrida intriguingly insists that “the lack does not have its place in dissemination” (*Postcard* 441). For Lacan it patently did, and his “teaching” was an affront to deconstruction since there is, for Derrida, “nothing outside the text,” that is the *available context*—available for dissemination. Where Derrida retains the subject as the ultimate beholder of the object, Lacan gives the gaze to the object in a kind of transference. In “The Undergrowth of Enjoyment,” Žižek depicts just that. Enjoyment (obliviousness) is the normal register of our quotidian lives, subject to/in pursuit of the object of desire, uncannily marked by barely conscious, indeed subconscious uneasiness, since consciousness is credulously conditioned in the symbolic reality the unconscious is unconstrained by. The unconscious then is the source of the undergrowth which, when it becomes conscious, especially in extremis, can seem to choke reality, delivering a climactic sense of rupture in its fabric. Žižek illustrates this crisis of the real, the rupture of imaginary complacency in the

symbolic, of the ideological, by means of the accumulating dread that marks the demeanour of the characters, respectively, approaching a gloomy abode in two Hitchcock films, which seem to anticipate and stare down the heroines' approach (in Wright and Wright 14-15). The third-person suspense is created by both the juxtaposition of perspectives and by the menacing music that accompanies and gains tempo with the approach, but also common empathy, on the part of the audience, with the experience. The transfixure of the actual subject of the uncanny, by the unseen gaze, has its origin in the *other* of the unconscious, not so much a projection as an opaquely mysterious reflection. The contrast with Derrida is that where deconstruction sees the subjective gaze as conforming to what is always already linguistically available, the gaze is not ultimately reducible to language; "there is a point where the authority of final jurisdiction is neither rhetorical nor linguistic, nor even discursive. The notion of trace or of text is introduced to mark the limits of the linguistic turn" (Derrida, qtd. in Royle 62). Nicholas Royle affirms that Derrida was always "preoccupied (in the strongest sense of the word) by what precedes or exceeds language, sometimes he calls it 'force', as in the early essay 'Force and Signification' (1963) where he writes: 'force is the other of language without which language would not be what it is'" (62). What Derrida sees this "force" as consisting in is what is outside the text, not for dissemination, a subject of inference and allusion, and herein lies his *post-structuralism*, or *post-reductionism*.

For Lacan, on the other hand, the subject remains structurally contingent upon the tripartite interaction of his primary categories: the imaginary, the symbolic order and the Real, which for Lacan configure the compelling illusion of subjectivity. Lacan's *post-structuralism* consists in his late adoption of the Real and the implications, for Žižek, amount to the "radical incommensurability between Lacan

and poststructuralist deconstruction” (Wright and Wright 15). Lacan trumps Derrida and the unconscious trumps the conscious, in that the constellation of unconscious and egoic content precede consciousness and mischievously invest object reality, treating the gazed at as the other, not mutely always already there (constructed in language), but gazing comprehensively back. Thus, not affirming objective reality, but confounding it, terrorising it; the subject’s gaze is returned by the haunted object, yet remains the incomprehensible Real—what functions as a “spot or stain,” “blemish,” “gap,” “split” etc. (Žižek in Wright and Wright 15) in the subject-object relation. A similar psychic phenomenon marks the voice—which deconstruction subjects to the (con)text—“That voice, the voice, for example, of the superego, addressing me without being attached to any particular bearer, floating freely in some horrifying interspace” (Žižek, in Wright and Wright 15). Apart from the fact that the “gaze” and the “voice” as other are by now standard tropes for Žižek—indeed clichés since they literally match Orwell’s qualification as a “dead metaphor”—appearing in various and inconsistent rhetorical constructions (*Truth of Žižek* 197-98), one is tempted to call this hyperbole since the conscience, the superego, is ordinarily no more an “other” than the human tendency in general to internalise dialogue. “Conscience makes cowards of us all,” but the question is whether an anxious failure to act is a *haunting* or arises merely from a highly fraught discursive field—that is, a dangerous situation. Hamlet’s agonies, his eloquent prevarication, seem perfectly reasonable given the stakes, and a more typically human response would surely have been to remain sat on one’s hands. Derrida’s position would seem to impute the voice of this uncanny other to the “force” of being; the anti-materialists, somewhat in sympathy, to the primal mystery of qualitative consciousness; Lacan disposes of it in classically Freudian, ultimately

structural terms, which Žižek's more *gothic* account sublimates as idealism—a negation of the negation of structuralism.

The uncanny is for Freud, “a harking-back to particular phases in the evolution of the self-regarding feeling, a regression to a time when the ego was not yet sharply differentiated from the external world and from other persons. I believe that these factors are partly responsible for the impression of the uncanny” (426). One could hardly ask for a closer alignment between Freud's rationalisation and Lacan's or Žižek's reification, wherein the earlier stage of *jouissance*, Freud's “primary narcissism,” is projected onto the other as the Real of the unconscious. The superego, too, “floating freely in some horrifying interspace,” derives from the Freudian notion of the “double”: “In the pathological case of delusions of being watched this mental institution becomes isolated, dissociated from the ego” (Freud 426); but this is hardly “normal,” and Freud sharply distinguishes poetic as well as “popular psychologists talk of the splitting of the ego” from, “the antithesis discovered by psycho-analysis between the ego and what is unconscious and repressed” (430). Freud's more pedestrian, indeed professional, analysis depicts an eccentric conflation of the egoic and the unconscious—between ego and stored-memory as something volatile and chaotic. Lacan's later work was predicated both on a denial of consciousness as unified and a defence of the unconscious as fundamental—an inversion of the practical position of the contemporary psychology he fell foul of, and ostensibly aligned with Freud. According to Lacan there is nothing in Freud to indicate consciousness is unified, and there is every reason to take his eclectic ruminations to indicate consciousness is “heterotopic and erratic at every level, no matter how its texture is ordered” (qtd. in Macherey 55). Freud was dealing mainly with deranged

subjects, but even the sophisticated texture of his own consciousness was idiosyncratic and Lacan's point seems passé.

Yet this is an enormous leap; that erratic "textual" (surface) consciousness may thereby be imputed to its interaction with the other of the unconscious, which dominates. While, ordinarily, unconscious-content—memory, experience—is on the surface distorted and fragmentary (who knows what fidelity obtains in storage), this chaotic data is both selected and unified by consciousness in the same way that object-reality is. Memory is a *pragmatic* and haphazard recuperation of significant past events, rather than a transcript. Similarly, a complex activity in real-time, such as facing up to bat in a cricket match, demands *concentration*—the filtering-out of redundant information so as to avoid a "bottleneck": "given limited [time as well as] neurological resources, any information-processing system is necessarily limited in its capacity. And the loss of unutilized data reflects the impracticality of retaining in memory vast amounts of low-priority information" (Haskar 188-89). Neither selective memory nor concentration in real time, nor even absent-mindedness for that matter, suggests consciousness is either heterotopic or erratic, indeed quite the reverse. Since cognition, like object-reality, is a *presumptive configuration*; it requires a composed consciousness to *compensate* for the unavoidable reductions and distillations of reality and memory respectively. Even if we credit the phenomenon of consciousness as a kind of egocentric whirlwind—fed by the symbolic order—around an empty centre, this could be argued simply to indicate the inadequacy of materialism as ontology, as opposed to making a fetish of the "lack." If neither reductive materialism nor structuralism can account for *discriminating* consciousness, the eliminative logic is that the solution can only consist in its inherent combinations. This was Lacan's post-structural moment in invoking the

Real, since the simple binary of imaginary and symbolic begets automatism, whereas the advent of the Real exacerbates the *intrapersonal* relationship. It might immediately be objected that none of this justifies making preposterous suggestions, such as that some non-material force is conflated with the Real as the centre of consciousness. Yet this is precisely what we may infer as a possibility from some of the philosophers we've examined above, on both sides of the Continental divide.

Indeed Lacan's validation of the unconscious is surely just as much of a leap. Lacan's "*notion* of the subject of the unconscious" is only one instance in the piecemeal and even plagiaristic development of Lacan's thought. Contrived initially from classical philosophy, its later formulation congeals from a host of influences before it makes an abrupt turn from a commitment to the Cartesian cogito to its fundamental negation (Roudinesco 25-33). Elisabeth Roudinesco names Henri Wallon as the unacknowledged coiner of the term "mirror stage"; she asserts that "Lacan always tried to obliterate Wallon's name so as to present himself as the inventor of the expression" (27). Biographer David Macey argues, in *Lacan in Contexts* (1988), that Lacan was heavily indebted to numerous influences and that his *Ecrits* are randomly assembled, often opaque, and have little theoretical integrity. He urges that,

structuralist references in Lacan come to dominate everything else: the debts to surrealism, to phenomenology, to Bataille. Kojev and Queneau simply disappear beneath the waves on which the signifier floats. In 1962 Jean Reboul reviews the six issues of *La Psychanalyse* published by the societe Francaise de Psychanalyse between 1956 and 1961, and makes Lacan's debt to Heidegger, Hegel and Bataille patently obvious; in 1968 Catherine Backes

[Clement] reviews *Ecrits* and effectively obscures Reboul's findings beneath a welter of references to linguistics and structural anthropology. Knowledge of the past is forgotten or repressed (*Lacan in Contexts* 5).

Derrida more tactfully implies much the same thing (*The Post Card* 462), but also baldly attributes the general *play* of signification in Lacan's jumbled texts to "style", "constructed so as to check almost permanently any access to an isolatable content, to an unequivocal, determinable meaning beyond writing" (*The Post Card* 420) . Macey argues that Lacan's legacy has typically been doctored by his followers to seem to be a consistent, systematic development from structuralism to its post, rather than the "conspicuously" surrealist-inspired and piecemeal-project it was in reality. Moreover that Lacan was neither interested in nor conversant with "contemporary literary theory"; nor had he even, "learned anything from, say, Barthes, or from the formal debates that had accompanied the rise and fall of structuralist theory and criticism. Still less is there any indication that he can be unproblematically incorporated into the post-structuralist vulgate promulgated by the followers of De Man or Derrida" (*Lacan in Contexts* 6-9). Macey published his account in 1988, well after "the initial importation of Lacan" into the Anglophone world, but before Žižek brought him to widespread prominence.

Even back in the early 1970s, when Lacan first came to prominence in Britain, his advent had little to do with psychoanalysis, but was more in the nature of a political import, the hope being that a theoretical hybrid, between the Marxist concept of ideology and the Freudian unconscious, might be effected, and form an alliance. Lacan was published in the *New Left Review* and various other journals—none of them affiliated with the psychoanalytic community or any clinical practice

(Macey *Lacan in Contexts* 15)—but pre-eminently, *Screen*, the Journal of the Society for Education in Film and Television. “*Screen*’s approach to Lacan is from the outset strikingly instrumental. The point is never to read Lacan as such, or to situate him within the history of psychoanalysis, but to use him to consolidate the theoretical project of elaborating a theory of the subject of ideology that can supplement Marxism” (Macey *Lacan in Contexts* 19). Despite Lacan’s being groomed for this role, he evinced little enthusiasm for it, or indeed for political engagement generally, and his Marxism was affected at best. Of course neither *The New Left Review* nor *Screen* originated the idea of appropriating Lacan and his most influential political affiliation was with Louis Althusser a decade earlier. Althusser was intent upon the Imaginary as a kind of “key to all social mythologies”; “it is at this moment, during the early 1960s, that the distinction between Lacan’s incidental affectation of Marxism and Marxism’s instrumental appropriation of Lacan comes into plain view” (Valente 159). We need not follow Althusser through his agonies in trying to hybridise Marxism and psychoanalysis—a project taken up by Žižek—except to observe that he failed, reducing the analysand to structural-epiphenomenal status, and being unable to resolve an alliance with Lacan, to which the latter was indifferent. Theoretically, according to Joe Valente, the alliance ends in “blank incomprehension” on Althusser’s part, poignantly confessed in his correspondence with a friend around 1977: “when you level at me ‘the question’ ‘How do you see a conceptual elaboration between [Lacan’s model of] the unconscious and ideology?’ I can only reply that I don’t see it” (qtd. In Valente 172).

David Macey’s account would have us believe the impasse was the inevitable product of theory composed on the run. Macey perhaps betrays hostility towards what he cites, among other things, as Lacan’s “neo-confusionism,” and towards

French theorists generally for poor documentation, though it is instructive to note that his scathing account of Lacan's scholarship does tend to be overlooked in more modern accounts, which also instance the uncritical acclaim Macey asserts Lacan tends to be the beneficiary of. Žižek is surely Lacan's primary celebrant. Mladen Dolar's potted history of Lacan's thought is also case in point, unproblematically resolving the inconsistencies in Lacan's *oeuvre* and instancing what Macey calls, the "Imaginary constructs [that] typify many English-language presentations of Lacan, as a fundamental assumption of unity and systematicity transforms *Écrits* into a conceptually homogenous text rather than a collection of papers written over a considerable period of time, with all the shifts and modifications that implies" (*Lacan in Contexts* 13-14). In fine, Dolar presents Lacan's "two versions" of the cogito, as a consistent "general development," and an "exceptional unity," arguing that Lacan never really abandoned the concept of the cogito—though his early and late versions are diametrically opposed, the first based on being, and the second on thought—but opted instead for a cogito as genuinely symptomatic of both the subject and his own theoretical development (37). It does seem extraordinary that Dolar posits an unbroken thread through Lacan's "theoretical development," and is apparently untroubled by the motley of influences, the improprieties and the eccentricities at play within Lacan's miscellany. Macey even goes so far as to suggest that a mode of "transference" is in operation between Lacan and his latter expositors, between the unchallengeable authority of the master and his disciples: "Lacan is so cathected that he must be followed without hesitation or rejected as a charlatan" (*Lacan in Contexts* 24).

For all that, it does seem that the cogito did prevail for him as a valid *experiential* phenomenon, though whether this distinguishes his theory from

structuralism generally remains moot. The cogito was always, after all, more than a mere hypothesis—subject like all hypotheses to supersession, to structuralist annihilation—but was vested in Descartes's and in the common experiential-conviction of the validity of qualitative consciousness (*res cogitans*). One can no more invalidate the *experience* of self-consciousness, with logic, than one can obliterate the sensation of taste or pain or angst by similarly reductive means. Consciousness is an obstinate illusion, if it is an illusion, and Lacan finally settled for a model of a disintegrated self, constructed within the “malaise of civilization” and overwhelmingly reflecting the existential influences of his intellectually formative years, according to Roudinesco (33). Dolar argues instead for a consistent thread through the three main phase of Lacan's thought, tied together, finally, in the form of Lacan's figurative “Borromean knot,” within which the,

cogito itself *is* that symptomatic nodal point around which those three dimensions turn, the point that pushes subjectivity first “beyond” the imaginary “I,” then “beyond” the symbolic subject; any ultimate foundation (for example the, “the Real of the anonymous drives”) turns out to be caught in this circular movement and cannot be grasped as such independently of the other two. For is the impossible coupling of thought and being not at the very core of the symptom upon which any subjectivity depends? (Dolar 35-37)

The analytic anti-materialists examined above insist that consciousness *is* unified, via experience, in every sense of the word, and via the subject of experience's capacity to retrieve data, however incomplete, opportunistic or corrupted by memory, and to reflect on it as well as to resolve. The question to be asked is can

Lacan's barred subject, essentially vacuous, account for the coherent, unified and persistent phenomenon of discriminating consciousness qua reality? Does Lacan, and by extension Žižek, remain in the province of structuralism? Does their post-structuralism accommodate the subject as the *savant* of experience? Or does it reduce the *patient* to the status of mere puppet in its fraught relations with the symbolic order?

3.5 *Ent Scheidung*

Žižek's brilliant and vast *oeuvre* is nevertheless simple in its essentials. It may be likened to a triptych whose large centre panel is Marxist, which is flanked left and right by Lacan and Kant-Hegel, including the dominant figures of German idealism. Via this incongruous trinity Žižek configures a materialist reality, ideologically-overlaid and inhabited by pathologically constituted individuals—an idealism however that Žižek conceives as offering the possibility of emancipation. Žižek is a post-structuralist in that via Lacan he construes subjectivity as an empty confluence of the imaginary—wherein the infant hails itself as distinct from others—the symbolic order—from which the newly-conceived subject thereafter takes its bearings and suffers itself to be constrained—and the Real—which obtrudes both congenitally and aporetically as an unfathomable yet demanding and brooding primordial backdrop. For an inspired illustration of the phenomenon, one might ponder the maddening, unbroken hum of neutrality behind Franz Kafka's surface narratives and their inlaid fears and desires, for there is nothing behind the anxieties invested in the narrative, just the abyss, lending the jurisprudence of Kafka's *The Trial*, for instance, its utter pointlessness. Similarly, Kurtz's dying words in Conrad's

Heart of Darkness, as related by Marlow, “The Horror!” The tedious brooding of Marlowe’s narrative, and the climactic, mysterious “horror” suggest the Real beneath Kurtz’s charismatic rhetoric and Marlow’s prosaic civility and the pretence of civilization pitted against it. Kurtz’s horror is not of primitivism, but of the breach of the membrane of civilization, and the nothingness beneath. Unlike Kafka and Conrad, Žižek is a post-modernist in that he seeks to supply the void that the Modernists despaired of; not with some lost idyll, but via the spontaneous conjuration of the self—a kind of psychic hologram. Žižek’s prolific output is devoted to illustrating and refining this same *ontology* against an endless raft of cultural relief. This has the effect of overwhelming the content, and perhaps of making it seem rhetorically more convincing than it might be considered in isolation. Just as Lacan’s writings are notoriously dense, Žižek’s are endlessly supplemented and qualified so that their essence, *simpliciter*, is exquisitely drawn-out. That *essence*, a non-essence, is a combination of German idealism and psychologism, the reduction of consciousness to a mere projection, sustained by unconscious brooding and civilised-credulousness.

Just as David Macey condemns Lacan’s scholarship, in a recent collection of essays, *The Truth of Žižek* (2007), the latter is similarly disparaged. Jeremy Gilbert, for instance, asserts that Žižek’s work falls far short of the ordinary standards of documentation expected of undergraduates, and that he evinces little “proper knowledge” as the voice of the whole philosophical field he sets up to be, or as an authority on the raft of disciplines in which he is ostensibly proficient (61-81). It is true that Žižek’s texts rarely if ever present as sustained exegeses, but there are gems of economy and clarity; the danger is that they’re lost in gaudy settings, the greater danger that the bling lends the stone its lustre. Like Williams, Žižek’s whole

ontology is based on the prior conviction that at bottom, materialism holds sway—as we shall see, Žižek’s “posited presupposition” is thus retroactively conditioned. Yet paradoxically, and unlike Williams, he is also convinced of the validity and coherence of the *ghost* of “identism”—of the compelling illusion of the *identitätsphilosophie* of Fichte/Schelling/Hegel—and so of idealism as the progenitor and product, the chicken and egg, of transcendental consciousness. This simplistic conflation of Fichte, Schelling and Hegel with identity philosophy—identism with the last two was progressively attenuated, or turned “inside-out,” as the subjective “I” was subsumed by their respective conceptions of the absolute, unto the late Schelling’s proto-existentialism—consists in what Žižek calls their “retroactive” philosophical development (137 *Less Than Nothing*). There commonly tends to be an “early” and a “late” stage in the development of determined thinkers over extended periods, marked by decisive shifts that are agitated by competing theoreticians. Žižek observes that these shifts of position rarely indicate genuine revision, but rather a “reactionary” adaptation to criticism that is the “catalyst” of genuine progress. Criticism offers the thinker an “objective” perspective with which to react. A thinker’s “late” stage often indicates a pivotal revision, born of the clash of ideas, “effectively as if ... a philosopher is able to step onto his own shoulders and see himself, his thought, ‘objectively,’ as part of a larger movement of ideas, interacting with what comes after” (138 *Less Than Nothing*). Nor is the “late” position of a thinker the reversal or the dog-leg of progress, but the assimilation of criticism to the posited presupposition. Citing Fichte, Žižek asserts that, “philosophy is not a neutral world-view, but a reflective appropriation of one’s pre-theoretical existential attitudes” (*Less Than Nothing* 139).

An infinite regress looms here as the philosopher attempts to recuperate this "pre-theoretical" bias, which derives from what? Some vague cultural/familial inherited sympathy/affection, subsequently colonised by a dominant idea? Partly—Žižek himself could not deny a pre-theoretical bias—but Žižek's project goes much further back, and is to find this pre-theoretical bias in the unarticulated transition between primordial being and the advent of the symbolic order, or *logos*; thus to validate "the shadow of Dialectical Materialism"; to rescue materialism from the reductive vulgarity it has fallen into. Žižek essays to recuperate idealism as an inevitable transitional stage, by way of "detour," of materialism—into mature reconciliation with the initial(ising) existential impulse. As a modern philosopher and Marxist, Žižek's bias is intuitive—the "pre-theoretical" is all but drowned in retroactive theory—materialism being the default philosophical position, but his aim is to give an account of its vestige in the tension between the old and the new, between primordial and philosophical. To that end, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, et al find their consummation, to date, in late-Schelling. "[T]he whole point of his [Schelling's] *identitätsphilosophie* is that subjective idealism (transcendental philosophy) and objective idealism (philosophy of nature) are two approaches to the Third, the absolute beyond or beneath the duality of spirit and nature, subject and object, underlying and manifesting itself in both" (*Less Than Nothing* 144). This is not something Schelling ever accomplished, a unified field, but was realised in Hegel on the side of idealism. As we shall see, Žižek seeks to retroactively appropriate Hegel's absolute spirit, indeed the whole of German Idealism, for Materialism. The overarching question to be asked is whether Žižek's idealism/materialism is adequate to the task of explaining consciousness.

As I say, Žižek's ontology is essentially simple, the rudiment of his whole *oeuvre*; the thread may thus be picked up in any of his texts—that an irreconcilable gap obtains between materialism and idealism that can only be mediated by psychoanalysis—the rest is just brilliant verbiage. Schelling plays a dual role in Žižek's theory, first in that he supplies an unresolved precedent, even an homologous link between romanticism and late Lacan (theorist of the Real), second in that Schelling conditions late-Hegel. That is, Žižek suggests that just as late-Schelling et al are conditioned by their respective critics, late-Hegel can be extrapolated as conditioned by late-Schelling to adopt a unified stance in transcendental *materialism*—as opposed to absolute idealism—whereby the subject of nature is reinscribed in nature as its own reflexivity, as part of nature and so gifted with natural insight and the capacity to speculate cannily about reality (*Less Than Nothing* 144-5). In effect, Žižek plays late-Hegel, conditioned by late-Schelling rather than dismissive of him—as Žižek recounts Hegel was (*Less Than Nothing* 137). Schelling was an obstinate champion both of absolute freedom and freedom as absolute, both temporal and infinite. In a Letter penned to Hegel in February 1795, Schelling declared that, “the highest principle of all philosophy is ... the Self insofar as it is purely and simply Self, not yet conditioned by an object, but where it is formulated by *freedom*. The alpha and omega of all philosophy is freedom” (qtd. in Courtine 83). Freedom was then not merely an embattled affirmation, as it tends to be today; for the idealists, and particularly Schelling, it was the condition of possibility of reason, and manifest in its consummate practices. Schelling's life work was devoted to theorising the enigma of freedom (Ffytche 75).

Žižek rehearses his theory in *The Indivisible Remainder* (1996), which nominates Schelling as closest in the extant romantic line to breaking free of the

ideology of spirit, which is not however negated but *naturalised*, with God underwriting both the miracle of freedom and its enlightened accomplishments—but otherwise retreating incomprehensibly. Freedom was Schelling’s consistent theme, from his early *Identiphilosophy* through his *Naturphilosophie*, which was a compromise rather than a negation of the former; they were complementary approaches to expounding humanity’s “God-given” (inexplicable) freedom. As Frederick Beiser observes, philosophising about nature has been discredited in the unilateral era of empiricism that ensued, yet post-Kant, the two were properly inseparable and philosophy did not merely do the underlabouring of science, but conceptualised its problematics:

The final decades of the eighteenth century, when *Naturphilosophie* was born, were some of the most exciting and turbulent in the history of science. It was in these years that the mechanical world picture collapsed utterly, that the reigning preformation theory in biology was replaced with epigenesis [sic], that geology made its first steps toward a systematic investigation of the ages of the earth. One major result of the new dynamic conception of matter and the rise of epigenesis was the collapse of Cartesian dualisms and the emergence of a new paradigm to explain mental-physical interaction. Rather than distinct substances, the mind and body could now be understood as different degrees of organization and development of living force. Under these conditions, what could any thinker do than speculate and attempt to formulate new paradigms?

(12)

It is vital to keep such qualifications in mind if we are to treat Schelling’s philosophy at all sympathetically—or to employ the proper caution when reflecting upon our own.

In Žižek's case, he perfectly reasonably offers to complete the paradigm Schelling struggled with interminably. How should freedom be vouchsafed to humanity with such largesse, if not by design? And how could its extension, unto reason and all its achievements, deny the apparent fact of anthropocentrism that makes it possible? How, moreover, can freedom coexist with the systemic conditions of order which otherwise prevail in the world and in the universe?—which, Schelling rationalises, would logically seem to counter freedom utterly. According to Schelling, if freedom “has any reality at all it cannot be a merely subordinate or incidental conception but must be one of the dominant central points of the system” (6). Schelling's solution consists in his own “indivisible remainder”, which is the vital link between unconscious primordial being and self-consciousness, the latter being the manifestation of *ent-scheidung*, or decision, which the subject “represses” upon waking in reality (Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder* 33). Schelling asserts that “idealism supplies only the most general conception of freedom, and a merely formal one. But the real and vital conception of freedom is that it is a possibility of good and evil” (26). The subject is the nexus of this possibility, its decision—Žižek's pre-theoretical bias—which Schelling takes from its crude premises in the possibility of good and evil to its incarnate and free development:

Following the eternal act of self-revelation, the world as we now behold it, is all rule, order and form; but the unruly lies ever in the depths as though it might again break through, and order and form nowhere appear to have been original, but it seems as though what had initially been unruly had been brought to order. This is the incomprehensible basis of reality in things, the irreducible remainder which cannot be resolved into reason by the greatest

exertion but always remains in the depths. Out of this which is unreasonable, reason in the true sense is born. (34)

Schelling concludes that, “only in personality is there life, and all personality rests on a dark foundation which must, to be sure, also be the foundation of knowledge” (95).

This is not to say Schelling was oblivious of the formative influences of culture and society—which we pay absolute homage to today—he accepted that “the individual cannot secure its autonomy without recognising that such autonomy must always also be socially mediated—be authorised or conditioned at higher, wider or anterior levels than the merely individual” (Ffytche 167). Freedom is preserved in the decision of the soul in divine eternity, rather than in temporality, where it is merely in the process of realising that which is already decided fundamentally. Temporal freedom is thus *covert*, “something that organisms conceal within themselves—either as an enigmatic feature of their self-development, or as a mysterious and precious quality, hidden beyond the bounds of their conscious I” (Ffytche 168). The experiential conflict between contingency and free will—which can beget either/or the illusion of i/mortality—is thus resolved, one way or the other, in the conviction of temporal, corporeal existence, or spirituality, as all there is. The *conviction* of freedom can only consist in eternally transcendent being which is the paradoxical essence of the finite subject (*The Indivisible Remainder* 20).

Yet Žižek, as late Hegel, is far more radical than late-Schelling in dispensing with the metaphysics of freedom altogether. Žižek’s Marxist imprimatur is to do just that, to exorcise the subject’s haunted consciousness as the psychic complement to bourgeois ideology. To that end, *The Indivisible Remainder* amounts to a wholesale revision, indeed inversion, not merely of Schelling but of the idealistic tradition,

which reading is reiterated throughout Žižek's works. Even politically, Žižek attempts to radicalise middle-Schelling as disenchanted with the institutional State. Having seen the State initially as guarantor for "the only possible framework of human freedom", Žižek cites Habermas for corroboration that the reactionary late-Schelling remained disenchanted with "the *alienated* character of the State", seeing it, however, as necessarily reflecting the fallen nature of humanity, rather than as in need of reform (*The Indivisible Remainder* 40-41). Yet there was arguably little prospect that late-Schelling might have quitted idealism for materialism, without quitting his whole system. Schelling did not naively cling to God as the ground of Being, or to the primordial decision of the free entity, rather he realised that, "to make the absolute truly nothing, at the same time as abandoning the Enlightenment structure of reason, or the apodicticity of Fichte's transcendental I, would threaten the destruction of the system altogether, the collapse of identity per se, and with it the security of all self-governing individuals" (Ffytche 155-16).

Neither was Schelling necessarily being politically squeamish; he was constrained, rather, by the logic of his conviction of the truth of human freedom. For Schelling (or late-Hegel) to transition to materialism, the whole enterprise since Kant must be discredited and freedom and reason ultimately denied. Schelling was not equivocating between absolute idealism and its obverse, absolute materialism; rather, each was vital and complementary: "This is one point that Schelling makes absolutely explicit in the Stuttgart Seminars: 'by virtue of occupying the middle-ground between the non-being of nature and the absolute Being = God, man is *free* from both" (qtd. in Ffytche 116). Yet Žižek theorises the resolution of these poles in absolute materialism, psychologically mediated,, preserving only the *effect* of freedom, its *true illusion* as it were, in "Schelling's *Grundoperation*—the 'vanishing

mediation' between these two poles" (*The Indivisible Remainder* 92). For Žižek this vanishing mediation is the bare *decision* itself—which lingers traumatically in the unconscious—rather than any quotient of *being* consigned to memorial oblivion. That is, the subject is conflicted in the act of repression, which is the necessary adjunct of symbolic sophistication; repressing the primordial drives in favour of order and relentless (symbolic) discrimination.

3.6 Materialism as Idealism

In *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, citing the wisdom of Zeno, Žižek asserts that “appeals to immediate reality do not count in philosophy” (165); what is given is already mediated and the philosopher finds recourse in abstraction. But to reason abstractly is to put implicit faith in that which reasons (the cogito), that is in some a priori capacity of differentiation within the reality being interrogated. This is the root of German idealism and Žižek’s genius consists partly in his ability to construct a lucid narrative, from Cartesian subjectivity all the way to the Lacanian rehabilitation of Schelling-Hegel and the modern pathology of consciousness. It is ironical that Žižek’s narrative flies in the face of his central contention, which is that the dialectic of philosophical accounts of consciousness is of course punctuated by rupture rather than resolution. Picking up at the point where Fichte attempts to reconcile Kant’s noumenal-phenomenal division, which is based on the deduction that there must be something in human reason that has purchase on the thing in-itself, Fichte’s working-solution, Žižek explains, lies in differentiating work and pleasure (*Less Than Nothing* 172). We might anticipate Marxian-praxis at this point—derived from Fichte—in the imputation that reason is primordially grounded in a natural context in which the subject-object relationship is organic rather than cerebrally-abstracted (though as we shall see, Žižek differs from

this). In this light philosophy can be seen as so much frivolity—occupied with making philosophical conundrums based on its own reification of thought. This perfectly coincides with Marx’s early and contradistinctive nomination of “species being” and the Marxian tradition whereby overt self-consciousness is all but dismissed as:

the kind of consciousness—and this is characteristic of the philosophical consciousness—for which conceptual thinking is the real human being, and for which the conceptual world as such is thus the only reality, the movement of the categories appears as the real act of production—which only, unfortunately, receives a jolt from the outside—whose product is the world; and—but this is again a tautology—this is correct in so far as the concrete totality is a totality of thoughts, concrete in thought, in fact a product of thinking and comprehending; but not in any way a product of the concept which thinks and generates itself outside or above observation and conception; a product, rather, of the working-up of observation and conception into concepts. The totality as it appears in the head, as a totality of thoughts, is a product of a thinking head, which appropriates the world in the only way it can, a way different from the artistic, religious, practical and mental appropriation of this world. The real subject retains its autonomous existence outside the head just as before; namely as long as the head’s conduct is merely speculative, merely theoretical. Hence, in the theoretical method, too, the subject, society, must always be kept in mind as the *presupposition*. (Marx “Grundrisse” my emphasis).

Marx here somewhat anticipates Žižek's angle in the present volume, which is to validate idealism as the very paradigm of emancipation—that is to validate idealism in order to transcend it. Thus Žižek concedes that “although Fichte repeatedly emphasizes how the subject is not a thing but a self-relating process ... he conceives of the subject in an all-too-positive way when he claims that the absolute I (subject) is all reality” (*Less Than Nothing* 174).

Fichte thus fails to leave the realm of philosophy behind, but valorises idealism as prior to the prevailing conditioning of the I's conceptual universe, whereas the transcendental “I” amounts to the neglect, indeed negation, of the real, grounded, alienated subject. Fichte's idealistic “I” is the reified projection of philosophical thought, which Žižek takes it upon himself to resolve; to resurrect idealism in order to resolve it. Žižek is thus critical of Frederic Jameson for being inclined himself to nomological closure, or in Žižek's words, “the Kantian tendency of (some of) today's brain scientists to insist on the a priori structural unknowability of consciousness” (*Less Than Nothing* 270). Jameson threatens to undermine Žižek's whole project by implicitly denying the primacy of the unconscious: “what Hegel's contemporaries called the not-I is that which consciousness is conscious of as its other, and not any absence of consciousness itself, something inconceivable except as a kind of science fictional picture thinking” (qtd. in *Less Than Nothing* 270). The implication is that consciousness must remain somehow mystically inexplicable, when for the materialist it can be nothing of the kind and must be reducible to (epi)phenomenal causes. For the Marxist materialist, consciousness must be not merely reducible to the organic, but also to the ideological, though for Jameson the latter suffices and consciousness per se is an enigma. Žižek is being more Marxist than Marx in wanting to reduce the phenomenon of consciousness to its

intrapersonal relations with the unconscious. For conventional Marxists, consciousness is the cultivar of capitalism—cultivated and brought to prominence as the pseudo-real subject. Ideology rather than consciousness has, since Marx, been shrouded in ambiguity: “The real subject retains its autonomous existence outside the head just as before; namely as long as the head’s conduct is merely speculative, merely theoretical.” Marx has no problem with abstract thinking, so long as it isn’t reified.

In fine, Žižek reprises unreconstructed German idealism precisely in order to rehabilitate it, to “disembody” it, to dissolve the aggregate, the concrete. He thus criticises Jameson for the heresy of reifying Hegel’s “Understanding (*Verstand*) as a kind of spontaneous ideology of our daily lives, ... a permanent, trans-historical fixture of our everyday reality” (*Less Than Nothing* 269), consigning the a priori explicability of consciousness to solipsistic-oblivion, which Žižek translates into Fichtean terms such that, “an element can be properly grasped only through its difference to its opposite, and since the I’s opposite—the not-I—is inaccessible to the I as it is in-itself, the consequence of the unknowability of the not-I as it is in-itself, independently of the I, is *the unknowability of consciousness (the-I) itself* as it is In-itself” (*Less Than Nothing* 270). I would object here that while Žižek is content to consign the I to a kind of unilateral isolation, we have no grounds, necessarily, to associate the “I,” or the “not-I,” with consciousness. That in fact is the question, and not the presupposition: are the cultured-subject, and consciousness, the same property? Žižek’s formula, as a refutation, presupposes that the I must be grounded in an “in-itself”—must have its corporeal equivalent, however alienated from it. The I as social-construct does have its bodily and cultural equivalent, but according to Žižek’s reading, Jameson seems to discriminate between cultural-construct and

consciousness *per se*. Jameson seems to acknowledge the *property* of consciousness, whereas Žižek's version of the dialectic has no need of it, has refined it away. It has to be appreciated that the Hegelian "Understanding" Jameson uses is an explicit category (moment) of being that *is* roughly equivalent to "cultural construct."

What Žižek finds offensive is, primarily, the implicit reification in Jameson's "*the unknowability of consciousness*"—as if consciousness was something more than Marx's "thinking head," above and beyond the presupposed discursive-reasoning it deploys—and pedantically, his conflation of the Hegelian concepts of Understanding and reason with dialectics. Žižek points out that Hegelian Reason transcends the kind of dyadic logic Understanding proceeds by. Hegel's whole system is inferential, drawn from the *mysterious* reality that reason has purchase in the universe, and predicated on the notion, contra Kant, that the thing in-itself must therefore be inferentially available to reason. For Hegel, Understanding is but one moment beyond perception in its credulously subjective formulations. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel takes us from the limitations of sensual perception and Understanding to Reason, but they are all the same property of *spirit*, each merely being its own literally *self*-imposed delimitation. Understanding pegged to sensual perception (empiricism) is ridiculed by Hegel as "'sound common sense' which takes itself to be a solid, realistic consciousness [whereas it] is, in the perceptual process, only the play of these *abstractions*; generally, it is always at its poorest where it fancies itself to be the richest" (77).

For Hegel, perception is at its poorest and self-satisfied-richest when vacillating between *essentials*, such as Schelling's "I and not-I." The Understanding's pinnacle, such as it is, is attained upon perceiving an "inner world," but only in relation to its own perceived inner world, such that confusion reigns;

“Understanding experiences only *itself*. . . . posits itself as an inner being containing different moments, but for which equally these moments are immediately *not* different—*self-consciousness*” (Hegel 102-3). Reason is another moment beyond blind empiricism and beyond narcissistic Understanding; it is liberated thought, thought liberated from its *self*-imposed constraints;

Reason is the certainty of consciousness that is all reality . . . otherness as an *intrinsic being* vanishes . . . this Reason which comes immediately on the scene appears only as the *certainty* of that truth. Thus it merely *asserts* that it is all reality, but does not itself comprehend this; for it is along that forgotten path that this immediately expressed assertion is comprehended. (Hegel 140-41)

That “forgotten path”—a central preoccupation of *Less Than Nothing*—is the dialectic via which Reason has come to establish its transcendental being, and no longer the laborious process by which it proceeds “in the dark,” so to speak. With his usual delight for paradox, Žižek asserts: “The greatest power of our mind is not to see more, but to see *less* in a correct way, to reduce reality to its notional determinations—only such ‘blindness’ generates the insight into what things really are” (*Less Than Nothing* 279). Žižek appears to be alluding to the de-cluttered, or “bracketed” mind as the seat of this “power,” but I will contend that Žižek argues himself into a corner here, as he cannot in that case account for the *property* of consciousness, nor the fidelity of reason.

Žižek eschews any *real* distinction between Understanding and consciousness, between a reified ontology and epistemology, thus “Reason is Understanding itself in its productive aspect” (*Less Than Nothing* 277). This is more complicated than it

sounds. In order to counter an objection such that consciousness ought then to be explicable by reason, ergo *subject to deconstruction*—which Derrida insisted it is not—Žižek instances the logic of hermeneutical horizons from which, in order to reason, we must “posit presuppositions”—take account of, attempt to compensate for, subjective/social conditioning. To “posit a presupposition” is to acknowledge that thought is subject to social conditioning, hence Marx’s stricture, cited above, “in the theoretical method . . . the subject, society, must always be kept in mind as the presupposition.” Žižek adds to this the scrupulous observation that the posited presupposition is itself always a *retroactive* obliteration of a former set of conceptual grounds and not base reality from which we may pontificate. This is a vital tension between Žižek and Marx, and indeed between Žižek and Hegel. Like Hegel, Marx validates conceptual thought’s capacity to both heuristically transcend the body, and to speculate beyond its conditioned horizon, merely by positing the presupposition. Žižek’s retroactivity denies this and speculation remains conditioned within a potentially infinite regress of a posteriori horizons, even implying a pseudo-teleological progression, not dissimilar to and possessed of about as much self-determination as Williams’s accumulating Culturalism. Žižek argues rather that there is no narrative progression between horizons and that, rather, each is isolated within its retroactively posited presupposition, separated yet conditioned irrevocably by the negation of the old order.

More importantly, for our purposes here, Žižek argues that this also applies to possessive-subjective “Understanding,” whose primordial *home* is inaccessible, placing the fundamental advent of reified consciousness at an infinite degree of separation from any present Understanding (*Less Than Nothing* 271-75). Žižek combines this reasoning with the observation that neither can Hegelian dialectics be

conceived in explicably narratological terms; dialectical thought is based on resolution via negation and its negation—cancelling-out—and so quotidian Understanding is conceptually as well as temporally out of joint, so that reductive narrative accounts of the development of speculative thought are problematic at best, each negation putting present Understanding at a remove, each sublation sterilising and tilling the field. Thought, consolidated in the present, a quasi-entity, can only ever be superficially apprehended. *Consciousness*, for Žižek the “I” which has no substance apart from its dialectical re-emergence, is inevitably isolated within its cultural dispensation, rudely grounded within its symbolic horizon and disconnected from its phenomenal origins—the Real which, however, still exerts its power of attraction. Consciousness is thus not so much an enigma as a remainder conjoined with a contemporary illusion, the non-product of “vanishing mediators” within the “universe of *logos*”—favourite Žižekian phrases.

All this seems plausible enough in a certain materialist light, wherein we are disposed, indeed obliged, to dismiss the enigma of consciousness in psychoanalytic terms, but the least we can say, to quote Žižek against himself, is this is “profoundly non-Hegelian.” The “certain materialist light” I allude to could not be more conventional and consists in the very reductive materialism we interrogated above, deriving from Descartes. Descartes rationalised the world into three dimensions of existence, occupied respectively by body (*res extensa*), mind (*res cogitans*) and God. Contra Descartes, Kant went from three dimensions to two, phenomena and noumena, while Hegel went from two to one—absolute spirit, and its complement, “absolute knowing”—Hegel’s formula whereby thought and being are resolved as one. Despite what Kenneth Westphal calls “Kant’s anti-Cartesian revolt,” Descartes’ cogito continues to be patronised and science and much of modern philosophy, since

then, remains implicitly committed to this metaphysic, wherein the mind is taken for granted as operating objectively apropos phenomena.

Only Hume, Kant, and Hegel recognised that the mind does not, logically cannot, apprehend phenomena objectively or unmediated; so-called “representationalist accounts of sensory ideas tended to assume that, if a sensory idea was caused by an object, that idea also represented (some feature of) that object” (Westphal “Kant's Revolt” 228-29). There is no way of knowing and every reason to doubt that a direct correlation obtains between the object and the associated idea. And this is not merely Humean scepticism (empirically-remedial)—or an anachronous post-structural equivocation—it consists also in limited, selective and qualitative register, enhancement, the mind’s propensity for composition, etc. More importantly yet, “the mere fact that objects cause our sensations or sensory ideas does not explain how our sensations or sensory ideas can or do represent their alleged objects,” bearing in mind that “bits” of sensory data do not assemble themselves as the object represented (Westphal “Kant's Revolt” 228-29). It is meet to remember too that our sensory ideas are not dependent on object causes—which was Descarte’s central insight in his first Meditation, conflating spontaneous dream-scapes and object reality (Dunham, Grant and Watson 37). Kant’s reprise of Hume consisted also in that the empiricist infatuation with cause itself presupposed certain a priori capacities of mind, namely Kant’s “categories,” and that this categorical capacity was also necessarily *limited* to spatio-temporal phenomena (Westphal “Kant's Revolt” 232-33), imposing the potential blindness, apropos phenomena, that logically conjured its essence—Kant’s distinction between phenomena and noumena, including the sublime. Kant inferred the mind as *dedicated* to phenomenal reality such that rational spontaneity was the only explanation, since whatever

theoretical or practical application we undertake presupposes an already given capacity to measure and discriminate. For Kant, freedom consists in exercising this capacity; complementary-wise, we are at liberty to abuse it (which Hume saw as inevitable). “We think and act rationally only insofar as we judge the merits of whatever case is before us” (Westphal “Kant's Revolt” 243). Herein is Hegel’s agreement with Kant, and his consecration of *achieved* Reason, delivered both of Hume’s passions and of the provincialism of the conventional Understanding.

Žižek’s reading of Hegel is somewhat different. Citing Hegel’s terminological distinctions, depending on the context: “the subject as elevated above the objective, as the principle of life and mediation of objects, and the subject as designating something ‘merely subjective’”; Žižek goes on: “the point is ... that the ‘lower’ aspect is the key constituent of the ‘higher’: one overcomes the ‘merely subjective’ precisely by fully endorsing it” (*Less Than Nothing* 280). The first is empowered, unencumbered and tantamount to divine omnipresence, the second limited to its self-conscious isolationism and doubts. This would certainly seem to be Hegel’s position; that Reason is liberated merely through casting timorous scepticism aside—the necessary *via media* which speculative reason boldly transcends. This is all very well for Hegel; but surely the real point is that Žižek is not endorsing Hegel’s idealism—epistemological monism—theology, or mysticism. Žižek is celebrating with Hegel the power of speculative thought—indeed his own *theoria*—but whence does it arise? It is a perennial remainder. Hegel’s philosophy was conditioned by Kant’s *Critique*, and his determination to resolve Kant’s logical divide between phenomena and noumena, but his solution is vested in God as “true infinity,” thus reciprocally-comprehending finitude, and has its roots in mysticism (Magee “Hegel and Mysticism” 264-5). This is not to say that Hegel’s thought is reducible to mysticism

(with all its pejorative connotations), though Glenn Magee seems to favour that conclusion, but to appraise ourselves of the “‘mystical’ element in Hegel’s thought,” which Magee asserts should not be dismissed in favour of “mainstream German philosophy, specifically Kant, Fichte, and Schelling” (“Hegel and Mysticism” 279). This is precisely what Žižek does do; rather than read Hegel through Meister Eckhart and Jakob Bohme, primary influences, he reads (launders?) Hegel exclusively within German idealism—and ultimately through Lacan. For what it is worth, Robert Wallace defends both notional mysticism and Hegel: “The mystical traditions seem to do precisely what Hegel advises us to do, which is to retain the notion that divinity transcends the finite, while not interpreting this transcendence in the traditional [Kantian] way, as a polar opposition” (106). This sharpens the point that Žižek’s Lacanian resort to the triadic play-of-signification within consciousness cannot account for the power of reason to transcend the finite, indeed Žižek implicitly denies this.

This was the central philosophical question of German idealism, provoked by the empiricists and taken up by Kant, Hegel, et al. If we are to dismiss idealism, how do we account for the apparently transcendental power of thought? Žižek makes the point for us admirably in stating his position that, “the Hegel of the absolute Subject swallowing up all objective content is a retroactive fantasy of his critics, starting with late Schelling’s turn to ‘positive philosophy.’” Indeed; for Hegel it is more a case of the absolute subject’s being consumed within the whole, so that all objective content is available for consideration. However Žižek continues:

This ‘positivity’ is found also in the young Marx, in the guise of the Aristotelian reassertion of positive forces or potentials of Being pre-existing logical or notional mediation. One should thus question the very image of

Hegel-the-absolute-idealist presupposed by his critics—they attack the wrong Hegel, a straw man. What are they unable to think? (*Less Than Nothing* 261)

Žižek’s, “What are they unable to think?” is not a rhetorical insult but nicely makes the point that thought wasn’t expunged post-Hegel, was never resolved in materialist terms, post-Marx, and still has to be foundationally accounted for. Žižek posits the question, earlier on, of his own perversity in “advocating a Hegelian ‘Absolute Idealism’” *after* the “post-Hegelian anti-philosophical break (Schopenhauer-Kierkegaard-Marx)” (*Less Than Nothing* 194). He answers the question in typically cryptic terms whose master code, in this volume (indeed throughout Žižek’s work), is the “posited presupposition.” That is he denies a real break took place, or a truly materialist anti-philosophy took over; a “re-assertion of Hegel’s speculative thought is thus not what it may appear to be—a denial of the post-Hegelian break—but rather a bringing forth of that very dimension whose denial sustains the post-Hegelian break itself” (*Less Than Nothing* 194). In other words no true break occurred and no post-Hegelian materialism obtains. *Philosophies* of materialism belie the stark reality that their practical side remains constituted in idealism, an idealism that has arguably never been so pervasive, albeit unacknowledged. Materialists, of whatever persuasion, are in self-denial; materialism is mere ideology, a “retroactive fantasy” that cannot account for our idealistic reality.

Not that Hegel relied on idealism in the absolutist way he is often represented to have done. The achievement of Reason is not unassisted and its dialectical progression from Understanding is not some idealistic realisation, or inevitable. As with Marcuse’s conception of essence as *potential* so with Hegel, who inspired him; yet Hegel’s Reason is as much a finite *accomplishment* as an infinite and immanent propensity. Reason is not simply emergent, but cultivated and educated. Indeed for

Hegel, consciousness attaining to reason, absolute spirit, is a long and arduous process (*bildung*), nor does this propaedeutic belong merely to individual consciousness, but to the diverse human history of the ascent of consciousness devoted to one rubric or another (Lindberg 261). Mysticism can thus be posited as another such mode. Hegel himself did not acquire his reasoning powers oracle-like, from the ethers, but painstakingly. “The Baconian applied science of this world is the solid foundation upon which Hegel’s ladder of *spiritual* experience rests” (Henry Harris qtd. in Westphal “Philosophizing About Nature” 283). And though Hegel was influenced by the mystical tradition, he triangulated his own conclusions in a rigorously scientific manner akin to that ideally practiced today, comprising “probative,” “systemic” and “explicative” components, such that “In brief, Hegel’s philosophy of nature is dedicated to showing that, when properly explicated, the basic concepts involved in an adequate scientific theory are mutually contrastive and interdefined in such a way that no genuine further questions about explanatory causes remain” (Westphal “Philosophizing About Nature” 286). Žižek rightly pours scorn on the notion of “Hegel the absolute idealist”—as if reason consisted in nothing more than some Romantic affinity with the universe. Yet Žižek’s own idealism is just as (un)Romantic as the parody of Hegel he condemns, consisting in nothing more than an acceptance of, and thus an affinity with, the unconscious psychic-symbolic constituents of our conscious lives.

How then does he account for the inherent *capacity* for transcendence inferred by Kant and Hegel? How is Žižek’s pathological puppet of desire to compete with Hegel’s salubrious potential of consciousness, or more importantly for our purposes here, compete with what Kenneth Westphal calls Kant’s “genuinely transcendental proof of mental content externalism”? (“Kant’s Revolt” 240). Quoting from the

Phenomenology, Žižek seems to celebrate, with Hegel, the capacity of the “subject” to transcend itself in thought, “the most astonishing and greatest of all powers, or rather the absolute power” (Hegel qtd. in Zizek *Less Than Nothing* 276), yet rather than elaborate on the miracle itself, or take the question to task, he immediately attends to the self-sufficient mechanism of its genesis: “all we have to do to get from Understanding to Reason is to *subtract* from Understanding its constitutive illusion” (*Less Than Nothing* 277). But is this all—as I’ve argued, it certainly wasn’t for Hegel—and how could that be? A clean slate does not beget Reason. Disabusing oneself of one’s illusions does not *effect* the “power” of consciousness to transcend itself in thought; that power if it exists, as Kant and Hegel insist it does, is latent and potential, *achievable* once the clutter is cleared away and not merely spontaneous. Reason must be educated. *Conditioned*, yes, within the linguistic-symbolic order, but not *galvanised* by it, automatically, as it were. As Neil Manson observes, “A subject’s conscious mental states are those that she is conscious of, so there must be higher order states via which she is conscious of her first-order states” (290). Second order mental states thus amount to provisional consciousness, or a suspension of disbelief on the part of first order states. Žižek inverts this logic, consigning Manson’s “higher order states” to the unconscious. But whence then derives the putative power of unencumbered reason to exceed itself and circumscribe the whole? Here at least we have the point of departure between Žižek and German idealism, for according to Paul Franks “All the German idealists, from Reinhold to Hegel,” accepted Spinoza’s conception of reality, which Franks calls “a Holistic Monist system. Such a system is (a) *holistic*, insofar as every finite element is what it is only in virtue of its role within the whole. And (b) it is *monistic* in the sense that the

whole is constituted as a whole—as opposed to a mere aggregate—by a single immanent, absolute, and infinite first principle” (65).

Žižek rejects this conception, in itself and of Hegel, revising it in favour of his own non-metaphysical version, vested in the universe of *logos*, or psychologism, rather than absolute spirit, thus buying into the debate among Hegel scholars as to his ongoing reconstruction as a naturalist philosopher. This debate is far too complex and advanced to analyse here, except to say that the contenders, respectively, for metaphysical and non-metaphysical readings of Hegel have been argued by a third cohort, promulgating “The *revised* metaphysical view of Hegel,” to be “guilty of projecting onto Hegel views they would like to find there rather than what is actually to be found” (Redding). This is what Žižek undertakes, supplementing the incumbent lack of an explanation for the transcendent power of thought, with a quasi-holistic conception of symbolic reality shot-through by the Real; Lacan’s triadic transfixion of the decentred-subject within a kind of (post)structuralist monism. Žižek denies the subject actual transcendence in favour of a recognition of incoherent unconscious motivation and the psychoanalytic cure—freedom from illusion and ideology. In short, Žižek replaces Hegel’s *actual* holistic monism with the potentially infinite prolixity, yet facile textual complexity of the symbolic order.

Thus in his influential “Cartesian Subject Versus Cartesian Theatre,” Žižek approvingly quotes Daniel Dennett to the effect that “our symbolic universe is a pandemonium of competing forces (words, phrases, syntactic figures ...)” (“Cartesian Theatre” 253). Dennett dismisses qualitative consciousness by reductively dismissing the supposition of consciousness itself as *symbolic fiction*, since all physical registration of data is mere discordant matter—Hume’s bundles—to be made sense of, so that “immediacy itself is mediated, it is a product of the

mediation of traces” (Žižek “Cartesian Theatre” 249-50). Žižek endorses Dennett’s “pandemonium” as linguistic, where words “want to be spoken,” and here Richard Dawkins’s apolitical conception of the “meme” is also pressed into service. Dawkins’s memes are akin to Jameson’s politically-energised “ideologemes,” but politically-neutral evolutionarily-random mutations, as opposed to Jameson’s “narrative paradigm” and his positively charged “smallest intelligible unit of the essentially antagonistic collective discourses of social classes” (62, 73). Either way this is a structuralist conception whereby language is the animating force in a volatile psychic mix; itself a vacuous “eye of the storm” composed of pre-linguistic *jouissance*, imaginary misrecognition (Althusser’s interpellation) symbolic internment, and the uncannily introjected Real as lack: “The Kantian self-consciousness is a purely logical function that signals only that every content of my consciousness is already minimally mediated/reflected. ... The subject to be attributed to the Freudian unconscious is precisely this empty point of self-relating. ... [Thus] *self-consciousness itself is radically unconscious*” (Žižek “Cartesian Theatre” 265-66).

Where Žižek differs with Dennett is in terms of the latter’s pure reductiveness, in that unlike Dennett Žižek grants the illusion of self-consciousness provisional, non-transcendental-freedom. Our freedom consists in the very negative we experience in our remoteness from the impossible thing (the “not-I,” essence, God) in itself. This was Kant’s complementary position, whereby our remoteness from the noumenal domain is the very condition of free will. The noumenal is vested in God, and were we privileged with direct access ourselves, all our actions in the world would be subject to divine fiat, conditioned by he who must be obeyed, even in the breach. Were freedom vested for humanity in transparent relations with the *ground*

of being, “most actions conforming to the law would be done from fear, few would be done from hope, none from duty” (Kant qtd. in Žižek “Cartesian Theatre” 270), and we would thus, Žižek claims after Kant, be reduced to mere “thinking machines” (“Cartesian Theatre” 270). This is precisely the absurdist predicament of Satan and his cohort in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*; they ostensibly possess radical-freedom, which they obstinately, indeed irrationally exercise, since their reign, in exile, is necessarily futile; logically, given God’s omniscience, the insurrection was pre-empted, indeed preordained. Just so Satan, incorrigible within an authoritarian order, never achieves a plausible position or genuine *subjective freedom*—which can ultimately only inhere in a state of nihilism. Thus Stanley Fish treats the whole elaborate plot of *Paradise Lost* as a rhetorical mode of authorial harassment. Satan never transcends the page to the extent, perhaps, that Shakespeare’s Shylock, Iago, and Falstaff do—though even these are diminished by the inevitable convention of being brought to account, by their very perversity—freedom. Despite Harold Bloom’s enthusiasm for Milton’s Satan, and Shakespeare’s great characters “made out of words” (47), their *interiority* and *freedom* is pure representation. Bloom grants Milton’s Satan “more of a Shakespearean growing inner self” than he does his Adam and Eve (170), but the reverse is arguably the case. *Paradise Lost* never manages to shuffle-off its didactic burden, or the hypothetical flavour of the action and conditions of possibility. But this is because Milton’s epic, and its protagonists’ (Adam and Eve) *humanist-freedom*, is *allegorical* rather than rhetorical, and so their subjective freedom is unrepresentatively-mute, rather than Satanically-scripted.

Rather than Kant’s noumenal realm, Žižek posits the freedom of consciousness as vested in the undiscovered country of the unconscious, which performs the same function as Kant’s inaccessible in-itself. Žižek’s subject, however, her freedom

attributable to the unconscious Real, “is precisely this empty point of self-relating, not a subject bursting with a wealth of libidinal forces and fantasies” (Žižek “Cartesian Theatre” 265). The unconscious is thus strictly empty and the illusion of self-consciousness is maintained by this subjective vortex of conflicting psychic/linguistic pseudo-forces. Yet Žižek equivocates: “what characterises human subjectivity proper is ... the fact that fantasy, at its most elementary, becomes inaccessible to the subject” (“Cartesian Theatre” 268). This is surely true, that fantasy often comes unbidden and thus provides compelling subjective evidence for the common conviction of a conflicted *inner-life*, and a respective ethical order (presided over by God). Žižek’s materialist alternative is a recognition of the subject as torn by the constraints and ethical demands of the symbolic order and its intermediary (the superego), the yearnings of *jouissance* (Freud’s death drive cum Real), and by the unrefined demands of our animal-being made the puppet of desire. A heady mix, it must be confessed, that amounts to a compelling explanation for our illusions of Selfhood—which even Hegel, and the Buddha for that matter, saw as the final barrier to Reason/Enlightenment. Žižek’s complementary enlightenment consists in the recognition and acceptance of subjectivity as this phantom-like amalgam of non-*essential* influence. Žižek’s cathartic prescription does not disclose the power of mind, indeed for Žižek such power does not exist independently of the big Other and its discursive universe, but because of it. The Symbolic order engenders and proscribes the ultimate horizon of thought—the facilitating paradox being the infinite possibility for linguistic permutation. We are nevertheless “free because there is a lack in the Other, because the substance out of which we grew and on which we rely is inconsistent, barred, failed, marked by an impossibility” (Žižek *Less Than Nothing* 263). The *cogito* (*essential* consciousness) is here designated

“impossible,” while the very medium of its phantom-emergence, the already given linguistic-mapping of its reality, is partial, inconsistent, etcetera. Žižek hereby recuperates Hegel for materialism and ostensibly for his Marxist agenda.

3.7 Transcendental Materialism

The phrase “transcendental materialism” belongs to Adrian Johnston who, sympathising with readers who are “susceptible to being dazzled to the point of giddy, overstimulated incomprehension” (xiv), has invaluabley stripped Žižek’s theoretical edifice down to its essentials and synthesised his vast output into one succinct volume: *Žižek’s Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity* (2008). For Johnston, ontology is more than a merely historicised domain; ontology seems to be a spontaneously creative condition of possibility which transcends conventionally reductive materialism (269). I develop this term in this section in a manner that is not entirely consonant with Johnston’s use, but with a suitably consistent aim of extracting from Žižek’s ontology the pathway to move the problems of materialism forward in a constructive fashion, which shall guide our steps in the final chapter. Despite Raymond Williams’s tendency to dismiss psychoanalysis, he might have approved of Žižek’s account, since what takes his ontology beyond idealism and psychologism is the fact that it is grounded in the *body* as the progenitor of all else. The subtitle of Žižek’s *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* is partly an allusion to just this, and to dialectics as functionally part of human biology and its blind adaptive strategy. Žižek partially revives Engels’s infamous Dialectical Materialism to explain the perennial emergence and development of subjectivity as it arises literally in the artificial gap

between the subjective and the objective, which exists as a kind of buffer between the overwhelming myriad of sensual register and the discriminating, consciously agile mind. What I have called the “Marxist metaphysic” becomes the vital interface, colonised by culture, between animal being and its perceptual universe.

This *parallax* is the essential perspective Žižek seeks to negotiate, as expounded in his self-declared “magnum opus,” *The Parallax View* (2006). Žižek’s “metaphysical claim” is that an irreducible gap obtains “between the ontological and the ontic” (“Forward” xi). That is between *Da* and *Sein*, Heidegger’s *being* and *Being*. In Heideggerian terms a veiled criticism is offered in “metaphysical claim,” since Žižek philosophises in the same metaphysical tradition Heidegger originally sought to abolish, wherein *Being* as the ground of *being* is forgotten and *object-relations* in the epoch of subjectivity and *techne*—empiricism, technology, manufacture, nihilism—retroactively abolish the pre-Socratic experience of immersion in *Being*. The whole history of metaphysics is constituted in the spontaneous alienation of *being* and *Being*, in *being* for-itself, as opposed to in-itself: “Metaphysics is the basic occurrence of Dasein” (Heidegger qtd. in Krell 109). After initially claiming that the *Being* of *being* was experientially recoverable, hypocritically instanced “in his political commitment to National Socialism and ... pathetic attachment to life in the provinces ... , claiming to find an instantiation of the ontological in the ontic” (Critchley “Forward” xi), in his later work Heidegger saw *being* as more in the nature of *extruded* by *Being* and left bereft and irreconcilable, and thus Žižek’s Lacanian-inspired irreducible gap within ontology agrees on the face of it with Heidegger. The difference being of course that Žižek’s ontology is material/linguistic, and arguably structural, since *Being* is the void and the ontic, the physical harnessed by desire, is the primordial burden.

This needs qualification in light of Žižek's engagement with neuroscience, and particularly the phenomenon of neuroplasticity. In *The Parallax View* Žižek cites what looks like a breakthrough apropos the Mind-Body problem, the fact that the brain, like the rest of the body responds to work:

our brain is a historical product, it develops in interaction with the environment, through human praxis. This development is not prescribed in advance by our genes; what genes do is precisely the opposite: they account for the structure of the brain, which is open to plasticity, so that some parts of it develop more if they are used more; if they are disabled, other parts can take over their function, and so on. What we are dealing with here is not only with differentiation but trans-differentiation, 'changing the difference.' Learning and memory play a key role in reinforcing or suspending synaptic links: neurons 'remember' their stimulations, actively structure them, and so forth. Vulgar materialism and idealism join forces against this plasticity: idealism to prove that the brain is just matter, a relay machine which has to be animated from the outside, not the site of activity; materialism to sustain its mechanical determinist vision of reality. This explains the strange belief which, although it is now empirically refuted, persists: the brain, in contrast to other organs, does not grow and regenerate; its cells just gradually die out. This view ignores the fact that our mind does not only reflect the world, it is part of a transformative exchange with the world, it "reflects" the possibilities of transformation, it sees the world through possible "projects," and this transformation is also self-transformation, this exchange also modifies the brain as the biological "site" of the mind. (*Parallax* 209)

Put crudely, Žižek's ontology treats the brain not as ontologically symbiotic with mind—mediated by language—but in *dynamic tension* with it, or rather with experience. While the rest of the body is mediated and ministered by the primitive mind/brain, the operating-software in effect, the modern or linguistic mind/brain or “proto-self” develops eccentrically, as it were, in accordance with its cultural experience, though always with the potential for transcendence.

As a Marxist it is important for Žižek to make this distinction between a purely passive and impressionable mind, and one possessing the possibility of radical freedom. Žižek is indebted to Catherine Malabou and what he calls her “Hegelian reading of the brain sciences,” and he endorses her concern that this adaptive capacity of the mind-brain might logically predispose it toward “the spirit of capitalism”; after all, it is “not only that our brain is socialised, society itself is naturalised in the brain” (*Parallax* 209). Later, in *Less Than Nothing*, Žižek criticises Malabou for her binary thinking on the mind-brain relationship, devolving into a kind of “bad infinity” in which consciousness is moulded as a “unity of opposites”; environmental influence and imprint (*Less Than Nothing* 105).

Consciousness (Reason) is arguably not the dupe of the court, or of the State, and Žižek favours a properly dialectical solution to the dilemma, whereby consciousness is not mere socialisation, a synthesis of its biological interaction with the world, but its sublation (*Aufheben*). *Aufheben* is Hegel's dual concept of completion and renewal, meaning both “to cancel or abolish, and to preserve or retain” (Magee *The Hegel Dictionary* 238). We have rehearsed the point throughout this chapter; contemporary consciousness is free by virtue of its *perceived* freedom, of transcending its formative stages, its earlier *incarnations*, while retaining them in

the background, thus *retroactively positing the presupposition*. Transcendental consciousness, Hegel's Reason, is thus not the passive recipient of an ontological burden, but an initiator and protagonist in its own behalf, proceeding decisively in accordance with its retroactively remodelled reality. Thanks to the dynamic interaction of materiality and mentality, consciousness of reality is a creative act, a kind of *autopoiesis*, rather than realism *per se*. Žižek here draws on the theorising of John Taylor, whose "main thesis ... is that consciousness is created through the relations between brain states. What is more, is this process is a continuing and adaptive one, so that consciousness emerges from past brain activity" (viii).

The argument is that apparently-real-time consciousness is in fact a dynamic synthesis of past and present—we might like to compare Williams's notion of the hegemonic present as both emergent and residual—wherein rather than the mind confronting reality anew, it construes incoming data in accordance with past experience. "Consciousness emerges as a result of a unique short circuit between present (input) and past (working memory) ... in Hegelese, as if it were to *posit retroactively its own presuppositions*; and it is this short circuit which generates the effect of 'immediacy' proper to qualia" (Žižek *Parallax* 212). Borrowing from Thomas Metzinger, Žižek sees the phenomenological gap between a physical and a subjective experience of reality (the subject-object split) as a "false opacity," which is Žižek's term for the "separatist" debate between behaviourism cum cognitivism and functionalism. There is a tendency in the philosophy of mind to posit a blindspot as existing between behavioural and functional categories—"phenomena [of consciousness] that exhibit intentionality and do not exhibit phenomenal character; and (2) phenomena that exhibit phenomenal character but to [sic] not exhibit intentionality" (Horgan 324). Žižek dismisses this parallax as a "false opacity," at the

level of experience as a transparent “homologous fetishist illusion” of a gap, a “reflexive determination” (*Parallax* 214). At the theoretical level the idea is that the self is a recalcitrant remainder, a mysterious opacity between functional and behavioural accounts of it, though more a bone of contention between these categories than a material exception either side observes since both are materialist accounts. Žižek endorses the dismissal of the conundrum as a necessary illusion of self—I shall offer my own account of the subject-object split in a later section.

Returning to *Less Than Nothing*, Žižek offers a,

precise distinction between the presupposed or shadowy part of what appear as ontic objects and the ontological horizon of their appearing. ... an object always appears within a certain horizon of hermeneutic “prejudices” which provide an a priori frame within which we locate the object and which thus make it intelligible—to observe reality “without prejudices” means to understand nothing. (*Less Than Nothing* 271)

This of course is the central insight of deconstruction; in our engagement with the world we “posit presuppositions,” but Žižek adds the rider that the former reality the posited presupposition tends to abolish is “retroactively” *erased*, rather than nullified, by the new horizon, so that no meaningful narrative link remains between the two, only a violent rupture. The implication for consciousness is that we needn’t posit Being / Speak[ing] / through every language; / everywhere and always,” à la Heidegger and Derrida. At the level of consciousness and subjectivity, *Being* and *being*, are resolved as the metaphysical “positing of the presupposition” of an ontological narrative, when no such narrative is possible and only seems requisite.

Consciousness, for Žižek, could be described as a febrile entity sustained in the micro nexus of neuronal plasticity, and in the macro-nexus of its engagement with phenomena. I use the conjunctive “nexus” to emphasise the contingent nature of the involvement of the entity with the infinite possibility implied both by the brain’s complex neuronal network, and the phenomenal universe of material reality encountered as other. The crucial point that distinguishes Žižek’s Hegelian/Lacanian account from Kantian dualism, is that Kant finds human freedom in its radically estranged relationship with the thing in itself. Freedom is guaranteed by the speculative interaction of phenomenal rather than noumenal consciousness. Like the impossible predicament of Milton’s rebel angels, to be possessed of absolute certainty, as to the *uncontingent* mechanics of the present, is to be bereft of speculative freedom, just as surely as their knowledge of God’s omnipresence in time and space renders the actions of Satan’s host worse than ludicrous—predestined, such that their actions are not born of free will at all. Following Hegel’s lead, Žižek recoils from this Kantian(/Miltonian) dilemma by refusing to accept the mechanistically-coherent (or divine) universe implied. “The Žižekian universe is one in which there is no big Other entirely up to the task of exerting an invariably active deterministic control over the order of things” (Johnston 208). More importantly, rather than God, or some comprehensive theory of everything, what passes for humanity as the big Other is the inevitable mediation of the symbolic order; shot through however with holes and inconsistencies, so affording myriad scope for novelty and neurosis.

Navigating between the reductive accounts of both materialism and idealism, Johnston urges that Žižek’s schema of subjectivity is “more than materialism,” and

certainly *post*-structuralism, in that though antecedently founded in *materialism*, the transcendental “subject for itself” is not reducible to that primary condition.

Žižek’s creative synthesis of German idealism and Lacanian psychoanalysis enables the argument to be advanced that certain properties of an asubjective, heteronomous libidinal-material foundation (as the barred Real of human nature) function as fundamental conditions of possibility for the ontogenesis of subjective autonomy (as a transcendence of this same “natural” foundation). ... A psychoanalytic theory of subjectivity informed by German idealism is able to contend that, strange as it may sound, autonomy imminently emerges out of heteronomy as an excess or surplus that cannot be reinscribed back within the ontological register out of which it grew. (Johnston)

Žižek’s ontology is not a theory of everything, however, and fails to account for the biological/neuronal *emergence* of consciousness. Unlike the reductive materialist orthodoxy which complacently insists that the mental is pegged to the biologically-generated neuronal, Žižek concedes that this fails to account for, “the real question ... how does the emergence/explosion of the mental *occur at the level of the neuronal itself?*” (qtd. in Johnston 279). Žižek’s ontology also fails to, or rather exceeds, Steven Weinberg’s dictum that an elegant sufficiency, “a few simple principles of compelling beauty” invariably marks a genuine solution. Brilliant as Žižek’s analysis is, there are many dissenters and I can’t help myself, in the final analysis, but find it obstinately tendentious. Below, I shall briefly examine a few alternative views, both timorous and dogmatic, before I draw some conclusions.

Chapter Four: By Way of Conclusion: Dark Aesthetics, Dialectics, Specters, and Spirit

4.1 “Identity Anxiety”

Around the same time that Žižek’s *The Parallax View* was published, two eminent cultural theorists also produced books utilising Jacques Lacan’s revamp of Freud. In 2005 Catherine Belsey’s *Culture and the Real* was published, while in 2009 Terry Eagleton’s *Trouble with Strangers: A Study of Ethics*, came out. Each of these books addresses its subject matter through a Lacanian lens, but while Eagleton is enthusiastically supportive of Žižek’s continental Marxism, Belsey’s book is highly critical of both Eagleton and Žižek. Belsey’s account seeks to retrieve Lacan’s Real as the *ground* of post-structural *Being*, as more than subjective illusion, but that which exists outside representation.

Revising Lacan’s three categories of human experience, Lacan’s Real comes both first and last; akin to Kant’s unknowable noumena, it is that singularity from which consciousness emerged when, to paraphrase William Blake, into the dangerous world it leapt. The Self’s advent in the world is one of pure sensation, alloyed with instinctual drives - a sudden consciousness of stunning experiential register. This brief span of pure indulgence is followed by the mirror stage, which begets our imaginary lives, when the infant recognises herself; that she exists apart from sheer sensation, that she is also an “other” in a world of distinctions, otherness and transaction. For Lacan this amounted to both more and less than *recognition*, since no sense of cohesive self is yet established. “The image in the mirror is a

deceptively unified version of the child's actual, uncoordinated body, and his delight in it comes from contrasting this idealised whole with his dysfunctional state" (Eagleton *Trouble with Strangers* 5). This first apprehension of the Self's unified embodiment is also complemented by these *others*, who illustrate that the world is a place of distinctions. Next comes the "symbolic order," the communicative realm of ciphers, rules, inference, affectation, and so much more, gradually learnt, that increasingly *defers* and ultimately *bars* access to that *jouissance* once felt at mother's breast.

The symbolic order effectively alienates the infant from what was once so blissfully unmediated. Paraphrasing Lacan, the agency known as ego is dialectically resolved in the symbolic order as *I*, yet he retains, more or less, his innate discordance with his own reality (Lacan *Ecrits: A Selection* 116-17). The symbolic order compellingly enfolds the subject in its conceptual universe. This *sophisticated* self, cast among a world of others, is indoctrinated into the activity of their various pursuits and aspirations and mechanically, if stiffly, follows whatever rubric is laid out:

language is an order constituted by laws, about which we could at least learn what they exclude. For example that language is different from natural expression and that it is not a code either; that language is not the same as information ...; and that language is so far from being reducible to a superstructure that materialism itself [Stalin] was alarmed by this heresy. (Lacan *Ecrits: A Selection*)

The subject is *intrigued* irrevocably out of herself, yet remains fired within by the deficit of the Real, that governing “organic” force which once held sway.

The Real, Eagleton tells us, “was by far the most underprivileged member of the Lacanian trinity, and certainly the least understood” (Eagleton *Trouble with Strangers* 139). Eagleton goes on to introduce Žižek as “Lacan’s representative on Earth,” and so follows him in what Belsey sees as an erroneous interpretation. The Real for Lacan is a controversial concept in that Belsey insists it was intended to indicate a non-symbolic dimension of *reality*; something mysterious, that is, rather than some visceral nostalgia or absence or pure imagination. Belsey cites Lacan from several texts and contexts to the effect that the real cannot and should not be refined away, but that it is vitally important to the mystery of our subject-object relations, which are imperfectly or inadequately accommodated within the symbolic order. According to Belsey’s reading of Lacan there is something more to us as sentient beings than the symbolic order makes intelligible. Belsey cites Lacan to the effect that the human animal “knows a lot more about things than he thinks when he acts,” and that “unconscious desire belongs to ‘an animal at the mercy of language’” (39). There are clear affinities here with Romanticism, artistic and philosophical—though Lacan’s inconsistent, or cumulative, treatment of the psyche is not taken into account.

We arrive, however, at what Belsey conceives of as “identity anxiety,” vested in the real. Belsey disagrees with current notions of the self’s utter cultural constructedness, that each self is purely a product of culture; a social construct, an identity sustained by family and acquaintances, bureaucracy, property—intellectual and material—as well as personal subscription. Beyond all that, culturalism has it, the self is the merest abstraction (Belsey 4). Belsey is equivocal. She shares the

thesis she attributes to Lacan that the real is *real*, existing somehow beyond representation as pure unmediated phenomena. She accuses Žižek of “divorcing the real from the organic” (53) and so reducing Lacan’s trinity to two: “Where Lacan identifies the organism, the symbolic and the unconscious, Žižek reinstates a binary opposition between social reality, on the one hand, which includes the semblance of the real and, on the other hand, the terrain of the drive, where there is nothing but the void of the terrain itself” (Belsey 55). Her idea of what she calls the anxiety of the real, is that it plays a mysterious part in our otherwise ordered lives which can be described in outline in cultural representation. The real commonly haunts our reality, and produces Belsey’s anxiety; evidence that we are more than cultural drones. Belsey and Žižek are on the same page, but whereas Žižek, as illustrated above, resolves a psychological complex, Belsey credits it as something akin to a primordially-untutored or instinctual cognition. The idea is not unprecedented and Simon Critchley attributes it to Emanuel Levinas,

the most radical aspect of deconstruction, its insight into subjectivity as “creaturality.” ... In a nutshell, the deconstruction of the autarchic *humanist* subject, and the claim that subjectivity is an effect of structures outside the conscious control of the subject, is assimilated by Levinas to the concept of creatureliness, which defines the human as that being who is overwhelmed by responsibility. (*Ethics* 67-68 my emphasis)

Belsey’s anxiety of the real has much in common with this conception of the human animal, though hers balks at following its logical conclusion, or at least its ethical convolutions. For Belsey, cultural production—art, architecture, literature, *memento*

mori—is often invested with unnameable anxiety, and so alludes to or offers negative consolation for this deep-seated sense of loss of the real. Like dark matter, the real is felt only by what it appears to engender: desire, dissatisfaction, anxiety. Belsey innovatively juxtaposes mundane reality with the “ghost,” as it were, of the real, which continues to haunt the subject and, *ergo*, cultural production. Invoking Freud’s notion of the “uncanny” in a discussion of several films she instances, in which she says, “the gothic invades the mimetic” (8), Belsey asks, “is it possible that this uncanny quality marks an unresolved cultural anxiety about our identity as subjects of culture?” (8-9). This question encapsulates Belsey’s proposition, and *Culture and the Real* is devoted to its explication and viability as, quote, “a theory of culture” that, she says, “as far as I know ... has not been made before” (xiii).

This mysterious textual *allusiveness* is, it follows, extremely common as all our lives are distorted to some extent by the same initialising trauma of separation and subsequent indoctrination. One might ponder Herman Melville’s *Bartleby the Scrivener* as suggestive of this anxiety of the real, not so much in the mystery of Bartleby’s condition as the void it suggests he occupies. What is it that so intrigues and unsettles the Scrivener’s Master, and by extension us, when Bartleby refuses to do his work? Mere insolence would be readily dealt with, that’s clear, but Bartleby’s alienation suggests unreality. The master is confounded by the uncanny disruption that Bartleby insinuates in *his* reality, with which he dimly and anxiously sympathises. Bartleby is the rebellious anti-type of cultured humanity, the trapped alien, sickening and fatally inarticulate, driven abruptly and beyond recall from our verbalising reality and bent on *home*. His automated “I would prefer not to,” stripped of emotion, palpably harks back to the childish plaint “I don’t want to,” itself resonant of disenchantment with the here and now, of narcissistic withdrawal. What

is the Master's, or the reader's, fascination vested in if not troubled sympathy for, or blind familiarity with, his undisclosed condition?

Belsey's book is devoted to exploring this suggestion of a breach in reality, and of troubled recognition of this unmapped, inaccessible essence, what Lyotard called the "unrepresentable," the real as cognitively-immanent in cultural production (Belsey 18). Belsey's account is full of illustrations, but she also attempts to theorise her idea and that is where, among others, Eagleton and Žižek come in for a roasting. The others are Judith Butler and Stanley Fish, all cultural "constructivists"—those for whom the self is utterly *cultured* and devoid of organic essence, for whom even bodies are "the effect of speech acts." Such determinism negates individuality, precludes dissent and "allows no independent place for the real" (Belsey 28). This gives the constructivists short shrift, Belsey readily admits, but she stands broadly by the complaint. Constructivism is tantamount to idealism, she argues, in that it reduces all phenomena to the product of human regard. For constructivists there is nothing coherent outside culture and nothing independent within it. Belsey thus holds constructivism as tantamount to idealism, wherein culture itself is conceived by human regard (28-29).

The cultural constructivist "idealism" Belsey tenuously ascribes to the likes of Fish and Butler—traditional and historicist discursivity respectively (15)—is in fact rationalist addenda to Hume's thought, rather than akin to the idealism popularly associated with Hegel. Kantian idealism was a philosophical response to Hume's scepticism that a subject comprised a unified self, capable of a priori conceptual insight into the nature of reality. Unable to detect such a unity, Hume's reductionist self was merely a bundle of senses construed willy-nilly according to internal impressions, "our passions, emotions, desires and aversions" (Hume 40-41). Hume

reasoned that neither space nor time made sense apart from their being phenomenal interstices experienced spatially and sequentially, thus merely invoking those dimensions as concepts, but with no concept of them in themselves, ergo the logic that the evidence of the senses cannot validate phenomena as the products of causes and their effects (40-43). The thinking subject as an individual entity is for Hume, and for modern constructivists, invoked as inseparable from and constrained by its unified experience in a preordained reality; whether it be diachronic or synchronic, it is psychological and discursive. The temerity and enduring influence of Hume's thought was his ability to disentangle the complex of experiential being from its credulously subjective and transcendental determinants hitherto; thus after Hume, "the given is no longer given to a subject; rather the subject constitutes itself in the given" (Deleuze 87). Hume—along with Belsey's constructivists—was a materialist, believing after Locke that the human mind is initially a blank slate, and this is what Kant set about challenging.

In order to understand the subtlety of Kant's challenge, however, we have to understand his motives. Hume's conclusion, that our conceptual universe was redundant, and "that every volume 'of divinity or school metaphysics' we should commit 'to the flames', 'for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion'" (qtd. in Gardner 6), was both logically inconsistent and partisan for Kant. To begin with, empiricism was just as dependent for its analyses of physical reality on the constitutive self as metaphysics was. And then, Kant wanted to know why, if metaphysics compelled the imagination just as much as nature did, it should be jettisoned as necessarily invalid in deference to the latter? For Kant, human reason was "driven 'by an inward need' and not by mere 'idle desire' to pose metaphysical questions" (Gardner 21). That visceral "inward need" was surely just as indicative,

somehow, of a real influence on the mental faculties as was the corporeal evidence of the senses. This notion was the germ that engendered Kant's "transcendental idealism" and led him to eventually formulate his "transcendental unity of apperception." Kant rejected both Lockean realism—which entrusted reality wholly to the senses, albeit remaining sceptical of human constructions upon it—and Berkley's idealism, or the notion that reality was an illusion ideated by God. Kant was insistent that external nature was real, but that its appearance was a human construction rather than the thing in itself (Gardner 96-97). Accordingly, Kant formulated his unity of apperception as an abstract condition rather than a substantial intelligence or *res cogitans* (Gardner 145-47). This led Kant into considerable difficulties, but it is enough for our purposes here to observe that "[t]ranscendental apperception is *consciousness of thinking*. It is purely intellectual, not empirical consciousness—consciousness independent of intuition, and thus not experience" (Gardner 148 my emphasis). By analogy, unified apperception is the preloaded software that—contra Hume's experiential conundrum—enables the contrasting of perceptions and thus the cogent interrogation of given reality.

Belsey is harsher with Žižek and Eagleton and their Marxist agenda than she is with constructivists. Positing the contrast with Eagleton, Belsey asserts that *her* project "is not prelude to an assault on the postmodern, and on poststructuralism as its philosophy" (10). Belsey also takes Eagleton to task for conflating Kant with Lacan, and for misrepresenting both (124-25). Žižek is excoriated at greater length, for conflating Lacan with Hegel, and so exacerbating an idealism that subordinates the real as fantasy. For Belsey, Lacan's real, like Kant's noumena, is inaccessible, but it is there, *real* but beyond representation, and so cognition. Žižek's Hegelian-Lacanian hybrid, on the other hand, reduces the real to a mere psychosis that takes

the form of desire (52-55). This, however, is the subject matter upon which Belsey is at her most strategic, because though she makes distinctions, finally her own position is akin to Kantianism—her cultural real a kind of negative of Kant’s sublime. Belsey parts company with Kant because his transcendental unity of apperception, with its religious hangover and Enlightenment positivism, is overly optimistic, indeed romantic, in its notionally anthropocentric perspective (120-21). Belsey finds the strictures of poststructuralism and culturalism much more compelling, though not rigid; each imposes drastic limitations on individual agency, but there is slippage by definition in the former, and for Belsey the real compromises the latter. The real, though “not there for the subject,” is uncannily there, beyond, within, contradicting the syntagmatic reality we haplessly subscribe to, and this is the source of Belsey’s *blessed* “anxiety”—a nonverbal sense of Kant’s noumena trumped by Lacan’s real—a “dark aesthetic” as compelling, yet unattainable as the Kantian sublime or Lacanian *jouissance*, a saving grace from our scripted lives, unnervingly “not there” as sheer unmapped phenomena. But rather than theorising the self, what Belsey is recommending is a kind of modest, rather than decadent, aestheticism, a sublimation of Kant’s sublime and a compromised Culturalism vested in a kind of patronage of the real.

According to Eagleton, Lacan was far more committed to psychological emancipation than to patronise it for the sake of escapism. Lacan rejected conventional morality “for an ethics of desire ... which confines both rights and virtues to inferior status” (Eagleton *Trouble with Strangers* 284). Eagleton suggests that Lacan’s late theorising

can be read as an allegory of an ethics of the Real. ... The burdensome necessity of the symbolic law gives way to the life-giving necessity of holding fast to one's desire, which like all genuine moral impulses is felt to be ineluctable. The only guilt to be feared now is the bad faith of giving way on this desire, which is affirmed as the very essence of one's being. (*Trouble with Strangers* 290)

The "very essence of one's being" does suggest that Lacan, contra Žižek, credited the organic nature of this pre-linguistic drive, as Belsey insists, but it also promotes a mode of impractical and eccentric elitism, Eagleton abjures. Having ascribed to Lacan a kind of fundamentalism of desire, Eagleton goes on to expose its impracticality, both individually and socially, concluding that the "Real is thus in danger of behaving like the Freudian superego or Kantian moral law, rubbing our noses in our own frailty by making demands which we find impossible to fill" (*Trouble with Strangers* 298).⁸ Just as subject-desire is confronted by the morality of the big Other, the moral economy of the Freudian-psyche is similarly constituted, with deep-seated desire harassed and put down by the superego.

Belsey's reading, however, is at variance with Eagleton's and credits Lacan's position as more of a compromise between the demands of desire (Lacan's Thing) and moral law. Once again her interpretation flies in the face of Žižek's, which she sees as founded on a wilful conflation of Kant's "sublime" and "sublimation" (141). In effect, Žižek dismisses Kant's sublime in a similar way as he denaturalises the ostensible underlying reality of Lacan's real; each is rationalised a mirage. "Žižek's sublime object ... is neither beautiful nor pleasurable and satisfying. On the contrary,

⁸ As we shall see, this conception of the real as the fundamental ground of desire also insinuates a society devoid of ethics.

as the symptom of an apparently universal pathology, the sublime object is at worst a materialization of forbidden *jouissance*, and at best no more than a ‘mask of death’” (Belsey 142). For Belsey sublimation is something more positive and we can either submit to the conventions of the symbolic order and its psychic complement, the superego, or we can find diversion in sublimation. Where Eagleton attributes to Lacan a fanaticism which implicitly demands “all men and women become Lears or Antigones” (*Trouble with Strangers* 298), Belsey, playing with the same tropes, sees two alternatives to bourgeois compliance: “go willingly with Antigone, into a heroic region beyond pleasure, a world of total dispossession, the unearthly place of the drive itself” or, “sublimation promises pleasure at the level of the signifier” (146). Belsey’s Lacan is not the uncompromising idealist Žižek and Eagleton invoke, and was content to forestall on martyrdom in the interests of culture, that is of “making things.” According to Belsey, “Lacan sees cultural objects as encircling the lost Thing, keeping it within bounds, without denying its existence” (71).

This presents as a new conception of aesthetics as subliminal allusion and register, automatically captured during the creative process and so subliminally recoverable as what Belsey calls a “dark aesthetic.” Belsey devotes much of her book to explicating this new aesthetic, by reference to various theorists and cultural texts, but she recoils from any notion of a new aesthetic yardstick which recuperates old notions of high and low culture, vested in some such category as *sublime incomprehensibility*. Somewhat anticipating Belsey, Steven Connor “suggest[s] that the sublime, which Lyotard defined as the apprehension of something too large or too complex to be apprehended by a conceptual understanding, now is more likely to provoke not awe, but a kind of voracity and the reassurance it gives” (74). Here is

Belsey's anxiety of the real: desire at the level of the drive and the tantalising promise of appeasement at the level of the signifier.

In line with Cultural Studies orthodoxy, no element of the whole culture is to be distinguished above the rest and she adopts her preferred, value neutral cum anthropological stance (123). Belsey echoes Williams's position then in refusing to distinguish one artefact of culture above another, seeing them all one way or another not merely as discursive texts, but as subliminally enthrall to that which Lyotard designated the "unpresentable." Where she differs with Williams is in distinguishing creative or artistic culture from cultural production generally as part of the economic base. Based on Lacan's advice to "make something":

Žižek [and we can include Eagleton] says you have to go through the fantasy to the void; Lacan says you can do that—but in the meantime you can make things. Making things is what culture consists of, given that the things in question include pots, beads, stories, paintings, photographs, films, essays and academic books. This is the material of cultural criticism and only Lacan, who largely ignores the Kantian sublime, gives us a theoretical explanation of its existence. (Belsey 148)

Belsey insists earlier that creativity "is the project of culture; by this means culture offers a detour that keeps the Thing itself at bay, defers with its own signifying presence the impossible *jouissance* of the encounter with pure absence, and gives pleasure in the process" (71). With reference to my own argument, outlined above, what Belsey fails to appreciate is that culture is elitist and primarily consumptive rather than inclusively creative. Reducing Williams's idea of culture to its creative

practitioners only exacerbates that elitism. Belsey's "dark aesthetic" presents not as an egalitarian mode of creativity, but as a rarefied medium based on the fetishisation and commodification of the real—the last vestige perhaps, if Belsey is to be credited, of our unscripted lives.

Belsey's position arguably obliges her to drive her Lacanian wedge firmly in among the posts—structuralism and modernism; the first providing the theory and the second the subsistence. Under the tutelage of Lacan and Lyotard, Belsey's postmodernism emerges as a new mode of commodity fetishism; an anxious aestheticism devoted to the ultimate indulgence, an encounter with the real at the level of the text. Criticism can now legitimately find its observations in the anxiety evoked by the unrepresentable real, which infests the interstices of culture. This dark aesthetic does away with tired and oppressive notions of "ethical instruction, ideological control, or scripted determinism" (155). But it sublimates, too, any need for an avant-garde. This postmodern modicum of *freedom*, to enjoy simultaneously a voracious and unslaked anxiety in an impossible voyeurism of the real, can be viewed, paradoxically, as a welcome reaffirmation of the self within the interstices of theory. On the other hand, it does nothing to address the plight of the self in commodity culture, and is thus diametrically opposed to the dialectical vision of Eagleton and Žižek, who are subversives. Žižek's crime is the promotion of an eccentric idealism; a quest, no less, than to re-theorise dialectical materialism. And Eagleton, who has made a career out of trying to revive a universalist paradigm, seeks to "counter culturalism" by invoking nature—which is not the real, Belsey insists, but "the terrain that Western science has set out since the seventeenth century to map and master" (14). The real, for Belsey, is something anxiously tangible and culture is its medium.

I would argue that Belsey's anti-idealism is itself both idealistic and defeatist in its disdain both for grand narratives or anything more tangible apropos consciousness. Making a new genre of the anxiety of the real might be a fascinating meditation but it also bespeaks cultural inertia. The thrust of Belsey's argument is that we should embrace human pettiness in the scheme of things, and stop imposing our idealistic regard on phenomena. Yet, in fact, there is arguably no good reason to accept the human predicament as fatally contingent. It was Kant who was the idealist when he posited the inaccessibility of thingness in itself. Rather than accepting the impasse of the noumena (or the real), the burden of proof surely lies with it? In the absence of evidence of the real, it is reasonable to proceed as though reality *is* accessible to us, and occluded only by psychic content, including ideology. This is not to arrogantly idealise nature, but in the absence of evidence, to deny the Kantian (or Lacanian) proscription necessarily *as* the fatal precondition of human ontology.

Moreover, Belsey's *passive* idealism does nothing to address the ongoing juggernaut of capitalism, a material grand narrative far more devastating than any hubristic idealism. As a cultural theorist, there are omissions of intent in Belsey's book; Marxism is not mentioned (though the Marx Brothers are). Belsey seems to forget that culturalism is or was post-Marxist, whose agenda was a "slow revolution." I would suggest that indulging in identity anxiety—sensing the real, that uncanny lacuna between id and entity—merely reduces *idealism* to naval gazing. Withal her critique of Eagleton and Žižek, what Belsey fails to mention in her book is that they are unreconstructed Marxists. Eagleton and Žižek's anxiety is invested in capitalism. By the same token, capitalism is heavily invested in the commodification of the self. Belsey's identity anxiety is not shared at the level of popular culture, wherein the self reigns as both a unique item of religious and humanist faith—

something to be revered, nurtured and developed—and as a commodity to be purchased, accessorised, or made-over. It is from this “reality” that Žižek continues to theorise deliverance.

Žižek’s take on the real, at the very least, has the virtue of being immune from the kind of diversion and patronage Belsey wishes to promote. In one sense, Žižek’s thesis most certainly is not idealism; his Hegelianism suggests a fresh start, beyond the symbolic order, rather than dialectical synthesis. Žižek calls his recommendation “Bartleby politics,” only his Bartleby is far more radical than mine, above. When Žižek’s Bartleby utters his “I would prefer not to,” he means I *want* not to; he is impassive in the face of all conjurations pro or con the importuning symbolic order—as he recognises that it thrives on *all* interaction. Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to” is thus not abstract negation; he has not retreated anxiously within himself as Belsey might have him do. Rather than the standard “interpassive” mode, Bartleby’s attitude is for Žižek passive-aggressive, resolutely defiant or *arche*; a new singularity; implying a parallax shift yet to develop (*Parallax* 381-83).

In case this all seems too fantastic to contemplate; the symbolic order, that we in the heartland of capitalism find so difficult to see beyond, is a far more tenuous thing to those outside its compass, among those for whom the *real*, within their impoverished or vicious lives, is a far more compelling reality than their symbolic order, or that which Belsey wishes to fetishise. Žižek is advocating a mindset, a refusal to have any truck with the reality that we maintain with our subscription, for or against. We must unsubscribe, withdraw intently from the game that Belsey would have us inflect with an anxious aesthetic. Is this idealism; the reduction of matter into thought? Or is it recognition that our ordered lives are *not* contingent, that rather they are governed unerringly by the monolithic indifference of late-

capitalist reality. It is beyond this “reality” that Eagleton seeks to assert universals in his book, *Trouble With Strangers*. Žižek’s and Eagleton’s books can be seen then as a joint effort to, respectively, theorise a liberated self, and a new dialectic based on revised human values—a new order based *not* on fatal otherness, but on the *rapprochement* of strangers in their corporeal being. In his book, Eagleton’s reading of philosophy is as Lacanian/Hegelian as Žižek’s Self, but rather than human life proceeding dialectically towards pure abstraction, the Self, having pushed through the imaginary—a kind of ideology—has the opportunity to build a new symbolic order based on a mutuality of genuine human need. That at least is one version of human deliverance, based on resolute materialism. Next we shall look at another, just as radical, based on the opposite.

4.2 Predestination Versus the Enlightenment Dialectic

In 2010, Jacob Klapwijk’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Critical Theory and the Messianic Light* was translated from the Dutch and published for the first time in English, having been originally published in Amsterdam in 1976. The belated advent of Klapwijk’s minor classic is fortuitous, rather than regrettable, as his critique has only acquired more poignancy since it was originally published. I use the word “poignancy” since anything more definitive presupposes the very perspective the author wishes to recommend. Klapwijk condemns both the dialectic of Enlightenment as metanarrative, and the Frankfurt School’s immanent critique as baseless superstition “capable of *breaking* human hearts” (*Dialectic of Enlightenment* 91). The overall criticism of Klapwijk’s book is aimed at the *institution* of reason itself as its own foundation.

One of the problems inherent in critically assessing the work of the Frankfurt School—or any school of thought—is doing so with the dubious *benefit* of hindsight, or from *within*; whether from within an historical surmise, an intellectual/spiritual tradition, or from a radical or conservative perspective, any of which inevitably conditions the treatment. Perhaps the most difficult veil to see beyond, however, and this is where Klapwijk's perspective is useful, is the patterned, almost automatic *thought* agitated within a whole paradigm. The Enlightenment, or Age of Reason, is Klapwijk's point of departure in confronting, through the Frankfurt School, the frustrated complacency—faith in reason—that underwrites it, then and now. Klapwijk traces the dialectical odyssey taken by the Critical Theory in the name of the Enlightenment, which we can extend into the anti-foundational reality of our postmodern predicament; like Odysseus' adventures on the seas, thought in the age of reason has conjured many strange beasts. The first generation Frankfurt School traced the Enlightenment and its humanist ideals—

the desacralization of nature, the break-up of myth, the coming of age of the human species, a stand for individual rights and dignity, autonomous use of reason, distance between the subject and object, control and calculations, experimental science, mathematics and logic, mechanization of labor, industrial production, and global traffic in goods and raw materials. (3)

—from its emergence to its consummation in failure as an emancipatory project. The Frankfurt School's best efforts were revealed at the time of writing as a failure, a negative critique as eschatological in its despair as Klapwijk's Reformational Philosophy is in its faith in the Christian gospel of the Messiah (*Dialectic of*

Enlightenment 97). What makes this an important critique is that the author is not constrained *within* an epistemological horizon, but adopts a vantage point of certainty in faith and divine redemption. Thus he is critical of the “infinite regress” that dialectics presupposes—a humanist critique adrift among the historicised tides of theory.

Klapwijk deals substantially only with Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Habermas; these are the main players and yet it is surprising that Walter Benjamin wasn't used to further exemplify the problematics of non-dedicated thought—reason as its own account—or taken to task for his conflation of messianism and Marxism, aphoristically espoused in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. Klapwijk's central criticism is of the ongoing “myth” of dialectics, and yet Benjamin's heretical messianism compromises both Marx and Messianism, dialectically resolving these antitheses in a genuinely bespoke faith that might have been usefully contrasted with the “personal faith” of Klapwijk's Reformation Theology. Yet there is little to hector in this consummate and succinct criticism of a School which remains adrift.

Habermas is exposed as the optimistic re-visionary he was at the time (74-77), while since then his social technologies have been shown to be ineffective. Indeed, since then Habermas has embarked upon a “post-secular” phase that seeks to enrich his enlightenment by ideological contamination—to immanently democratise the totalitarian momentum of the liberal-rationalism that passes for humanism in the postmodern West. In the decades since the original publication of Klapwijk's book, the gloomy prognostications of Horkheimer and Adorno have been born out and Habermas has resorted to conventional diplomacy. The dialectic of Enlightenment at the end of history seems as subject to eschatological interpretation as ever.

Indeed dialectical philosophy is Klapwijk's overarching target in the book, in which he pre-emptively Lyotard in professing his own incredulity towards metanarratives: "I regard all the mega-constructions that dialectical thinkers put upon the universal history of human kind as speculative" (*Dialectic of Enlightenment* 91). Klapwijk revises the Frankfurt School's distress—and "neo-Marxist" distress generally—as stemming from at once being disenchanted with the Enlightenment and unable to conceive of an alternative. "Neo-Marxism's distress is reason's distress. Reason can order and reason can obey. What reason cannot do is to free itself from the structures of authority and command. Reason cannot extricate itself from the dialectic of its own development" (7). Writing in 2010 in his preface to the English translation, Klapwijk claims that he is not against reason *per se*, which has always informed action, but that he is against the Enlightenment credo by which reason is presented as the "unshakeable foundation of politics and society" (xi). What Klapwijk recommends instead, and claims for his cohort is a hermeneutical destiny *outside* human confabulation, which he describes in a later formulation as, "a protological-eschatological perspective of meaning-disclosure [which] guides but also transcends all theory. That perspective can neither be constructed theoretically (in terms of a speculative idea of cultural disclosure) nor be realized practically (in terms of a revolutionary program for societal change)" ("Reformational Philosophy" 38). Put simply, what the author proposes—and he infers considerable agonised support from the writings of the Frankfurt Schoolers—is neo-Calvinism, though Reformational Philosophy, in the spirit of post-modernism, is today an ecumenical church ("Reformational Philosophy" 34-37). Klapwijk regards all humanly-conceived and "dogmatic" dialectical "reconstructions" as both delusional and non-redemptive in their speculative apotheoses. Delusional because reason is deemed not

humanity's transcendence but God's "common grace," thus even renegade reason has its source in God

what might be the value of present-day, secularized science for Christians. Must it be accepted gratefully as a gift from God's hand, its apostate features notwithstanding? Or should its apostate direction be unmasked and opposed in the light of the Christian cultural mandate? Is it a sign of God's common grace? Or is it sooner an expression of a universal antithesis between belief and unbelief? (Klapwijk "Antithesis and Common Grace")

If one first accepts the premise that spontaneous reason is impossible, this is a compelling critique and should be considered deeply by those who would prefer a humanist dénouement to the countless chapters of the history of (fallen) human suffering. And yet the messianic light, Christ's redemption, the pre-ordained apotheosis to come, remains—much like Historical Materialism and its adherents—an item of faith also yet to be realised.

Moreover it is possible to defend dialectical thought from charges of false idolatry. Historical Materialism was not conceived by Marx as dialectically inevitable. Marx, like Hegel, put his faith in a priori conceptions of reality, but based his own theory on the logical extrapolation of human social dynamics; nor were his sociological predictions ever in the order of predestination. Redemption, too, for Marx resided in the hope of an egalitarian order to come. It must be acknowledged that Marx's Historical Materialism offers little in expiation of the cost, in terms of human suffering—but then, Historical Materialism is no more a reconciliation narrative than evolution is—and yet hope for the future remains an albeit dim

messianic light. Nor is hope in the future, in the fullness of time and atonement, without consolation. Indeed in this sense Marxian hope *can* be argued to be *outside* or “exterritorial” (*Dialectic of Enlightenment* 96) as Klapwijk insists it must be. According to Fredric Jameson, the “master code” of the Marxist hermeneutic “or transcendental signified, is precisely not given as a representation but as an *absent cause*, as that which can never know full representation” (“Marxism” 149-50).

Beyond Marxism, the “myth” of dialectics has even gained some analytic respectability since Klapwijk’s book was first published, most notably via the work of Roy Bhaskar, who distinguishes his post-Hegelian dialectics as fired by “transformative praxis or agency” (*Dialectic* xiii). In the post-Marxist tradition, Bhaskar’s redemption is founded in sublation, a blend of faith and aspiration guided by the weak messianic light of posterity. In a damning critique of Bhaskar’s prose style—and circular argument—in his *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom* (1993), Alex Callinicos approvingly quotes Bhaskar to the effect that dialectical thinking is “the art of thinking the *coincidence of distinctions and connections*” (579). It is possible then to defend dialectics simply as methodological reason, without necessarily defending, or even subscribing to, the notion of Enlightenment as *metanarrative*, or as dialectically productive of the current dystopia. Marx’s seminal thought was founded in his critique of capitalism—led astray then and ever since by the Hegelian fashion for systematically closed systems, and by the obstinate re-theorising of strictly materialistic premises. Klapwijk is in the right when he alludes to the incongruity, the theoretical aporia, of dialectical thought as “ultimately a materialistic theory” (*Dialectic of Enlightenment* 15). As we have seen, the premises behind materially generated idealism remain inadequately theorised.

Ironically, Bhaskar has solved the problem of circularity imputed to him by importing outside agency and updating his theory to an impressively titled, “Transcendental Dialectical Critical Realism.” According to Callinicos, Bhaskar’s “‘transcendental radicalization’ involves in particular,

“a new realism about transcendence and God.” God is both transcendent and immanent: more specifically, “he/she/it” is immanent in the finite human self. The roots of social oppression and alienation lie in alienation from the self: this more fundamental alienation is overcome when the self breaks loose from the attachments that bind it to particular desires and fears and imprison it in the cycle of reincarnation, and recognizes its identity with God. (584)

Understandably, Callinicos is tacitly mocking of Bhaskar’s late revelations, lamenting that a “leading philosopher of the Left has committed intellectual suicide” (585). And yet why is it so easy to be dismissive of such eccentric accounts of our reality, when they are instanced in every culture throughout history and count their followers in their millions? Nor is Bhaskar the first—or most impressive—*savant* to be persuaded, *against reason*, to embrace an alternative account of reality. It is not my intention to recommend any such conversion, or to push anything but agnosticism, but to deplore the myopic and condescending attitudes of the zealots of rationalism. To modify a Klapwijk aphorism somewhat, without sound foundations, what is not *speculative*, is *belief* (*Dialectic of Enlightenment* 91). I would posit, based on the statistical evidence—if indeed it does not amount to empirical proof—that there is more to religious *experience* than ideology. Klapwijk insists not on foundations, but on the “*exterritorial* in man. . . . human beings have to seek *the*

ground (of their being) *outside themselves* (*Dialectic of Enlightenment* 96). Klapwijk locates this ground in the biblical prophecy of the Messiah in the Gospels. For my part, I am content to seek the exterritorial *outside capitalism*, but without recourse or devotion, necessarily, to an absolutist and intolerant materialism. Anti-capitalism is the essence of Marx and the rest can be treated as redundant. Marx's problem with the young Hegelians was that they reserved their critique for abstruse questions of consciousness; of "German philosophy and not German reality" (Critchley *Ethics*). Western Marxism too often amounts to a sequel. Yet by comparison, Klapwijk's passive surrender to biblical prophecy is a hermeneutics that, to echo Nietzsche, offers no hope in this world.

Moreover, the gospels are decidedly ambiguous on the question of the Messiah, just as Jesus himself was, by all the accounts of the Gospels, much less concerned with the heavenly realm than with the here and now. Jesus only once nominates himself the Messiah, after having more than once denied the appellation, and then only under the pressure of expectation—according to gospels written long after the fact. The Gospel of Mark, the earliest yet written some forty years after Jesus' death, is even more contentious on the question, indeed it consistently "presents Jesus as a perfectly normal man, with a family that included brothers and sisters. No angels announced his birth or sang over his crib" (Armstrong 96). Since 1901, the Gospel of Mark's prevarication has often been attributed to what William Wrede first called the "Messianic Secret," alluding to the question of the Messiah as shrouded in secrecy in Mark, which is commonly alleged to have named Jesus the anointed one only after his death and for the *edification* of the people. Wrede in fact distinguished between the literary and historical Jesus, insisting on the primacy of the former exegetical mode (Aune 1-4). The coming of the Messiah was of course

prophesied in the Hebrew scriptures, and Jesus was *finally* anointed deliverer of the Jewish nation and redeemer of the human race, though eternal life remained an explicitly exclusive club and, “Mark’s gospel is essentially a soteriological document in which history is subservient to theology” (Burkill, qtd. in Aune 4).

Terry Eagleton argues for a radicalised Jesus, intent more on the here-and-now than the hereafter. Eagleton concedes Jesus was no revolutionary, giving Caesar his due, but neither was he navel-gazing or deferring to predestination. Rather, Jesus was politicising inequality and injustice and Eagleton insists his disciples could have been in no doubt as to his expectations:

There is little opiate delusion in Jesus’s grim warning to his comrades that if they were true to his Gospel of love and justice, they would meet the same sticky end as him. The measure of your love, in his view, is whether they kill you or not. Christians who are not an affront to the powers that be, so he suggests, are not being faithful to his mission. (“Introduction” xviii)

If Eagleton is correct there is a broad discrepancy between the modern church and its congregations and Christ’s evangelising mission. Eagleton goes on to compare Christ’s mission with that of Marx, wherein however there can be no “evolutionary socialism”:

Given the urgency and severity of our condition—what the Gospels refer to as the sin of the world’—achieving a just social order involves passing through death, nothingness, turbulence and self-dispossession. This is the meaning of Christ’s so-called decent into hell after his crucifixion. Only through an

encounter with the Real of destitution can Humanity be remade. And this, given our pathological state of self-delusion, is possible in the end only by the grace of God. (xxi)

Eagleton and Klapwijk are apparently nearly as one here—though when Eagleton suggests that “the kingdom of heaven turns out to be a surprisingly materialist affair” (xviii), how does he square this assertion with incongruously idealistic concepts like “love” and “justice”? Eagleton is himself a lapsed Catholic and one does not presume to speak for him, though his late infatuation with Lacan is in evidence in his equally incongruous invocation of the “Real,” just quoted, and might serve to illuminate and qualify the context. The question serves as a primer for the next part, however, and to that end also, it is worth quoting Klapwijk again from his forward where, thirty years on, he restates the critique but fails to reiterate his own preferred source of illumination:

Here is the fate of our time. Reason is idolized as the ultimate compass for the future but it fails to enhance freedom and generates effects that threaten all life on earth. Critical awareness about these self-destructive tendencies is rare. Experts combat the failures of reason with more reason and without recognizing its paralysing results. What we need at the moment is a new critical vision, the need for a light—the Frankfurt theorists named it a “messianic light”—that is shining from the outside on a system that has discredited itself. (xii)

Klapwijk and his Reformation Theology perceive humanity in Calvinist terms which precede both Enlightenment and Romantic ideals, whereby we are innately wayward and sinful, requiring God's law as compass and Christ's sacrifice for redemption. However much this may offend modern, *enlightened* sensibilities, there is surely no disputing the substance of Klapwijk's critique; that reason, in the narrow sense, has so far failed us on many levels, indeed continues to invalidate the very premises of the Enlightenment. Meanwhile the Frankfurt school has arguably remained bereft of solutions and is dispirited at best. It cannot be denied that Klapwijk's own messianic light does provide ethical guidelines and a purpose; though the concept of earthly emancipation is redundant.

4.3 Specters, Spirit, and Discourse

In 2011 I attended a colloquium which asked contributors to "think the world." I decided to base my response on the English translation of Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (1994). In this quasi-mystical book, Derrida deconstructs three signature Marxist texts, part one of *Capital*, *The Communist Manifesto*, and *The German Ideology*, focussing on Marx's own proto-deconstruction of Max Stirner (an alias adopted by Johann Caspar Schmidt), one of the so-called "new Hegelians." Derrida was himself "thinking the world" in the prospect of a "new international" and professes his Marxist credentials in his attempt at legitimising the Marxist cause as an intergenerational species of intellectual martyrdom dedicated to setting the world aright. The object of his book was deconstruction, in order to reveal what

remained that was more, perhaps, than ideology, and maintained the Marxist cause as perennially vital.

The term “deconstruction,” coined by Derrida, regards any text as ultimately “aporetic”—of having no consistent reference to experience or phenomena. To complicate matters further, all human perception is translated by language, thus rationalised by this aporetic “intertext,” which we are born into and via which we interrogate reality. The essence of deconstruction is linguistics, and yet Derrida often points toward some organising principle within the very aporia deconstruction exposes. Such is the object of deconstruction; not deconstruction for its own sake, but for the sake of the remainder, whatever that may be. Derrida begins with a quote from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, drawing for Marxism a comparison with Hamlet’s dilemma over having to belatedly avenge his father’s murder; the king haunts the present and Hamlet is compelled to find restitution. Similarly, the ghost of Marx, and his Marxist host, haunt the late-capitalist present—figuratively consolidated, at the time, by Francis Fukuyama’s triumphalist (since then recanted) polemic, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and culminating in his *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992). Just as for Hamlet, who must avenge the past and so, “The time is out of joint,” new generations of Marxists, or post-Marxists, are similarly haunted and motivated by their intellectual debt, to mourn their fallen comrades and to reorganise in their turn. The object of *Specters of Marx* is to expose the enduring logic, or pure essence, that motivates Marx’s acolytes.

By way of contrast, I am sceptical of Edmund Husserl’s notion that *epoché*, or bracketing, legitimately reveals phenomenal experience, free of its symbolic configuration. I suspect we cannot avoid such mediation between the subject and the object of perception, and that an ultimate empiricism will remain problematic—

perhaps not even the object. Not only is the thing in itself a shimmering uncertainty, but it lies also beyond the veil of ideology. I hasten to add that such scepticism is merely prudent, and does not *insist* on our perceptual limitations, just as Hegel arguably didn't insist that there were none. Hegel trumped Kant merely by virtue of the absence of *evidence* that the thing in itself is opaque to us.

In any case, such equivocations pertain to ultimate knowledge, and I would rather rejoice in our ability to interrogate experience *as* it is given to our senses than lament our want of omniscience. As has been argued above, omniscience—or a genuine theory of everything—would resolve into its opposite and deny the savant transcendent experiences of imagination and the whole realm of the possible. We may not be able to say with certainty what we perceive, but our very intellectual reserve here is our greatest hope that we might become free—at least of malignant ideology. We occupy a compelling reality, compelling at least according to our animal senses and quotidian consciousness. And yet our experience of the world *comprehends*, or ideates, so much more than raw data. While our bodies register sense-stimuli and our brains process it into up to the second experience, our minds preside somehow above this merely tangible reality, both unconsciously and aspirationally—we long for diversion. Some of us may be docile, bovinely indifferent beyond the march of quotidian events, yet surely we are all, at least potentially, capable of or even driven to transcending the everyday. We do in fact attain some modest transcendence of our terrestrial constraints habitually via various media and technologies that relieve the monotony, stupidity even, of base reality.

Our corporeal lives are the vital condition of our being, however, which we neglect at our peril. Yet in our commitment to our distaff, to the maintenance of our mundane lives, there is I would argue an ever-abiding *suspension of disbelief* in that

reality—rather than outright credulity. As Catherine Belsey’s anxiety of the real might be argued to indicate, we are naturally sceptical of, disenchanted with, and even haunted by the diurnal round, neurotically perceiving cracks in its fabric and confabulating, in our idle moments and at leisure, alternative vistas. Our *excursive* selves, what we might call a medium of “transphysical” human *being*, is so far as we know fatally dependent upon our animal being and material welfare; our workaday lives and consciousness are thus more dedicated to *reality* than transreality; yet even here, our excursive selves, or transphysical meditations, are merely suppressed. For now, what I call our “excursive” or “transphysical” selves can refer to our intellectual forays in the discursive or linguistic realm of rational thought—what Habermas called the “Janus face” of Western rationality (qtd. in Klapwijk *Dialectic of Enlightenment* 55), alluding himself to the Marcuse/Weber consensus that industrial rationalism⁹ colonises and subjects all other modes of reason (Marcuse “Industrialization” 223)—what I would designate *one of* the halls of angst.

There are at least four conceptions of the world we might think. There is the phenomenal world—the *real* that for Lacan defies unmediated comprehension. Then there is the world of physical *reality*, which we perceive through various cultural filters and an overall ideological paradigm, the current such episteme being positivism, which exerts strict censorship over our discrete conjectures apropos a formerly wanton culture of metaphysical rambling. Despite this new orthodoxy, Husserl’s phenomenology insists that “no objective entity of science is available to direct and immediate experience” (Kockelmans 336). Which brings us to the variously conceived *lifeworld*; for Husserl, via phenomenological reduction, the lifeworld *stands in* as an empirical base for science—as opposed to more credulous

⁹ According to Marcuse, “technical rationality turns into material political rationality (or is it the other way around, in as much as technical reason was from the beginning the control of “free” labor by private enterprise?)” (“Industrialisation” 222-23).

modes of scientific realism. Similarly, Jürgen Habermas's lifeworld amounts to the cultural sphere of "communicative action," developed to counter the imbalance of rationalism, wherein our lives, optimally, respire in an ambience of cooperative negotiation and cultural meaning (Olga 18), outside which there is only suffocation. Third, and I adopt the term from Derrida, there is "spectral reality." In "thinking the world," Derrida's idea of spectrality precipitated for me the notional idea of a "transphysical"¹⁰ world, if I may call it that: a flux of transcendental thought, not coherent in any consistent way, in fact precisely confused, obtaining coterminously with the lifeworld. But I will return to this theme—for now we might observe that such notions fly in the face of rationality, as well as reductive philosophies of pure constructivism. Constructivism is reductive realism, humanity's servile state of spirit.

In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida provides the ghost of an etymology of the concept of spectrality, indeed his book is predicated upon its etymology and the curious fact that Marx's writings are largely *possessed* of ghosts and spectrality. All Marx's major concepts—the abstract nature of capital, commodity fetishism, exchange value, ideology and even dialectics itself—which formats the text of part one of *Capital*—are insubstantial and theoretical. In his focus on his selection of Marxist texts, Derrida reveals that they are all similarly grounded in *hauntology*—a play on the word "ontology." In short, Derrida argues that Marx's thought is grounded in *hauntology as ontology*, using indeed the very same structural tropes as the Christian order he aims to discredit. Derrida's intriguing thesis, in the words of Simon Critchley, is that "a certain irreducible spectrality and *différance* at work, a logic of haunting that, for Derrida, is the condition of possibility and impossibility of any

¹⁰ This word is not in the *OED* but does have some currency outside the rationalist orthodoxy, among latter-day Theosophists. I shall make my own suggestions in what follows.

conceptual order” (145-46). It is the nature, linguistic or otherwise, of this *différance* that is contentious.

Marx was intent on *exorcising* the ideological host, as it were—whose obverse also “haunted Europe” as a spectre in the famous opening of *The Communist Manifesto*—which prevented the revolution. This is one reason, I would speculate, why he so often chose to write in abstractly conceived terms. Such was his dialectical method, but it was also useful for eliding the conventional concepts and *stable* signifiers that too easily tend to assemble themselves into thoughts and sentences. Marx’s writings are thus dialectical and rhetorical, rather than rational and empirical. History was Marx’s empiricism. Derrida’s own text is haunted by the *différance* between the ideological/sematological and the more *inspired* components of language; or in Derrida’s terms, between the *hauntological* and the deconstructed *ontological*—which is to say that for Derrida the Marxist intertext is haunted by certain fundamental tropes which apparently have their essence not in common currency, but in quasi-universal ideals—which runs counter to the materialist ontology Marx was bent on establishing—not yet realised ontologically but haunting the present with an injunction for justice. The spectres, then, are not only Marxist, but the spectral enemies of revolution, haunting the spirit of revolution as itself. Derrida goes so far as to sympathise with the loss of nerve, “as if [in the end] Marx and Marxism had run away, fled from themselves, and had scared themselves . . . as if they had been frightened by *someone* within themselves” (*Specters* 105). Ernesto Laclau would rationalise these contending forces “discourses,” but for Derrida the spectres of Marx and their counterparts are *undeconstructable* and, “it is from the spectral drive that something like thought is born” (Critchley 147). This could be interpreted in Laclau’s favour, but is evocative of further speculation.

Différance amounts to the gap between a straight-forward reading of a text and its spectral burden. This sounds like mysticism and I think it should be conceived somewhat in such terms, indeed that that was Derrida's intention; not to indulge in mysticism, but to acknowledge, or rather not to obsessively or hastily deconstruct and edit it out. The essence of *post*-structuralism is the "mysteriosity" of the intertext, to use a modern idiom, which deconstruction throws into relief. Invoking Marcellus's "Thou art a scholar; speak to it, Horatio," Derrida highlights the incongruity of the designation "scholar," in that the

traditional scholar does not believe in ghosts—nor in all that could be called the virtual space of spectrality. There has never been a scholar who, as such, does not believe in the sharp distinction between the real and the unreal, the actual and the inactual, the living and the non-living, being and non-being ("to be or not to be," in the conventional reading), in the opposition between what is present and what is not, for example in the form of objectivity. Beyond this opposition, there is, for the scholar, only the hypothesis of a school of thought, theatrical fiction, literature, and speculation. (*Specters* 11)

While from this we may still infer that Derrida's spectrality is properly above mysticism, it also contains a warning not to fall into the trap of treating *as* "speculation" that which does not conform with the foregoing binary oppositions. Derrida is thus, I would say at the outset, emphasising his ambivalence, even apropos deconstruction, which does not leave behind a void. Speculation, as such, has no allegiances, but the difficulty of thinking without them is *palpable*. "What force does Marxism retain if we set to one side its materialist account of life,"

Critchley asks (*Ethics* 148), perhaps not willing to consider the nuanced possibilities implicit in Derrida's distinction, in Marx's critique, between the spirit, and the spectres he wishes to purge. Materialism is here itself being deconstructed.

It was precisely Marx's tendency to offend against the logic of materialism in his dialectical speculations, which his bias nevertheless attempted to bring to their tangible conclusions. Derrida cites Plato as Marx's ancestral antagonist in the abstract (*Specters* 126), for whom form preceded corporeality, but Marx's materialism is not a clear winner by any stretch. Dealing with *The German Ideology*, Derrida focuses on Marx's critical onslaught on Max Stirner. "Stirner sees spirits," Marx mocks (*Specters* 120). Despite Marx's Bravado (paraphrased by Derrida), Stirner was a formative influence in the development of Marx's materialism, anticipating post-modernism and insisting, in essence, that grand narratives were no longer plausible in a world where ideology is abolished, be they God-centric, Humanist, or Marxist: "to the egoist only his history has value, because he wants to develop only himself, not the mankind-idea, not God's plan, not the purpose of Providence, not liberty, and the like" (Stirner, qtd. in Gareth Jones 142). Derrida observes the "ingenuousness" of Marx's vociferous demolition of Stirner's supposed supernaturalism, beginning with the rejoinder, "what is the spirit other than ego? ... What is the spirit, owing to its creation out of nothing, other than itself?" (*Specters* 121). Marx himself comprehensively *deconstructs* Stirner's rapprochement with Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, a template for a reconstruction of Christianity. Derrida feverishly paraphrases and quotes Marx, quoting Stirner, by turns:

He [Stirner] makes of religion a *causa sui*, as if specters could move about on their own. He does not see that "Christianity' has no history whatsoever," no

history of its own. It does not manage to explain, as it should have done, the “self-determinations” and the “developments” of the “religious spirit” based on “empirical conditions” and “empirical causes,” on “a determined form of society,” “determined relations of exchange and industry.” He missed both the being-determined, therefore “necessary,” he missed the *determination* (the master-word of the accusation) and more precisely the empiricity of this determination. He thus misapprehended what determines this determination of spirit as hetero-determination.” (*Specters* 122-23)

Marx is making a mockery of what he sees as the clear evidence that Stirner, in his attempt to reform Hegel, sews the seed of a reformed Christianity; specifically, Stirner “misapprehended what determines this determination of spirit as hetero-determination” (*Specters* 123). As rehearsed above, Hegel’s absolute spirit is realised through the subject’s heterological progress. The problem for Marx then becomes how to square the differentiation of spirit and spectre—which Stirner conflates, qua Hegel—with a materialist perspective. Stirner also, however, implicitly exposed the “categorical imperative” invested theretofore in the doctrine of Historical Materialism as idealistic, renouncing which, however, left the cadre the dupe of yet another ideology. Marx and Engels were forced to revise their conception of the cause as bereft of “*all* ideas of any autonomous role whatsoever,” thus bequeathing the “self-defeating task of explaining the place of a voluntarist movement in an economically determined historical process” (Gareth Jones 143-44). It was after this that Marx and Engels also began to play-down the economic determinism, and overdetermination was also mooted.

In seeking to vanquish Stirner's ghosts, Marx inadvertently fathers-forth his own; a *hauntology* of what I might call "dynamic atemporal thought," bearing in mind that Derrida conceives his "hauntology" as a conflation of haunting and ontology. The problem for Marx, according to Derrida's deconstruction is that specters are not born of the Hegelian spirit, but of the body, and so ultimately of ideology. There is finitude within infinity—that is the body is vehicle of the Hegelian spirit as immanent possibility, the product of work—but "there is no ghost, there is never any becoming-specter of the spirit without an appearance of flesh, in a space of invisible visibility, like the dis-appearing of an apparition" (*Specters* 126). The ghost is thus a bodiless body, a recuperated *form* and an infinite regress logically follows in which neither the body from which the ghost is emergent, nor the ghost which reanimates the spectral body, takes precedence, and time is out of joint. "Humanity is but a collection or series of ghosts," Derrida has Marx conclude, with "the happy irony of the pamphleteer and a somewhat nervous self-satisfaction, one whose body no doubt is worked over by some compulsive disavowal" (*Specters* 138).

The further problem of course is that Marx vests his critique ultimately in a materialist ontology as the end of history as ideology, so whence proceeds his eloquence but from the same ideological store? All Marx's major concepts partake of spectral logic, so that the Marxist critique must itself be a product of the spectral logic it ridicules, hence the haunting not only of Europe, but of *itself also*. What remains for Derrida, however, is the undeconstructable injunction for justice, what Derrida calls, deferring to Walter Benjamin, "weak messianism," and what he variously calls for himself an "injunction," "justice." Marxism never gets put to bed and these terms signify the unresolved and unsubstantial, yet authoritative and

irrevocable, calls to action, to *praxis*, the conversion of thought into action. Such *calls* are always conflicted, however, not merely by hegemony, but by internal conflict. Just as a priest's vocation is conflicted with the spectres of the Enlightenment and the arguments of materialism, so too the avant-garde must battle with its own demons.

Benjamin's messianism is a humanising compromise between progressivism and vitalism. The idea of social progress through activism is the constant foil against which Benjamin conceives historical messianism; one may think of *Geist* as having its own magnetic bias, like a compass held in equipoise. Vitalism is then for Benjamin the obverse of positivism; this time *Geist* is at the behest of timeless natural forces. Benjamin's idea is that *Geist* has its own heading (McCole 64-65) and Derrida would seem to agree. The complementary violence perpetrated by progressive and vitalist indifference against historical time yielded, "an intoxication purchased at a high price": to be "punished by all the spiritual and natural powers" (McCole 65). Derrida suggests something similar; that the ghosts of Marxists past, present, and future, continue to haunt the lifeworld. Their discourses, or grievances, like those of Hamlet's father, continue to circulate unresolved in some ethereal, trans-historical realm—a discursively interstitial lifeworld, not at peace, that insinuates itself as a perennial, yet conflicted, *injunction* to act—as with Hamlet's father, a haunting demand for *justice*. It is interesting that Marx wished to exterminate history's ghosts, though he was obsessed with spectrality, even conceiving something tantamount to supernatural as investing commodities, and so inciting commodity fetishism. Even Marx, the materialist, conceded that objective reality could not be reduced to such simple terms; "Marx declares that the thing in question, namely, the commodity, *"is not so simple,"* which Derrida points up as "a

warning that will elicit snickers from all the imbeciles, until the end of time, who never believe anything, of course, because they are so sure that they see what is seen, everything that is seen, only what is seen” (*Specters* 150). In my view this reiterates Derrida’s equivocal stance as a post-structural agnostic.

Derrida conjures and plays with the material/immaterial. The essence of *Specters of Marx*, and arguably of deconstruction as method, is vicarious exposition of the ghostly void—the aporia, or the ur-text of the text—that is, the papered over contradictions in our textual reality. Were, indeed, Derrida more accessible and concise than he is, his works would amount to mere palimpsests, more wallpapering over the cracks, shutting out the ghosts and reducing deconstruction to verbiage. It is precisely his prolixity that sustains the anxiety which would otherwise be edited out. *Specters of Marx* was a reaction against both Marx’s, and recently Fukuyama’s, quests to end history, to kill the ghosts that give vitality and immanence to the troubled present. Despite the progressive bravado of liberal-rationalist triumphalism, modernity is haunted by past and present injustice. The spectral thought of Marxism is not at peace and will continue to haunt the diverse institution of capitalism—and its own inaction. Just as Hamlet was haunted by the injustices of the past, and carried the burden, the injunction to act, in spite of his prevarication, so the spectres of Marx, the patent injustices presided over by capitalism, continue to haunt modern consciences and bedevil the status quo. According to this logic, Marxism still has leverage, but not enough to topple capitalism; for that, the spectres would have to be aligned, I would contend.

Ernesto Laclau, in a studiously objectivist vein, deconstructs Derrida and takes another view. Laclau begins by endorsing Derrida’s commitment to “direct[ing] the historio-political forms back to the primary terrain of their opening to the radically

heterogeneous. This is the terrain of constitutive undecidability, of an experience of the impossible that, paradoxically, makes responsibility, decision, law and—finally—the messianic itself possible in its actual historical forms.” But then Laclau criticises Derrida’s determination to retain the “emancipatory,” “ethico-political injunction” for a “democracy to come” (Laclau *Emancipation(S)* 75). The problem for Laclau is evident enough in the terminology; not only is “emancipation ... no more than another name for the eschatological messianism that he is trying to deconstruct” (*Emancipation(S)* 75), so too “democracy,” however idealistic the democracy to come, a deconstructed concept, evokes the same spectral logic and should be disendorsed rather than cultivated (*Emancipation(S)* 77). Laclau’s arguments leave humanity bereft of the *spirit* of ethics; his ethical logic is purely structural. Laclau has the logical right to this structural reductionism apropos the inconsistent Derridean argument he is criticising—deconstruction is itself deliberately bipartisan, and Derrida contradicts his own premises in insisting on the “emancipatory promise as promise: as promise and not as onto-theological or teleo-eschatological programme or design” (qtd. in Laclau, *Emancipation(S)* 74). A more useful corrective angle, however, might be to correct *Derrida’s* implicit structuralism, in the quotation in question, by replacing his *existential* “promise” with the promise of ethical realism.

This is beyond Laclau’s materialist philosophy and discursive logic, of course, and ethics consist in nothing but discourse. Laclau dismisses “Levinasian ethics”—“whose proclaimed aim, to present ethics as *first* philosophy, should from the start look suspicious to any deconstructionist” (*Emancipation(S)* 78)—which, founded in the body, do not amount to value realism, while the *priority* Levinas assigns does smack of spectral logic. The “value realism” I allude, to, however, is *a given*,

consisting a priori in nature—not despite social texts, or individual deviance, but not inscribed by them either. Thomas Nagel argues for a value realism that is not reducible to or dismissive of subjectivist or socialist logic—these certainly being influential—but ultimately obtaining as part of the natural order. “In this it [value realism] resembles physical truths, psychological truths, and arithmetical and geometrical truths” (Nagel 102). The value realist then sees a direct correlation between the rightness or wrongness of an act without, necessarily, recourse to contingent social or psychological considerations—which, indeed, in their turn, in their righteous plenitude, tend to bludgeon the evidence and render subtler considerations senseless. Value realism does not in itself, however, amount to an ethical injunction, and is readily waived for whatever reason, just as Derrida’s ethical injunction might be, or so Laclau mocks (*Emancipation(S)* 78). But this surely points it up as the “weak” messianism or *différance* Derrida nominates which, dare I suggest again, is not necessarily discursive. The point of value realism of the kind Nagel infers is that human behaviour, across cultures, is often predictable—beyond the “normative” domain Laclau deals with—and so indicative of some primary influence. Nagel concedes that “the intuitive conviction that a particular domain, like the physical world, or mathematics, or morality, or aesthetics, is one in which judgements are attempts to respond to a kind of truth that is independent of them [and] may be impossible to establish decisively. Yet it may be very robust all the same and not unjustified” (Nagel 104). The problem, I suggest, is the very weakness of the drive versus its rationalist opponent.

Laclau’s systemic account leaves no scope for an inner compass, which is not merely confounded by discursive noise, but made obsolete, a nonsense of, by

discourse analysis. Individual agency can consist in nothing but eccentricity, ultimately accountable in group and social terms. As Laclau eloquently puts it:

We live as *bricoleurs* in a plural world, having to take decisions within incomplete systems of rules (incompletion here means undecidability), and some of these rules are ethical ones; it is because of this constitutive incompleteness that decisions have to be taken, but because we are faced with incompleteness and not total dispossession, the problem of a *total* ethical grounding—either through the opening to the otherness of the other, or through any similar metaphysical principle—never arises. (*Emancipation(S)* 79)

This is stunning both in its reductive premises and its redemptive conclusion. It seems undeniable that Derrida's "democracy to come" does indeed amount to eschatological logic, though his *idyll* is not the end of history that might be inferred—which Derrida was bent on mocking in all its forms. Laclau, moreover, leaves the ethical subject hapless in its aporetic reality, as if the subject requires an utterly uncompromised ethical order within which to be consistent—or indeed he/she could ever be consistent. Laclau peremptorily quashes the central aspect not merely of humanity, but qualitative consciousness, which is the real anomaly in society, albeit weak. Behind identity is a discriminating entity as much as a constructed subject. We live as *bricoleurs*, certainly, but we are more than *bricolage*. It is not incompleteness that grants us existential freedom, nor would completeness foreclose on it; a honey bee is neither seduced by nor suspicious of the anomalies in its social order. Room has to be made for the radical freedom of human consciousness, *within* its constraints and whether it is exercised or not. Laclau proposes his

“undecidability” as a fundamentally pure category when no such random condition exists that might precipitate the infinite possibility he prefers not to interfere with (*Emancipation(S)* 78). Laclau’s radical dogma of non-interference amounts to an intellectualised mode of political correctness, a kind of democracy-based post-colonialism that is not Marxist at all—as if Marx was indifferent as to what order followed capitalism! Geoffrey Harpham offers similar criticism of Laclau and Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*:

They offer no way of deciding hard cases where interests clash, no way of ranking interests, no principle of decision; nor do they conceive of such principles of resolution in any but oppressive terms. To the extent to which they urge such traditional values as ‘openness,’ or ‘participation,’ they remain committed to form rather than content, and thus are liberals rather than radicals. (253)

Ironically, Laclau finds *Derrida* conservative and inconsistent in wanting to retain a notion of democracy that is inseparable from the classical spirit of emancipation, which is in fact tied to Christianity. Laclau prefers a clean break, an ideological purge, and so also, consciously or not, makes his own break from Raymond Williams’s idea of the residual and emergent dynamics of the hegemonic present. I would say Laclau’s preference is logically puritanical, and that any order to come, democratic or not, will inevitably carry elements of its inheritance in its new incarnation (for argument’s sake supposing that present democracies are of a kind). Moreover, Laclau’s position is both untenable and risky; as he says himself, other incarnations of a strict spectral logic are possible, just as his “populist reason”

might spawn something random. I contest this. Historicised society at any time is comprised of a few short-lived generations, a literal incarnation of residual effects, as well as aspiration, tradition, memory and so on, predicated perhaps as much on certain *givens* of human nature as on socialised injunctions. I side with Derrida and believe we do have to work with the institutions we have—including not so much democracy as the democratic impulse—which arguably cannot be reduced to their merely discursive structuration, but represent something in the *spirit* of humanity.

4.4 Ethical Foundations

The epiphany for me in *Specters of Marx* was the realisation that the spectral world of thought, Derrida's historical host, could be conceived as almost tangible—attenuated, rather than evanescent, real in as much as thought prevails as a troubled influence in the world, not merely in terms of Husserlian utility or discursive noise, but as the vital spirit of humanity. Thought is what delivers us from brute existence and makes life both worth living and unendurable. The eschatological logic of the ends of history posited by Hegel, Marx, and Fukuyama suggested the realisation of ultimate philosophical-cultural/politico-economic horizons, whereas the ultimate horizon is surely spirit, or unconflicted thought—a mode of emancipation wherein the conscience is untroubled and in harmony with the institutions of the lifeworld, not to any utopian degree, but best practice. However the human *animal* may evolve, it surely cannot transcend its physical existence, not if it were immortal, or enhanced by technological means. Intelligence, imagination and thought *are* transcendence. Only by means of mental projection, representation, rhetoric, imagination, morality, aesthetics etcetera do we transcend our brute physicality. Even supposing we

obtained immortality, via extropianism perhaps, moreover secured ourselves from harm or pain, what then?

How else would we divert ourselves from mundane reality, except by means of “transphysicality”—including spontaneous thought and imagination—out of body forays, as it were, rather than bodily experience on its own? Thought and imagination (even psychosis) are often spontaneous, dreamscapes and intuitions presenting perhaps the most compelling instances of original perception not tied to physical register. Descartes himself was of course convinced enough by such experience to conceive of substance dualism: “I knew I was a substance whose whole essence or nature was solely to think, . . . which does not require any place or depend on any material thing in order to exist. Accordingly this ‘I’—that is the soul by which I am what I am—is entirely distinct from the body” (qtd. in Belsey 25). Surprisingly, the term “transphysical” is not in the *OED*, since what it describes could not be more mundane. The word has been recently recruited by Dr Eric Weis, however, for extra-mundane purposes in his *The Long Trajectory: The Metaphysics of Reincarnation and Life After Death* (2012). Weis appears to have followed Roy Bhaskar in committing “intellectual suicide,” but his use of “transphysical” is much like my own, at least in speculating on the virtual reality of a “transphysical” realm of thought. Derrida’s “spirit” suggests a hint at something similar.

Unlike Bhaskar and Weis, however, I am not concerned with reincarnation or life after death, but only with crediting thought and imagination as *vital* parts of human nature—and human society—which do indeed exist at least pseudo-independently of the body. A neo-Darwinian explanation might speculate that transphysical experience *exists* within the very dilemma of the subject-object split. Accordingly, the subject-object split is not the product of alienation, or a condition to

lament all—or necessarily to explain or maze over—but to take comfort in. The split provides for the enigma of transphysicality—in suitably orthodox and reductive terms—while keeping the animal out of harm’s way. The philosophical conundrum of the subject-object split can be explained along Darwinist lines in that it appears to be an attribute of all sentient beings, demonstrated in the ability to perceive and avoid danger presented by the *other*. The split provides for a remove, as it were, a vantage point from which to *anticipate* danger, take advantage of fortune, or smell the roses. If perception was immediate there would be no chase between a predator and its prey, no contest between bat and ball. Only by such means do we obtain relief from animal being while also monitoring and protecting it. It can easily be extrapolated from this premise that the development of society, culture and language, exacerbates this *natural* split unto infinitely-contingent proportions, such that culture does indeed become the site of *transphysical construction*.

The real problem of the split, however, is similar to David Chalmers’s “hard problem” of consciousness—in that there is a discriminating interlude, or agency, at all—but there is no question of the subject-object split being advantageous in the hazardous environments all organisms inhabit. Derrida did not commit “intellectual suicide,” like Bhaskar and Weis (and countless others), but was more concerned with the *spirit that motivates the specters*, that is with the ethical nature of the injunction for justice that lies buried beneath the verbiage. This grounds Derrida’s deconstruction of Marx’s texts in the here and now, with which, in the *spirit* of Marx, I am also concerned—as opposed to Bhaskar and Weis’s more exotic transphysical ramblings. Klapwijk’s own sense of the transphysical is evident in his assertion that, “They [Christ’s followers] *know* that ‘man’ is exterritorial and they are not ashamed to know it” (*Dialectic of Enlightenment* 97-98). The problem with

Klapwijk's exterritorial conception of Christ as the source of Messianic light and ethical foundation is its implicitly passive stance in a world that increasingly needs action. Klapwijk claims, "they remain faithful to the earth and sensitive to suffering" (*Dialectic* 98), but his own logic dictates submission to God's will and acquiescence in the earth's predestined fate. Bhaskar and Weis's transphysical tourism is similarly unaccountable for this world, offering diversionary hope in life after death and reincarnation, which implicitly disdains the here and now, or is at least a negligent diversion from it.

All the logic we need proceeds from the insight that the subject-object split represents an *evolved* capacity, both for self-preservation and diversion; designed first, however, to circumvent danger, and not to anaesthetise the prey. Even Robert Koon's insistence, that "some doxastic or prescriptive intentionality is ontically prior to all social conventions, practices, attitudes, preferences" (298) is answered by this conception. In a state of nature, the subject-object split instantiates a *strategic intervention* in the immediacy of events that necessarily posits a *consciously canny agent* in the *animal's* best interests. Socialisation and technology increasingly render this self-protective faculty redundant and culture flourishes in its stead. Culture thus emerges as an evolutionary by-product of sentient nature—the spontaneous emergence of meaning. Nor is this conception wholly reductive, since the emergent consciousness, or agent, necessarily asks questions of direct relevance to its human predicament, initially physical but increasingly spiritual. One can extrapolate from this how religions evolved in answer to all such anxieties. The problem perhaps emerges once culture reaches a point of sophistication whereby the *ground* of being falls away and the acolyte is left at the mercy of priests, secular as well as spiritual, authorised by God and versed in arcane law, or in the modern world expert in the

mysteries of science. The problem is that neither species of priest is devoted to their respective calling *independently* of the host social order.

The alternative to this *natural agency* that is the subject-object split would seem to be along the lines both theists and anti-materialists tend to favour; that the world is administered and patronised by a divine being, or that consciousness and meaning are teleologically inscribed or somehow cosmically emergent. This scenario is more sympathetic to the insistent and intergenerational demand for meaning, purpose and justice. Perhaps more compelling yet, unlike our first scenario it does not automatically dismiss the wisdom and transphysical experience of countless sages down through history. Perhaps the greatest excess of our rational age is the wholesale dumping of the phenomenology and concomitant philosophy of the ages. All redundant and all too often treated as delusional and infantile by a rational orthodoxy with no conception of *how to live*, and well on the way to an inglorious and self-destructive demise. The only answers the spokespeople of the institution of rationalism have to such charges are fatalist spiels about cosmic time, à la Sagan, or a puerile “rational optimism,” as espoused by the author Matt Ridley of the book by that title, wherein ethics are not so much redundant as consigned to the markets, *science* being the objectively uncontaminated saviour of humankind and maestro of *progress*—progress dictated by the markets. Ridley muses musically that “there was always a Rousseau or a Marx to carp, and a Ruskin or a Goethe to scoff, but [thanks to the Enlightenment] it was possible to wonder, with Voltaire and Hume, if commercial behaviour might make people more moral” (104). The answer for Ridley is self-evident: “Today it is the new money of entrepreneurs and actors that funds compassion for people, pets and planets” (105). Putting aside the question of the ethical credentials Ridley champions—Ridley is a Viscount and member of the

House of Lords cum scientist, journalist, and failed chief banker—the question of the *sustainability* of the enterprise is answered by his “sunny optimism” (352) and more and better technology.¹¹

Returning to our first scenario, the epoch of consumer capitalism looms as a thoroughgoing dystopia wherein an insatiable appetite for diversion is both cultivated and exploited by market forces—an influence as abstract and omniscient as any deity. At the same time, our *consciously canny agent*, which formerly prescribed the animal’s safest course, is withered beneath the contempt of a super-ego and hyper-stimulated, by the culture industry, to the point of abject indifference to the animal’s perilous course. The animal is of course no longer independent and the conscious agent defers to supervening social and institutional security measures—long since sold down river, but an abrogation of responsibility in any case, since the animal’s lifestyle is patently neither salubrious nor sustainable¹². What remains of the conscious organism’s self-reliance is a latent and nagging anxiety, palliated by the consumptive diversions of the halls of angst—culture writ large.

Returning briefly to our second scenario, or account of the conscious subject—the Cartesian idea of substance dualism, including Catholicism, Klapwijk’s Calvinist messianism, other variations on the theme, or idealism and teleology—in short, a universe administered by God or otherwise dynamically meaningful. The advantage in this broad spectrum of possibility, for a grounding of ethics, is that it can

¹¹ Regrettably, there is little space for the very large subject of “liberal-rationalist hegemony,” including the recent polemics of the so-called “New Atheists” and Terry Eagleton’s responses in particular. Paradoxically, given Marx’s rationalist ambitions for scientific credentials and his own ambitions for mastery over nature, these are key post-Marxist anxieties that I hope to address in the future.

¹² Once again space does not permit the citing of evidence to the effect that mental illness, physical degeneracy and non-communicative diseases are epidemic in rich Western countries and spreading elsewhere.

potentially accommodate the manifold *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) William James wrote about in the classic book of that title. James documented many *wonderful* religious experiences and refused to consign them to necessarily materialistic causes, refreshingly taking refuge in *ignorance*—which his rational descendants too often refuse to acknowledge. James was a pragmatist and value realist, judging that the value of religious *opinions* “can only be ascertained by spiritual judgements directly passed upon them, judgements based on our own immediate feeling primarily; and secondarily on what we can ascertain of their experiential relations to our moral needs and the rest of what we hold as true” (18). James differentiated “‘geniuses’ in the religious line” from “second-hand religious life”; those for whom religion “has been ... made by others ... communicated by tradition, determined to fixed forms by imitation, and retained by habit” (6).

Perhaps Klapwijk and Weis are such geniuses, and their preoccupations are thus compelling and important to them—nevertheless they have corporeal responsibilities too—but for their followers the inspiration is purely diversionary. Even James’s pragmatism is subject to the same charge in its focus on the individual’s needs, at the expense of a critique of their conditions of possibility in the broader social context. James seems bent on promoting angst generally as an individualised condition with a ready spiritual cure, designating the human condition inevitably wretched beneath an ideology of cultivated optimism, always tenuous and often exploded, turning us then “into melancholy metaphysicians” (140). There is no doubt wisdom in the idea of cultivating more realistic expectations of life than the ones we foist upon our children—or the Matt Ridley’s of the world foist upon us—but it is surely hasty to blame on our existential condition what might at least be mediated by a society tailored to the whole animal’s needs. However we conceive of

those needs—evolved or God-given—they are both physical and spiritual; yet our human predicament surely dictates a bias in favour of the former. *We are here*, at the dictate of God, remote intention, or the blind indifference of the universe, and it behoves us to make the best of it. This does not mean wearing rose-coloured glasses, or favouring the physical over the spiritual, but seeing each component of being as vital to the other, rather than making a fetish of either.

In order to rein-in the sermonising tone here, let us remind ourselves that the Marxist injunction for justice and redemption is in *this* world, just as Claudius's injunction for justice was in the State of Denmark. Justice as a concept is first of all an ethical charter. The execution of justice is often problematic, but its expectation is a norm as well-founded as the expectation of taking a fall, or being devoured when due care and attention are not paid—serve you right! As social beings the concept of justice has been elevated to universal status and we are haunted by infractions against it, against the moral code it instantiates that our instincts cannot deny. Freud's petty-fogging superego does not do *justice* to the *will to justice* that hails us. Thus for Derrida *justice* remains an undeconstructed injunction of the lifeworld that we register in our bones, if not in our heads. It is not only the ghosts of Marxists past that demand justice, but the flagrant offences against the moral justice of the (virtual) universe that are institutionalised in capitalism. *We know* that greed, extravagance, excess and sloth are irresponsible and *wrong*—we don't need the Bible to tell us—just as we *know* that gross wealth and poverty, glut and famine, are *wrong*, both in themselves and in their disparities. If we know this in our bones then we feel the contradiction as an anxiety of consciousness, or in our souls, as the spectre of futility and pointlessness. In this conception, ethics are not something we can choose to ignore without injuring ourselves morbidly.

Yet ethical realism is rationalised irrational, refined back into a set of intangibles, consigned to psychologism, pragmatically suspended and routinely abused by the prevailing political economy. The modern democratic capitalist State embodies the contradiction of enshrining a just and ethical order, based on God's law or Humanist principles, of which it routinely makes a mockery.¹³ It is in this context that I am concerned with "thinking the world" and establishing "ethical foundations" in this world rather than the next. By ethical foundations I mean reconciling the disjunction between the rhetoric of ethics and the unethical reality of State capitalism. Ethics are rightly pursued exterritorially, in God, because there is no ethical order on Earth. The fact that billions worship their God of choice points up the desperate human need for an ethical order. And yet God's law, as practiced, is also compromised, commodified, and routinely flouted, as well as being antiquated, intolerant, non-inclusive and generally dismissive of the here and now. Thinking the world is a tall order and can surely only be conceived in idealistic, indeed dialectical terms. Thus I am thinking the world in terms of humanity's *own* ethical foundations, institutionalised first in its governing bodies and international relations. If I could enact one stricture that would change the world instantly, and might even save it, it would be to impose a wealth and assets cap on every individual, regardless of rank. This single measure would spell the end of capitalism as we know it—the deity we all serve—and restore the individual, the animal, to its own modest habits and diversions. Marx's dream of communism was romantic—which is probably why he

¹³ One of the favourite claims of capitalism's defenders, such as Matt Ridley, is that it continues to raise millions up out of poverty and living standards generally (11-47). Quite apart from the question of the sustainability of first world lifestyles for approaching nine billion people, I take issue with the suggestion that the billions have been there all along, waiting to be rescued. The reality, which there is only space to point at here, is that economic growth requires material growth, and that the population explosion since the industrial revolution is due to that demand. Poverty has diminished, certainly, but demand for economic growth has grown exponentially and the billions, the famines to come and the degradation of the biosphere are the by-product of the unchecked accumulation of capital.

never promulgated it—or at least so far-fetched from the global capitalism that now holds sway as to be unimaginable, and unsustainable. A wealth and assets cap applied to all would have the effect of throttling back the engines of growth and imposing a semblance of material equality. The cap might still afford a degree of ostentation and ambition, but not of power-mongering and accumulation for its own sake. Such *fantastic* notions as these have their proponents in other disciplines,¹⁴ however, and we cannot pursue them here.

In such a world we might, perhaps, transcend both our physical burden and the constraints imposed by culture. Does this sound fantastic? Do we not do it already, in thinking the world, in deconstructing the strictures of body and mind we as often as not observe only in the breach? What limits should we put on our thinking? If we follow Husserl, we have rational limits, but do we not subscribe to the dogma of scientism by reducing thought to a *pseudo*-detached contemplation of phenomena? And to what end? Science has no ultimate end; its means amount to an endorsement of the status quo, which also determines its ends. C.P. Snow's polemic over the two cultures has not so much been reversed as one has been made redundant. The search for ends and meaning is the business of metaphysics, ethics, politics and art. Imagination and untrammelled thought are the medium. We must think the world comprehensively, critically and constructively. We cannot afford to resign ourselves to a reductive realism, such as that world politics are inevitably driven by competitive self-interest, or that *democracy* must remain elitist. This may be the current reality, but how do we reconcile it with the "injunction" to act, and how does it sit with the "undeconstructed spirit" and "democracy to come"? It is only by

¹⁴ Tim Jackson, author of *Prosperity Without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet* (2009), for instance, is an economist, playwright and founder and director of RESOLVE (Research Group on Lifestyles Values and Environment). His book clearly lays out the issues and the solutions which combine economic reform and humanist values.

reducing *material* inequality that *cultural* elitism can be condoned, indeed celebrated. Are we to go on disregarding the spectres not only of Marx et al, but of weak messianism in all its incarnations and their ghosts? Or are we to suffer the exorcism of our demons via the cold tide of rationalism that continues to wash over us? Marcuse and Weber endorse such rhetorical questioning and abstract reasoning in the cause of critiquing what Marcuse calls “capitalist reason: abstraction becomes critical of this reason in so far as it shows the degree to which capitalist rationality itself abstracts from man, to whose needs it is ‘indifferent’” (Marcuse “Industrialization” 224). There is arguably very little to ponder, phenomenologically. In its phenomenal state, nature is meaningless, only acquiring meaning, for us, via our idealistic regard, whether aesthetic, fearful, awe-inspired or existential. Far from rationalising nature, as Belsey contends, it is only idealism that can conceive it sublime and wish to protect it. In rational terms, the natural world is only explicable to us via the sense we have made of our sense-experience of it, both cultural and visceral; to go beyond that, to appreciate, empathise and deplore, requires transphysical imagination and conscience.

Thus the world of nature is part of the lifeworld as much as of brute reality. Anxiety, fantasy, desire, ambition, love, hate, generosity, greed; these are a few of the preoccupations that can both beset and take us out of our corporeal selves. I’m not interested in evaluating these concepts, except to say that they can be identified with both corporeality and ideality; they represent confluences of both. Our lives are spent contending with these dichotomous parts, tangible/intangible, one generally taking precedence over the other; depending, perhaps, upon circumstances, the culture, and individual motivation. In the wealthy West, and now around the globe, these human preoccupations are increasingly patronised, husbanded, nurtured and

fed-on in order to produce capital, via what Marx called commodity fetishism.

Derrida devotes several dense pages to this mysterious phenomenon in *Specters of Marx*. The *OED* defines fetish as “made by art” and “an inanimate object revered as having magical powers or as being inhabited by a spirit.” Derrida, whom one is obliged to paraphrase, calls the commodity fetish a “thing” without phenomenon, whose transcendence is not altogether spiritual, retaining the bodiless body Derrida theorises as making the difference between specter and spirit (*Specters* 150-51). The bodiless body is the ghost-image, or after-image, rather than pure abstraction, and commodity fetishism is sheer diversion.

There is not space here to even sample the incredible diversity, of type and nature, of the commodity form today, but is it too much to assert of its effects that late-capitalist humanity is a pathetic hybrid whose dichotomous being is fused into an agonising conflation of body and mind, the constant traffic and allure of commodities never satisfying either. Body and mind are of course one, according to both Marxist and neo-Darwinist orthodoxy. The denizens of late capitalism, at the end of history, are like factory chickens bred for their meat and stuffed with the illusion of freedom; incongruously earthbound yet desirous of flight. Is this such a grotesque analogy? Isn't life under capitalism, for the “huddled masses,” tantamount to factory farming? Like the flightless plight of meat-chickens, modern humanity is deemed incapable of *free thought*. Wherefore the attendant malaise of postmodern anxiety, then? Transcendence is reduced to commodity fetishism, faddism; the futile flapping of stunted wings stands in for transcendence and dignity.

The *spirit* of humanity is demeaned, but so is the real world we inhabit; capitalism straddles both, impoverishing human nature and the biosphere simultaneously. Indeed, I would put a heading over Derrida's hauntology: Ethics.

Just as Marxism, as a weak-messianic, spectral injunction for *justice* continues to haunt the capitalist lifeworld, so does an *ethical injunction* haunt capitalist exploitation of the real world. There are indeed remarkable parallels between the notion of a spectral injunction for justice, and the resurgence, or hauntology, of ethical thought. After 1968, Western Marxism contracted into Culturalism and was on the brink of extinction after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the infiltration of capitalism into Mao's China, a few years earlier, and Fukuyama's proclamation of the end of History. Ironically, though arguably provoked by these events—and one other—ethics, in the form of radical thought, began its resurgence around the same time, after decades in the theoretical wilderness. Deconstruction of Humanism was all but complete and a tenuous reconstruction was about to begin.

The other formative, or perhaps only precipitous event of the new theoretical era, at least for deconstruction, occurred at the end of 1987 with the discovery of Paul de Man's anti-Semitic war time journalism, which caused a contemporary journalistic uproar wherein, as Geoffrey Harpham puts it, "anti-theorists ... astonished at their good fortune ... [found] de Man and deconstruction vulnerable on *ethical grounds*" (21). Derrida published his scathing rebuke, a reversal once again, of the various charges in the journal *Critical Inquiry*, under the title "Biodegradables," in the course of which it transpired that discursive ethics had never really gone away; had only been driven underground—from spectrality to chthonian depths. The de Man affair signalled a return, or coincided with the re-emergence of humanist ethics which Harpham calls a return to Kant, not just by Derrida, but Foucault as well (75-76). The problem for Kantian ethics had been its grounding in humanist thought, which itself had to be deconstructed. Ethics had to be freed from the hubris of egoic centrality that is humanism; which might, and did,

morph into all manner of egocentricity; from masochism, to sadism, to autocracy. An ethical injunction evokes the rod, thus Derrida only evokes its spectrality as the haunting relation to the other, in the form of what he calls “infinite responsibility”.

Indeed, we have now come full circle; Derrida’s conception of Justice in *Specters of Marx*—published in detail only after the de Man scandal—in Simon Critchley’s words, “defines and is defined by the ethical relation to the other. In Derridean terms, Justice is the undeconstructable condition of possibility for deconstruction, the ‘for-the-sake-of-which’ deconstruction takes place” (151). Deconstruction has *ethical foundations*—to evoke the oxymoronic title of this section. Similarly, the anamnestic solidarity of Marxists past is an ethico-political haunting. Justice, the undeconstructable and weak messianism, all allude to an *ethical* injunction to act. They allude, moreover, to what is outside the cultural text, not phenomenologically, but ethically; citing infinite responsibility towards the other in all its forms. And here is where we can revisit Benjamin, briefly, because his messianism includes an ethical injunction against our treatment of *material reality* as well; an injunction, or haunting, that I have tried to insinuate above and have figured as the obverse of or anchor to our innate transcendental habitat. According to John McCole, alluding to both the material and the transcendental, and even to commodity fetishism,

Benjamin sometimes seemed to locate the unconscious in the material world itself. He observed that the surrealists, unlike psychoanalysis, “tracked down the traces not so much of the soul as of things.” Or as he described the figure of the collector: “The decisive thing about collecting is that the object is released from all its functions in order to enter into the closest possible

relations with that which is similar. This is the diametrical opposite of usefulness. . . . Here we constitute an alarm clock that calls the kitsch of the previous century to “assembly.” The collector thus performs a modest dress rehearsal for a messiah who will come, not to destroy, but to rearrange a world that instrumental rationality has degraded into a chaos of objects imprisoned in “the drudgery of being useful.” The tragedy of modern culture is not . . . that objective culture threatens to overwhelm subjective cultivation but that it rests on the unrestricted domination of nature by humanity. (McCole 294)

The inspiring thing, perhaps, about this is that the ethical injunction obtains in the material world as well as in the spectral realm of transcendent thought. Subjective and objective reality are ethically inseparable. Ethics are not merely the historically abused, arbitrarily imposed dictates of the autocrat or the state. “Ethics” is just a word that might easily be used to signify the transgression of cultural norms, or authoritarianism. But ethics also have a spectral, untarnished existence, like justice, which haunts our unethical actions in the world. “Ethics” is a transcendental signifier.

Yet is this enough? Humanity seems to get by swimmingly with a bad conscience. Terry Eagleton, for one, is impatient with Derrida’s spectral ethics, which he paints as “a form of spiritual vanguardism which breaks disruptively into the self-satisfied inertia of everyday life” (*Trouble with Strangers* 247). Perhaps; although as we’ve seen self-satisfaction, more like anxiety, is a cultured and commodified rationale. Eagleton goes on to accuse Derrida of binary thinking in his rigid oppositionism between the dissident and the normative—as though each is necessarily exclusive of the other—and ultimately, of “monadology,” alluding here

to Derrida's fixation on otherness as the primal state of relations apropos the human condition (*Strangers* 247-48).

One does wonder if radical alterity, or heterology, amounts to a sufficient ethical injunction, let alone provide sufficient lift for the chickens to escape the factory and attain transcendental flight. If ethics are a human discourse at the transcendental level, why could they not be formalised and observed as a governing set of injunctions, disallowing the free-market tyranny of capitalism? Of course if capitalism was presided over by such ethics, it would cease to be capitalism in any recognisable form. Capitalism is fundamentally unethical. Such a transformation is hardly likely to occur spontaneously, however urgent the spectral injunction to act; we are all absolved of guilt by the sheer complexity of the system we affect to despise. A major weakness of Derrida's thinking, and that of Continental Philosophy in general, according to William Schroeder, is a failure to, "envision alternatives to the current political-economic-cultural order and to devise ways to realise these alternatives" (628).

This is indeed the challenge, to think outside capitalism, and not just to theorise, but to *establish* "Ethical Foundations." Nevertheless we must first be *compelled*. Kant makes the intriguing contention that freedom of thought cannot prosper under its own authority but, paradoxically, only in its subjection by authority. According to Kant, only an "enlightened" ruler who "has no fear of phantoms," but wields power and authority, "would dare to say: *Argue as much as you like and about whatever you like, but obey!*" Kant goes on to elucidate on what he calls the "strange and unexpected pattern in human affairs":

A high degree of civil freedom seems advantageous to a people's *intellectual* freedom, yet it also sets up insuperable barriers to it. Conversely, a lesser degree of civil freedom gives intellectual freedom enough room to expand to its fullest extent. Thus once the germ on which nature has lavished most care—man's inclination and motivation to *think freely*—has opened within this hard shell, it gradually reacts upon the mentality of the people, who thus gradually become increasingly able to *act freely*. (qtd. in Harpham 71-72)

Harpham goes on to discuss the confusion and consternation this passage from Kant's *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* has incited in modern philosophy, arguing that finally Kant was intent on a new paradigm of thought wherein rather than the conditions of reason itself, he was embarking on a broader ontology for humanity (73-76). As is usual and understandable, Harpham reaches no firm conclusions, though the spectre of tyranny is suggested in the Enlightenment itself. Returning to the passage cited, in the modern era of liberal-rationalist democratic capitalism we are surely experiencing precisely the paradox Kant describes, *in reverse*. Liberalism deploys a soft ideological exterior dedicated to human rights, granting virtually total discursive freedom, with only token injunctions on free speech, made in the name of political correctness—even that an indulgence *extended* to identity politics, rather than any curtailment of freedom. Moreover, welfare capitalism and consumerism *fetishise* civil freedom, which in turn cultivates the *illusion* of intellectual freedom. Our alleged intellectual freedom (institutionalised in culture and consumption in all its forms) is realised as the very mode of production—exactly as Williams conceived of it, yet its antitype politically. The culture industry in its myriad forms, including the arts—formerly the avant-garde—

is routinely patronised by and dependent upon government largesse. The ability to *act freely* diminishes the capacity to *think freely*—that is to resent and so think *outside* the prevailing order of thought. It is precisely the indulgent nature of liberal-rationalist late capitalism that propagates sloth of body and mind—while preserving it above criticism, in keeping with the very tenets of liberalism!

I choose “sloth” again, one of the deadly sins, or capital vices of Christian ethics to illustrate two points. The first, to reiterate my contention above that we *know* sloth is *wrong*, just as we *know* that the other deadly sins—lust, gluttony, greed, wrath, envy, pride—are *wrong*. Our modern sensibilities might balk at an ethical injunction against “lust,” but the original sense was intense desire, or *lusting after* anything. Lust then, like the other deadly sins, is immoderate and can be argued to be inimical to the well-being of the individual and society generally. There is not space to deconstruct them, but I contend that we *know* that each of these indulgences is *wrong* for body and mind, as well as *other*, and regardless of their classification as “sins.” That they are wrong is self-evident, a *felt* kind of knowledge. They could then be argued to provide for an *ethical foundation*, a tangible set of manifest truths, rather than intangible and often unreasonable morality. My second point in invoking the deadly sins is that they are precisely *not* condemned and vilified by the modern church, when these sins are patently inimical and abominated by God in his magnum opus. In keeping with the indulgent nature of liberalism these sins, which are mainstays of our consumptive culture, are placed above criticism and virtually ignored. Meanwhile a comparatively minor *sin*, like homosexuality, one not *felt* sinful, viscerally or spiritually, but merely as the transgression of a social norm, is found intolerable and often excoriated by the same institution that tacitly condones the self-destructive behaviour of the deadly sins. Herein we have the subtle, yet

gaping chasm, between definitions of ethics and morality, between tangible and intangible (intolerance); morality alludes to a mysterious good in itself, and ethics to “the good for us” (Harpham 259). Harpham puts ultimate faith in *morality*, enforced by authority. I would put my faith in *ethics* not merely enforced by authority, but taking the *form* of authority. The seven deadly sins do not moralise, but negatively espouse a set of fundamental ethics that if adopted *constitutionally* would wash away the immoral tyranny of capitalism.

Perhaps Kant realised that liberalism, born in the Enlightenment, provided no compelling moral authority, its humanist premises more akin to theology in their phantasmatic assertions. Human rights were both fetishized and made unaccountable. Nor indeed is the moral authority of the church any more effective; it is nearly as liberal as the institution it serves, ignoring the tangible ethics it might champion in favour of fetishizing conservative norms. Terry Eagleton concludes with a similarly indifferent logic of the “Real” that proceeds from his Lacanian cum post-Marxist account of Ethics. Eagleton argues that ethics and politics share the same rhetorical and ungrounded space; “Ethics involves impersonal commands just as politics does”—as if there can be for humanity no ethical mandate that carries any weight—ethics for Eagleton amount merely to the grubby business of negotiation over the same predicament (*Strangers* 324-25). The only tangible for Eagleton and Žižek is “the desire of the Real” (*Strangers* 322)—the unknowable ground of anxiety and *jouissance* that drives us in defiance of all authority. I agree with Eagleton that a straightforward heterology, even Derrida’s infinite responsibility to the *other*, is not enough. But I differ with materialism generally in the proposition that no ethics can compel us. Even in that case, we must then compel ourselves. Susan Neiman argues in her *Moral Clarity: A Guide for Grown-up Idealists*, that we are perfectly capable

of constructing our own compelling set of existential ethics (415-29). Yet I would anchor this to the discriminating faculties of qualitative consciousness and transphysical judgement. Wee are capable of adopting ethical foundations and prohibitions that are *felt* as compelling in our bones. If they were adopted at the constitutional level, both of society and subject, in the present political economy it would be tantamount to revolution.

We seem to be approaching the very crisis when we will, to cite Benjaminian again, be “punished by all the spiritual and natural powers.” It seems to me, when I think the world of the twenty-first century, that we need ethical *foundations* that govern and ameliorate our treatment of both ourselves and the planet—which are to all intents and purposes one. Capitalist liberal rationalism cares for neither and the messianic injunction is *irrational*. The messianic injunction to act remains vital, however, as the haunting of past, present, and even “*traces* of the future,” to give the aged Marxist, Fredric Jameson, the final word: “...and it is all of this that restores some immense temporality as tendency or Tao which has been flattened out by positivism and finally reduced to the present by the current social order” (174). The challenge then is to bring ethics down to earth—to the simple and corporeal conditions of being that are undeniable and imperative.

4.5 Terminal Thoughts

“Whole Cultures”

It is a mistake to go on conceiving of culture in holistic terms which elide the reality that the “whole culture” is divisible into consumers and elites. The “whole culture” label does not in itself democratise culture. Indeed it masks the fact that

culture remains trenchantly elitist, moreover that no level playing field obtains. Capital is the lifeblood of elite cultural practices, which only obtain their *exclusionary* eminence by its investment. The “whole culture” is a furphy which institutionalises gross inequities and excludes or segregates *amateur* and menial participation. The “whole culture” model imposes a cohesive hegemony where none exists in reality, and actually runs counter to any Marxist project that seeks to highlight exploitation. Consumption is the modern mode of exploitative production, which attains to decadent lifestyles for the few, and consumptive morbidity for the many. Williams’s concept of the “whole culture” is finally an idyll, conjuring romantic images of communitarian life wherein everyone contributes. The contribution of the masses consists in the deprivation of self-reliance and the enslavement of fantasy.

“Materialism”

Materialism is the doctrine of meaninglessness, incongruously embraced by Marxists and Neo-liberals alike. While neo-liberals are resigned to the *justice* of the markets—within which their niche is generally secured—Marxists impose materialism like a rubric on all considerations of life—yet wish to retrieve some lost or yet-to-be-realised purpose therefrom. Materialism cannot satisfy either aspect of the Marxist dilemma; it cannot do justice to the moribund order *under* capitalism, and it cannot raise humanity up in prospect. Idealism is the offended capacity in our current “sick” societies, and the missing ingredient *within* Marxist utopias. Ironically, the communist utopia is a wholly idealistic conception, yet doctrinal materialism would deny it idealism of its own.

“Ethics”

Both the rationalisation of the neo-liberal agenda, and the agony of the Marxist dilemma is highlighted by any consideration of ethics. For the former, ethics amounts to legalese, hypocritically vaunted and constitutionally observed in the breach; for the latter, the dry entrails of materialism are perennially re-examined for any sign of life—for a precedent or rationalisation of an ethical life. Grounds for ethics can never proceed from the physical conditions of life, but only their idealistic complement. Whether aesthetic, compassionate, or projected onto God, ethics are idealistic, a *felt* affectation cum instinctual appreciation of right and wrong—whose observance may still require equanimity, self-discipline and the courage of conviction. The exemplary moral authority of the social order is paramount.

4.6 A Concluding Pamphlet

The Marx-Engels critique was first and foremost an anti-capitalist emancipation movement. It was motivated not by philosophical questions as to the integrity or provenance of human reason, the academic diversions of the day, but by the spectacle—and spectres—of human wretchedness that had attained industrial proportions as the by-product of capitalism. Marx and Engels were both Hegel acolytes, but were both also affronted by the mismatch between Hegel’s idealism and the material conditions endured by the working class—with which they had both been intimate.

Idealism was the vehicle Marx and Engels used for their sustained assault on industrial capitalism. By idealism I can now point to their *transphysical* intervention in the material squaller humanity was mired in. Dialectics—which *actualises* a

systemic model so as to idealistically account for internal contingency—was Marx’s method to conceive of the material dynamics of the system and where it might lead. Rhetoric, the pen and philosophy (*as foil*), was the medium. The actual intervention Marx and Engels valorised, far remote from these, was the working class, whose organised discontent they were well versed in and encouraged by. They (necessarily) failed to take account of hegemony, however; not everyone was destitute, and ideology can reconcile the most abject state with its endurance. And while idealism is a powerful nostrum, it is ultimately only a placebo. In extremis our mortal, fragile and sensitised condition takes precedence over idealism.

Meanwhile, Marx overreached himself in seeking to deconstruct the whole edifice of Western thought and spirituality, as if Plato, Kant, Hegel et al had contrived their ideas from nothing but conceits and delusion. As if idealism—humanity’s conscious purchase on reality, existential freedom, yearning, fear and conscience—could be reduced to ideology and replaced by a dedicated materialism. After food and safety, humanity craves and occupies the transphysical above all. Yet while *emancipation*, however that might be conceived, looms large in the mind’s eye, it easily gives way to diversion and flight. In his dialectical engagement with the forces of German idealism, Marx’s philosophical materialism was gradually pared back until there was little to sustain the movement he and Engels championed. They retreated, somewhat, from the idealistic fray into Historical Materialism as the fundamental dynamic of Humanity’s material and social destiny; apropos idealism, leaving well enough alone. My own findings support this default strategy. Capitalism stands condemned on its own terms, and it is criticism of its dire effects—socially, spiritually and environmentally—and manifest destiny that must be the focus of a radical *post-materialism*.

According to this logic, Raymond Williams's Cultural Materialism—including modern variations on the theme—was a retrograde step, as reductive and unsupportable as Marx's last refuge in materialism, which, for posterity's sake, he should have walked away from eloquently. As it transpired, Engels tried to retrieve a systemic philosophy of materialism that consigned idealism to the ideological dustbin. Reductive materialism has only ever been the province of intellectuals and priests of science. Idealism is the palliative and indispensable counterpart to the material human condition. Ironically, it is capitalism that has trashed idealism far more effectively than Marxism ever could, reducing our idealistic cathedrals to vicious self-interest. Institutional religious idealism either shadows an indifferent neo-liberal agenda—for token-credibility's sake demonising minorities and overlooking enormities along the way—or it abrogates responsibility for this world in favour of the next. Similarly, at the individual level religion, an eclectic commodity, serves as little more than escapism. If Marxists need to embrace idealism, idealists need to come down to earth and take responsibility for the physical conditions of life.

It is a frustrating paradox that idealism has no physical effect in the world. Marx was right that material change can only be brought about by real action. Yet as history testifies, idealism begets action. Then it depends what or whom idealism empowers, where the power to act resides. Western capitalist democracies offer hope in that they *do* vacillate between concessions to social justice and *laissez faire*. Here is idealism in action, but the trend, the default, continues to favour the latter. This comes down to incumbency—hegemonic deference to the existing mode of production.

Theorising cultures and democracies as chaotic discursive “wholes” within which patterns can nevertheless be described, manipulated, or plotted, as Williams and Laclau do, cedes agency to the *complex*, which remains more or less concentric to the *material* dynamics which sustain it. Change is only ephemeral and this passive stance can only be rewarded with inevitable and devastating collapse. Neither is revolution the solution, as Marx’s logic dictated. Human beings are too short-lived, timorous and conditioned to hardship by nature to summon the will—though they will follow meekly unto tyranny. Radical change can only be brought about by concerted *idealism*, concerted *indignation* with the *manifest* offences against our basic humanity, presided over by capitalism.

Capitalism has to be the target of indignation, not just from Marxists and environmentalists, but from every church; from God’s church to the union movement, the arts, sociology, and the sciences. None of these has any credibility if they go on serving Mammon. Each can be redeemed by standing apart *idealistically* and fomenting for radical change vested in *human* ethics, which are readily identifiable and far more tangible than any vague notion of heterology. Terry Eagleton and Slavoj Žižek go on calling for revolution, making an ongoing mockery of Marxism, which ought to be recuperated for its damning deconstruction of capitalism and its profligate, dehumanising and exploitative dynamics. Revolution is off the agenda, except in as much as the bourgeois revolution is still underway. The only sign of any revolutionary epoch after that is economic and environmental collapse. Those of us in the West who are conversant with capitalism’s corrupting influence, impoverishing and polluting effects, its decadent latter stages and patent unsustainability, are in a position to *idealistically* oppose its further development. Concerted idealism can *enact* change. Massive changes could be wrought by a

measure as simple as a cap on wealth—a cap on the endless accumulation of capital.

To quote Eagleton out of context and in the cause of *idealism*, including Marx's *idealism*: “even if it finally fails in its project, it can at least reap the bitter-sweet satisfaction of knowing that it was right all along” (*Trouble with Strangers* 326).

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