The Cadence of Becoming

To resume again...

In the current debates of Continental philosophy there is a return to questioning the sufficiency of Becoming as a conceptual framing of change and transformation. Perhaps it was the good timing of people like Alain Badiou, Peter Hallward, Adrian Johnston, and Slavoj Žižek in their return to that grand theosophical figure of German Idealism Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling that has promoted this debate. There again, perhaps it was the rhetoric of Becoming after Henri Bergson and Bergson's reinvention by the Deleuze-machine gaining a new purchase on life. But the debates are most certainly localised around Quentin Meillassoux's small treatise *After Finitude*.

Away from the delights of philosophy, in the unthought traces of mundane everyday life, contingency gets a bad name. Call it 'risk' and it is something you insure yourself against. Call it 'love' and it is something that destroys your beloved through your idealisation of them. Or call it 'choice' and you'll find the dissatisfaction promulgated by the crises of capitalisms both in the traditional liberal-democratic forms and in the new authoritarian modes. When we purvey our epoch what are we to think? We appear to invest so much time and energy towards insulating ourselves from contingency that talking about it might be yet another analgesic tactic to assuaging it...

When our fabulous conference conveners Anna and Charlotte approached me to be a speaker at this event I had initially reacted with some good humoured skepticism at their offer. It's not that I didn't want to accept their offer, but that I had been contingently

situated in an invited position for which I had not applied. Of course, all my anxiety about their invitation was quickly overcome by my post-secular, atheistic and idiotic *jouissance*. Yet what is most interesting to me is that what I experienced in this moment is what 'contingency' is for contemporary Continental philosophy: something that erupts into the life of the human subject as a speaking-being for which there are no words but that demands witness and testimony. To bear witness and speak a testimonial then, the speaking-subject is forced to either transform their position such that they can find their voice again, to transgressively act-out the neurotic sham of 'voicing the unvoiceable', or to fail at both and suffer aphasia. The kernel of this moment of contingency is where I will begin.

Transformation, Transgression, Failure

What I wish to bring forward here is a brief sketch of how this underlying principle of contingency enables the possibilities of transgressions and transformations. Already in Freud we encounter such a formal principle of contingency in the primal binary-signifier between what is and what is not, the *Vorstellungs-Repräsentanz*. This concept of the binary-signifier is always about loss, precisely the loss that is incurred with the entry to language for which language promises surplus reward but often delivers too little, never quite giving back the 'lost object'. The *Vorstellungs-Repräsentanz* is thus the ontological principle that structures the Becoming of a speaking-being: it is the longing for that which is lost even to the Unconscious.

From here we can map transgression and transformation as two ways of

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encountering the space that is opened up to Becoming. In transgression the subject functions as a stand-in for the empty place of the lost object. Here what is properly transgressive oversteps the limit of the world as it is given but does not break with the prevailing order. Rather, transgression relies on the limits instantiated by the prevailing logic, or Otherness, of the world.

Transformation, on the other hand, is an attempt to reorient the speaking-being's relationship to the lost object. Negative or affirmative, transformations always move within the letter of what the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan calls the Symbolic Law. When transformations succeed we find ourselves realigned in the field of the Other. When transformations misfire we are confronted by 'symptoms', a kind of ciphered message that isn't addressed to anyone in particular and which belies an ambiguity about the status of the speaking-being: the one who is not duped by the arbitrary rules of language is the one who errs.

At a glance then it is transformation that is the more radical turn of the two. But what a *failed* transformation reveals is ontologically primary to what a successful transformative affirmation offers. What then does this mean for us in the developed West today in our era of technologically-saturated crises? I would argue that such a question is stepping into the ring with the Other all too quickly. Instead, I suggest we take some time and find some space to consider what is being unveiled by all this symptomatic symbolic junk, this structure of the symptom.

The Structure of the Symptom

The structure of the symptom in psychoanalysis exhibits many of the features that one can attribute to transgression or transformation.

Symptoms are anachronistic, without time; there is never a 'right time' for a symptom to emerge. While symptoms may vary in what they are, the basic structure of a symptom points in two directions: the vague and enigmatic past from which it has emerged and the uncertain future into which it endlessly repeats. This is what makes the symptom anachronistic, its double-time without a fixed, frozen present time. Symptoms in this sense are transgressive: they perforate the arbitrary limits instantiated by the Other and its Law by staging an out-of-joint remainder in the place where representation 'ought' to be excluded. To this extent the before-time of the symptom is what Freud called the *Vorstellungs-Repräsentanz*: those signifiers that stand in for the void of excluded representations.

The symptom is also enigmatic. Where a letter always arrives at its destination, the symptom has no destination, no addressee in particular. But what the symptom does address in its generality, namely the Unconscious, is not something added to the speaking-being. Rather, as anyone who reads Freud or Lacan closely will note, the Unconscious emerges in the cut that gives voice to being. This cut is what Lacan calls 'symbolic castration', the threat that reality might decay. Or, to put it another way, the speaking-being as a subject always begins from the choice between 'nothing' and 'something' where this 'something' is "always irreducibly in the sense of 'something extra, something additional, something foreign / put on, in a certain respect something

contingent.'"[1] The symptom is thus enigmatic because it is 'put on', which is not to say that it's all that easy to get off precisely because the symptom is acephalous rather than given by the Other.

The resistance of the symptom to the interpretation of the Other is its *jouissance*. But what Lacan calls *jouissance*, the suffering of enjoyment or enjoyable suffering, is intimately connected with the modality of the symptom. There is a lesson here for ideas of transformation because the modulation of *jouissance* oscillates through the chances to make and modify sense. If *jouissance* is the ineffable suffering of the symptom, the enjoying of its infinite repetition, then we can also postulate three modes of enjoying the symptom: *jouis-sans* or without sense; *jouis-sens* or with a sense of direction; and *j'ouïs-sens* or I am moving on. This variability of *jouissance* is the mark of its contingency. *Jouissance* doesn't add anything to polite *plaisir*, instead it intervenes in enjoyment but mostly remains void or at least avoided.

Chaos and Contingency

This structure of the symptom highlights the contingency at play in ontology. The intervention of *jouissance* into enjoyment, of the symptom into the chain of signification enunciated by the speaking-being, is brought about by the failure of the Other. Were the Other whole, a consistent totality, there would be no symbolic misfiring, no symptoms. With the manifestation of the symptom however a path is opened towards understanding the primacy of a negativity that enables change in principle. Somewhere between ontological thinking and psychoanalysis there is a path

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1   Žižek in *AF/AW*, p. 40

that winds down the chasm of contingency. This contingency is the *jouissance* that intervenes in the 'normal' regularity of Becoming and sets it awry, teasing out transformations and transgressions.

Contingency's renewed importance in contemporary Continental philosophy has been championed by thinkers already *au fait* with psychoanalysis, namely the aforementioned Badiou, Meillassoux, Johnston and Žižek. While for reasons of time we will have to leave aside many of these figures, I would like to focus on Žižek's reading of Meillassoux as it relates to the possibility for transformation and transgression prior to the emergence of a being who might be subject to, for, or by transformation and transgression.

Žižek's encounters with the Chaos belying Meillassoux's vision of contingency persist in the interstices between the *Jenaer Realphilosophie* of Hegel and the *Die Weltalter* of Schelling. The vestiges of these two oeuvres are especially prominent in an essay by Žižek called *The Abyss of Freedom* that accompanies a translation of the second-draft of Schelling's *Die Weltalter*.[2] Here, in the opening discussion of the interaction of Ground and Existence, Žižek comes upon the concept that locates chaos in both Hegel and Schelling: madness. No mere psychologism, Žižek's analysis attempts to pinpoint the way that the normal run of our immediate natural surrounds (*Umwelt*) is always-already thrown off balance by the incommensurability (in principle) of Ground's maddening impenetrability and the transparent 'rational' determinism of Existence. What is at stake here is not the given-ness of things but the hampering of Ground's preontological status, "it only 'is' *sous rature*, in the mode of its own

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2   See *AF/AW*.

withdrawal."[3] Thus any being in particular (up to and including God), for Žižek's reading of Schelling, is rendered contingent on the basis that its full self-identity is thwarted by the withdrawal of Ground from the ontology of Being (Existence) because it lacks "any proper ontological consistency."[4] Here madness enters as the "violent gesture of contraction that negates every being outside itself."[5]

Žižek pursues this moment of madness through the *Jenaer Realphilosophie* of Hegel to a point that is noticeably similar to Meillassoux's encounters with the chaotic necessity of contingency. As Žižek states, "the subject is no longer the Light of Reason opposed to the nontransparent, impenetrable Stuff (of Nature, Tradition…); his very kernel, the gestures that opens up the space for the Light of Logos, is absolute negativity qua 'night of the world.'"[6] What concerns Žižek here is not the fall into madness as a regression into the chaotic abyss of Ground's inconsistency (as *Abgrund*) but how the subject emerges from the abyss of madness into 'normalcy'.

This locus of Chaos in Žižek operates in a manner that matches Meillassoux's speculative mode. In Meillassoux the question of how to make sense of ancestral statements beyond the finite horizon of the subject's normalcy (Kantian finitude) locates its mad 'principle of unreason' in the realism of Ground's preontological status: Schellingian Ground as characterised by Žižek is, for Meillassoux, the Chaos that belies contingency. The Hegelian confrontation with madness achieves this in terms of the subject while Schelling conceives of such radical contingency in terms of the unity of

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3   Žižek in *AF/AW*, p. 6
4   Žižek in *AF/AW*, p. 6
5   Žižek in *AF/AW*, p. 8
6   Žižek in *AF/AW*, p. 9

Ground (Chaos) and Existence (Being) in the world.

At this point it is crucial to emphasise that although Ground and Existence are not identical this does not make them co-dependent or correlated. Rather, they operate in a manner that allows one and the same cause to produce opposite effects. The 'mad act' of contingently withdrawing from the madness of Chaos is to shift out of the excessivity of Chaos and not to instate a type of cosmic balance between Ground and Existence. Compositely, the contingency that grounds the instantiation of every *logos* reveals the insufficiency of Being to but not be a totality (i.e. a being is not given but rather is not no-thing). Parting ways with Schelling's effort to unify Ground and Existence, Žižek similarly underscores how "the codependence of two antagonistic forces does not reside in the fact that one force needs the other as the only ground against which it can assert itself."[7]

This folding back of Existence and Ground upon themselves rather than purely in antagonistic codependence is a familiar trope of the novels of Chuck Palahniuk. Palahniuk, like other American literary minimalists such as Amy Hempel, structures his prose to play with the subterranean meanings a reader's judgement imposes on a text in the very act of reading. As a reader you never see the bullet coming, and this is perhaps sage advice for an attempt to exert tyrannical control of transformation and transgression given the autonomic character of Ground and the Existence that brings forth the subject.

The procedures of Palahniuk's plots, narratives, and characters are always revealing the chaotic vortex beneath the austere assurances of civil society; i.e. what I

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7   Žižek in *AF/AW*, p. 20

earlier referred to as risk, love, and choice. But this elaboration of chaotic contingency in Palahniuk's work is foremost Romantic, not nihilistic. This is important because it helps us to locate a way out of the tired nihilism that characterised thought in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Palahniuk's novel *Diary* is particularly instructive in how to eschew nihilism through references to the poetic mania of Ground as encountered by the novel's absent antagonist, Peter Wilmot.

In *Diary*, we are told that the character of Peter Wilmot, the comatose husband of Misty Wilmot (the narrator), spent time prior to the opening of the narrative refurbishing houses, and in these houses he hid rooms covered with fanatical raving. These rooms, these dark places, bob up to the surface of *Diary* with a sense of untimeliness. Peter has entered the resident's homes in good faith and vandalised the space, motivated by his being overwhelmed by the terror that Waytansea Island's families intend to perpetrate.

Peter's rooms are what Palahniuk elsewhere refers to as a 'chorus', a recurring theme that brings forward the kernel of the narrative. But what is being repeated here? The rooms of Peter Wilmot are dark places where the entire space has been overtaken by someone's graphic mania. To quote:

"These summer people, poor Misty, she tells them, Mr. Wilmot wasn't himself
for the last year or so. He had a brain tumor he didn't know about for—we don't
know how long. Her face still pressed to the hole in the wallpaper, she tells this
Angel Delaporte how Mr. Wilmot did some work in the old Waytansea Hotel,
and now the room numbers jump from 312 to 314. Where there used to be a

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room, there's just perfect, seamless hallway, chair molding, baseboard, new power outlets every six feet, top-quality work. All of it code, except the room sealed inside.

And this Ocean Park man swirls the wine in his glass and says, 'I hope room 313 wasn't occupied at the time.'

Out in her car, there's a crowbar. They can have this door-way opened back up in five minutes. It's just drywall is all, she tells the man. Just Mr. Wilmot going crazy.

When she puts her nose in the hole and sniffs, the wallpaper smells like a million cigarettes came here to die. Inside the hole, you can smell cinnamon and dust and paint. Somewhere inside the dark, you can hear a refrigerator hum. A clock ticks.

Written around and around the walls, it's always this same rant. In all these vacation houses. Written in a big spiral that starts at the ceiling and spins to the floor, around and around so you have to stand in the center of the room and turn to read it until you're dizzy. Until it makes you sick."8

These houses that contain Peter's rooms perform the function of Existence: they are domestic spaces that solidify an attachment to a place, a time, a history, a symptom. But it is as though the possibility of Peter's rooms was always there, hiding in plain sight: all the island's families knew about the planned terror, all the mainland visitors to Waytansea Island were implicated. The history of the homes carried this within the very act of dwelling inside them. Peter Wilmot's lost rooms, his dark places, are the

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8   Palahniuk, 2004: 26-27

realisation of a contingent possibility always-already present in the structure of Waytansea Island's civility: the abyss of Ground breaking through the illusion of the *logos* or totality of the community's Existence.

Contingency of the Symptom

Although we might contend from the above discussion that the contingent withdrawal from Chaos/Nothing is necessary for the manifestation of any *logos* as such, the properly philosophical encounter with this withdrawal appears to arise at the very moment of a contingent gap emerging in the extant state of *logos*, of a voice in Being. This presents, quite literally, a terrain of transformative possibilities by exposing *logos* to its arbitrary foundation; and the dark rooms of Peter Wilmot are precisely such an exposé of the façade of Existence as the Being of community. Yet the *logos* of Being elucidated by Meillassoux seems to indicate that this *logos* encodes Chaos as an impenetrable symptom: the mad withdrawal from Chaos that has no *logos* to its movement. And what is the name for such a formation of contingency in *logos* as a cipher (on the side of *logos*, an element irreducible to *logos*) but 'the symptom'—a term noticeably absent from Meillassoux's discourse in *After Finitude*.

Certainly, we might consider this symptomal character of contingency is what makes the normalcy of *logos* go awry in the sense that every attempt at formal-notional determination rests on a 'mad act' of an arbitrary violent gesture: not being nothing. Yet *a propos* of Meillassoux (and Schelling), the contingency of this persistence in *logos* also suggests that contingency is a troubling, maddening element that puts the human

subject awry. The subject supposed by Meillassoux's speculative non-metaphysical philosophy herein must come to terms with the symptom of their own mad arising/grounding in Existence—not in the limited subjectivist view of some New Age construction of natural wisdom, but instead in the infinitely demanding atemporal depth of Chaos in which even our natural surroundings are necessarily contingent and prone to giving way.

Such an analysis of the contingency of the symptom (of existence) invites an opportunity to think through the subject of Meillassoux's philosophical, non-metaphysical speculation as non-All. The rejection of totality in Meillassoux's analysis breaks apart totality from *logos*, the space between which is chaotic: an unfolding of partial objects in an endless night. The speculative subject of the contingent withdrawal from Chaos is thus confronted with their void-status. Herein the subject is rendered as 'void' by the ontological Void of Chaos, the site of speculative analysis becomes the enigmatic ground of Being. The symptom highlighted by contingency in this way is therefore the very existence of the subject as such; the subject as a formal construct of minimal difference between the *logos* of Existence and some enigmatic, impenetrable, imperfect, contingent Ground. It is only on virtue of this incompleteness of Existence-Ground that the mad act of withdrawal from Chaos can be recognised retroactively as the 'necessity of contingency'. Herein the subject is non-All, never quite elucidated by the totalisation of *logos*, instead always a partial void.

Such a view of Chaos and Being can be seen in the cyberpunk fictionalisations of virtual reality. In these literary speculations, authors such as William Gibson draw out

the affective materiality of the contingency of being-in-the-abyss but also go further

than Meillassoux by examining the extension in a chaotic Void. In his early works

Gibson provides us with an interesting example of how the 'mad act' of withdrawal

allows the subject to be non-All and yet prone to the contingent effects of *logos*. In the

acclaimed *Neuromancer* (1982), *Count Zero* (1984), and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988),

Gibson develops a topological vision of cyberspace as an empty plane populated with

geometrical objects that represent hordes of data. One enters cyberspace through

electrodes placed about the head that are attached to a 'deck,' or interface, allowing

access to and navigation around the matrix of cyberspace. The spatiality of Gibson's

cyberspace is itself empty, a kind of Void-Nothing whose depth is characterised by the

relative quality of the representations of geometrical data (*logos*) to one another and the

user's intellect (analogical to Meillassoux's 'speculative realism') that may, at any

moment, shift, turn, collapse, and so forth. Embodiment remains a 'necessary evil' of

this technological interaction in Gibson's narrative vision. For example, the subject can

still experience vertigo but feels an uncanny absence of resistance when hastening

through this Void. Gibson's cyberspace cowboys 'feel' the Void-Nothing of cyberspace,

the Void impresses sensations seemingly from within the 'sense' of *logos*. 'Sense' is

thus rendered categorical and formless in-itself, a type of non-metaphysical *chora* in the

way it opens the possibility for these sensations felt in the Void to be incommensurable

with the disembodied rationale of navigating cyberspace.

What is curious about Gibson's narration of the Void is how, upon entering

cyberspace, a character will lose their sense of actual embodiment because the domain

of virtual reality is far more replete with immediacy however chaotic. This is in accord with how all *logos* is, in the view of Meillassoux and Žižek-*vis*-Schelling, put on, fake, virtual, etc. The senses that absorb the 'natural surroundings' of the *Umwelt* intrude on the virtual field of possibility, the feel of using the deck to navigate cyberspace, for example, tends to only report sensations pertinent for the intentions in cyberspace, the phenomenology of this Void. With immediacy on the side of the virtual the actual is overcome by the reality of the virtual/*logos*. That is to say, where there is no active subjectivity the Void remains in its virtuality to hide the necessary contingency of the body.

Something within Sense but greater than a sense itself informs the cowboys' intelligence to navigate the space: fantasy. This is so because the Void is replete with an irrational immediacy coextensive with the 'effervescent punctuality' of consciousness. The Void/Chaos appears in the most fleeting of instances as it withdraws and speculative fantasy sublates the 'gap' in its wake. However, as Meillassoux and Žižek show, the subject cannot transcend this paradoxical 'empty' permanence of the Void/Chaos but only the withdrawal, the contingency of Sense.

As in Žižek's engagement with the philosophy of Deleuze it is the 'reality of the virtual' that is at stake in the Void, its "transcendental empiricism." This empiricism is transcendental in the sense of the "a priori conditions of possibility of our experience of constituted reality," or, as Gibson accents with the presence of an electroencephalogram (EEG) on each deck to measure brain activity: you can really die in cyberspace; *logos*

can really annihilate you.[9] Such a view understands the Void/Chaos as the formlessness from which the subject-as-a-being emerges, and is distinct insofar as it lacks the oceanic feeling of being amongst a multitude of like beings. But given Žižek's comments on Meillassoux's analysis, what Gibson's narrative portrayal shows on the contrary is that Chaos is not that which receives the existing thing in its death, the collapse of our mad withdrawal from it, but that which endows the *logos* of Being with an unreflective and even narcissistic 'there-ness.' Herein the withdrawal from Chaos provides temporality only to make it recurrent and without end, although in itself it is *a priori* to the mediation of the grounding of any *logos*.

The persistence of a subject in Gibson's Void/Chaos rests upon the mad act of the withdrawal from this Void. But what is ultimately contingent, what is most precarious, is the counting of this void-subject in Existence as a gap inherent to the foundation of *logos*, the very point where any *logos* can be arbitrarily grounded. Gibson's phenomenology of the Void-Nothing reveals that the death of the subject is only possible through the disappearance of its registration in *logos*, but that such a death is always part of *logos* where the chaotic Ground unhinges the arbitration of the formal-notional determination of Being.

Conclusion

Whether we discuss philosophy, psychoanalysis, or other literatures, today there is an urgent need to confront and traverse the contingency that belies the persistence of the speaking-subject. An all too ordinary analysis would suggest that symptoms manifest in

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9   S. Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences* (London: Routledge, 2001) p. 4

response to a Cause that annihilates all other valuations. But what has been shown here today is that we cannot conclude in nihilism because, structurally speaking, it is contingency that is revealed by nihilistic clearing, and this contingency juxtaposes the persistence of the subject to the abyss of Ground: this persistence is untimely, it is past and future, it is a symptom laden with jouissance. Contingency, in this way, enables metamorphoses through transformations or transgressions by delimiting the conditions of possibility. In Palahniuk's romantic minimalism this is the fragility of the logos of community, and in Gibson's cyberpunk you can really die in cyberspace. Both of these examples offer a way to understand the possibility for transformation and transgression through recognising the formal incompleteness of the existence of the speaking-subject in their change, transformation, and transgression—their contingent Becoming.