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Deleuze, The Dark Precursor

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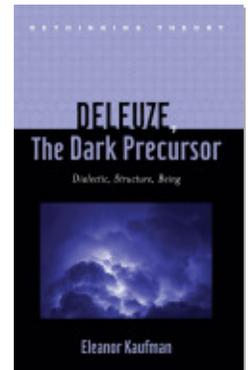
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Betraying Well (Žižek and Badiou)

AS WITH MANY PROMINENT thinkers, there is a striking imperative that circulates among those who read Deleuze: a drive to fidelity, or more nearly to not betray the master's thought, the trap that so many who write in his wake purportedly fall into. The world of Deleuze criticism is rarely immune from the dialectic of fidelity and betrayal that is arguably so far removed from Deleuze's thought. Of course such a pronouncement is itself a judgment that only repeats this particular logic. It is the merit of Žižek's *Organs without Bodies: Deleuze and Consequences* and Badiou's *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being*, both written from a certain position of infidelity, to dramatize this controversial force of dualism that underlies if not belies Deleuze's oeuvre.¹

Both Žižek and Badiou are critical of the position of the Deleuzian disciple, each evoking after a fashion the paradox whereby to be truly faithful to the spirit of the master, one must betray the letter of his teaching. As Žižek puts it, "There are, accordingly, two modes of betraying the past. The true betrayal is an ethico-theoretical act of the highest fidelity: one has to betray the letter of Kant to remain faithful to (and repeat) the 'spirit' of his thought. It is precisely when one remains faithful to the letter of Kant that one really betrays the core of his thought, the creative impulse underlying it" (13). In a similar though even more direct vein, Badiou remarks on the problem of betrayal as also a problem that his proper work encounters, implicitly equating his status as a master thinker to that of Deleuze. His target is one shared with Žižek, those Deleuzians who champion radical flux and pure positive libido—in short the body without organs—and those who take the works coauthored with Guattari, namely *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, as their central inspiration. Badiou characterizes this as a "crucial *misunderstanding*" and comments: "That Deleuze never did anything of an explicit nature to dissipate this [misunderstanding] is linked to that weakness rife among philosophers—in fact, none of us

escape it—regarding the equivocal role of *disciples*. As a general rule, disciples have been won over for the wrong reasons, are faithful to a misinterpretation, overdogmatic in their exposition, and too liberal in debate. They almost always end up by betraying us” (96). Here, Badiou, like Žižek, not only denounces the bad betrayals of the disciples, but gives us the hope that his form of betrayal will be a truer and better one.

The correspondence between Žižek’s and Badiou’s readings of Deleuze, which at a certain level might seem to have very little in common, is an assertion of a latent dualism, even a hidden dialectical energy, in Deleuze’s repeated insistence on a Spinozist notion of the One and Deleuze and Guattari’s repeated diatribe against the Hegelian dialectic. Though others, most notably Fredric Jameson, have pointed to this underlying dualism,² its proclamation—or more nearly implication in the cases at hand—still carries a distinctly heterodox force. This reading against the grain is bound up in the very style of the reading: for Badiou, it is the reduction of all of Deleuze’s work to one central and repeated concept, namely the assertion of being as univocal, a problematic from which Badiou hardly strays; for Žižek, in spite of his insistence on engaging with the Deleuze of *The Logic of Sense* over and above the Deleuze and Guattari of *Anti-Oedipus*, what counts as Deleuze is much more all over the map, at times hardly resembling Deleuze at all. Indeed, the second half of Žižek’s book (the part called “Consequences,” which discusses cognitive science, film—particularly Hitchcock—and cultural politics ranging from fascism to the Zapatistas to Hardt and Negri’s *Empire*) does not even mention Deleuze by name with great frequency (not that it need to). This section, if not the whole book, is certainly much more recognizable as peculiarly Žižekian in its broad-ranging series of paradoxical structures whereby the purported bad guy of the situation (the Stalinist, the fascist, the anti-Islamicist, even Bill Gates) is revealed to contain the kernel of the situation’s truth, if there could be said to be one. In the middle of Žižek’s discussion of fascism, there is a point where he asserts that “two important, interconnected conclusions are to be drawn from such Deleuzian analyses” (190), and it seems a reader’s immediate response would be to wonder how exactly these analyses are Deleuzian.

On the one hand, the Deleuzian element in *Organs without Bodies* is somewhat elusive, but on the other, and this is the key, Žižek does something apart from the two main forms of writing on Deleuze: the one

exegetical, explicating and elaborating the philosophical implications of Deleuze's work, the other an application, showing how nomadic thought or deterritorialization or what have you is a useful framework for analyzing some entirely different text or problematic. Though Žižek does give extended attention to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the body without organs (more on this and its relation to Lacan in what follows), he comes at this neither as an exegete nor an applicator but as more of a Judas figure who betrays (and loves) with a kiss. This is altogether fitting given Žižek's remarks on the relevance of Judas in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, where "betrayal was part of the plan, Christ ordered Judas to betray him in order to fulfill the divine plan; that is, Judas' act of betrayal was the highest sacrifice, the ultimate fidelity."³ The betrayal lies in Žižek's very form of reading askance, of sometimes making alignments that Deleuze's work invites (such as with Lacan), of bringing out dimensions (such as the Hegelian one) that the work is at pains to negate, and at times not really addressing his work at all. Though Žižek avows that the problematic of *The Logic of Sense* is the central Deleuzian one (and that accords with the general argument of this study, though I also address the importance of other works from the late 1960s), Žižek's text has a way, at least stylistically, of making Deleuze seem very hard to pin down.

By contrast, if Badiou insists that all of Deleuze's work repeats the same thing, he is quite fittingly not out of line from the master, as his compact reading finds different ways to reiterate the same set of links and dissociations between himself and Deleuze. These might be summarized as follows: though both evoke the category of the multiple, Deleuze retains the notion of the One, while Badiou abandons it; moreover, Deleuze elevates the simulacrum that Plato denigrates, while Badiou retains a Platonic notion of truth and abandons the virtual, the virtual being the site of Deleuze's secret Platonism (see Badiou's own summary of the two positions on p. 46). What links Žižek and Badiou is that both delineate, yet usually without naming it in so many words, the latent dualism of Deleuze's thought. Badiou does this by suggesting that Deleuze's professed univocity is really an equivocity in disguise, Žižek by bringing out Deleuze's affinities with Hegel and with Lacan.

Sometimes Žižek translates Deleuze into Hegelian terminology, as when he evokes Deleuze's dialectical materialism, and at other times he analyzes Deleuze through Lacanian models such as the phallus or Lacan's

revision of Freudian castration. Whether it is articulated via Hegel or via Lacan, the insight is guided by a similar logic, one that is to my mind the real brilliance of Žižek's reading. It is a reading that bypasses the obvious set of good and bad dualisms in the works coauthored with Guattari (the good molecular versus the bad molar, the good nomad versus the bad state, the good becoming versus the bad being, etc.) in favor of the *structural* dualism that, most simplistically, divides the joint works from Deleuze's single-authored ones. The disjunction at issue is not so much the split between being and becoming as it is the *structural impasse* inherent to becoming itself: in short, there are two becomings; one is a becoming of production and generation, in which the actual is generated from virtual intensities. This becoming is the seemingly more materialist Deleuze of the coauthored works, but in fact the one where Žižek locates a hidden idealism. By contrast, it is the "becoming" of *The Logic of Sense*, in which the corporeal realm instantiates a secondary level of incorporeal effects (effects that retrospectively turn out to be embedded in the very heart of the corporeal), that Žižek favors and regards as the proof of Deleuze's ultimate dialectical materialism. As Žižek puts it,

Is this opposition of the virtual as the site of productive Becoming and the virtual as the site of the sterile Sense-Event not, at the same time, the opposition of the "body without organs" (BwO) and "organs without body" (OwB)? Is, on one hand, the productive flux of pure Becoming not the BwO, the body not yet structured or determined as functional organs? And, on the other hand, is the OwB not the virtuality of the pure affect extracted from its embeddedness in a body, like the smile in *Alice in Wonderland* that persists alone, even when the Cheshire cat's body is no longer present? (30)⁴

Thus, it is the seemingly immaterial or even transcendental Deleuze of the early works that turns out to be the most materialist, and it is the apolitical single-authored works (interestingly, Žižek refers to the elitism of these works [20], while Badiou refers to Deleuze as an aristocratic thinker [12]) that have the true political potential, though not one that is drawn out by Deleuze himself. As Žižek writes, with the damning formulations that he (and also Badiou, not coincidentally) reserves for vulgar leftism:

The ontology of productive Becoming clearly leads to the Leftist topic of the self-organization of the multitude of molecular groups that resist and undermine the molar, totalizing systems of power — the old notion of the spontaneous, nonhierarchical, living multitude opposing the oppressive, reified System, the exemplary case of Leftist radicalism linked to philosophical idealist subjectivism. The problem is that this is the only model of the politicization of Deleuze’s thought available. The other ontology, that of the sterility of the Sense-Event, appears “apolitical.” However, what if this other ontology also involves a political logic and practice of its own, of which Deleuze himself was unaware? . . . What if the domain of politics is inherently “sterile,” the domain of pseudo causes, a theater of shadows, but nonetheless crucial in transforming reality? (32)

Here, Žižek joins Badiou in an unsparing attack on those who use Deleuze in an overtly political fashion to champion the likes of pure becoming, the multitude, and radical democracy. Žižek does not really explain what a better and alternate Deleuzian politics would look like, but it seems not to be that of Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* and later works.⁵

Žižek is at his Lacanian best when he shows how Deleuze’s dialectical materialism partakes of the logic of the phallus and castration, asserting that the phallus is exemplary in that it signifies the point of mediation between the two seemingly divergent series (the corporeal and the incorporeal). Žižek shows the castration function to be the link between the corporeal cause and the incorporeal effect, what he terms the Sense-Event:

First, the impassive-sterile Event is cut off, extracted from its virile, corporeal causal base (if “castrations” means anything at all, it means *this*). Then, this flow of Sense-Event is constituted as an autonomous field of its own, the autonomy of the incorporeal symbolic order with regard to its corporeal embodiments. “Symbolic castration,” as the elementary operation of the quasi cause, is thus a profoundly *materialist* concept, since it answers the basic need of any materialist analysis. . . . This is the “phallic” dimension at its most elementary: *the excess of the virtual that sustains actualization*. . . . As it was clear to Deleuze (and not only to Lacan), the notion of castration answers a very specific question: how does the universal symbolic process detach itself from its

corporeal roots? How does it *emerge* in its relative autonomy? “Castration” designates the violent bodily cut that enables us to enter the domain of the incorporeal. (84–85)

In this fashion, Žižek’s explication of the phallic mediating function at once shifts the common emphasis on lack and negativity so frequently evoked alongside the mention of Lacan, and it brings out the twofold structure at the heart of Deleuze’s thought, simultaneously showing the two parts to be bound together in a mutually implicated relation.⁶

Insofar as the phallic function represents for Žižek this element of *relation* between the two disjointed series, it serves a transcendental function (a term, in addition to the category of mediation itself, that Deleuze denounces in no uncertain terms): “In this precise sense — shocking as it may sound to vulgar materialists and obscurantists in their unacknowledged solidarity — the phallus, the phallic element as the signifier of ‘castration,’ is the fundamental category of dialectical materialism. Phallus qua signifier of ‘castration’ *mediates* the emergence of the pure surface of Sense-Event. As such, it is the ‘*transcendental* signifier’ — nonsense within the field of sense — that distributes and regulates the series of Sense” (91, my emphasis).⁷ Žižek’s pronouncement has an interesting if not perverse double twist: precisely by making a strong claim for the mediating and transcendental role of the phallic signifier, it thereby articulates a basic compatibility between Deleuze and Lacan that is often contested or goes unacknowledged by Deleuze scholars. While I have enormous sympathy (probably rare among such scholars) for this compatibility and for the way it elaborates and extends certain unarticulated elements of *The Logic of Sense*, it does seem that this insight is gained by dint of the imposition of a strong form of Hegelian dialectic on Deleuze and Lacan, whereas a weak one, one that made mediation more incidental rather than fundamental, would be to my mind more in order, especially in the case of Deleuze.

Badiou comes closer to the position against mediation outlined in the chapter on Sartre above. He isolates even more precisely how the critical impasse in Deleuze’s thought centers on the question of mediation. At one point he notes that “Deleuze’s method is thus a method that rejects all recourse to mediations; indeed, this is why it is essentially antidialectical” (32), and yet Badiou points out that the category of relation is never entirely absent, for even the act of evoking nonrelation or univocity ges-

tures to a hidden relational element, an oscillation that is in some sense a mediation. In light of this, Badiou modifies his assessment of Deleuze's dialecticism: "It would seem that it is not very easy to definitively abandon the presuppositions of the dialectic" (85). Badiou thus underscores one of the crucial aspects of Deleuzian difference, that disjunctive series, such as those we have seen and will see to be at issue in *The Logic of Sense*, are not conducive to an easy mediating third term that would show them to be fundamentally autopoietic, though they are also never immune from it. While I concur that the autopoietic mediating quality is not entirely absent in Deleuze's thought, it is always vexed in the way Badiou's modification demonstrates. Mediation is something that appears in spite of Deleuze, and this "in spite of" is crucial, for it is the key to Deleuze's hidden dialectic, which is not quite the easy one Žižek often makes it out to be.

Žižek's *Organs without Bodies* might be characterized by two terms that recur with striking and almost diametrically misplaced frequency. One is a notion of "excess" that Žižek repeatedly situates at the center of Deleuze's oeuvre. He writes, for example, of "the excess of the pure flow of becoming over its corporeal cause" (3), of a "Deleuzian excess of relations . . . [the] excess of the effect over its causes" (112), and even more generally of "Deleuze's affirmation of an irreducible *excess* of the problem over its solution(s), which is the same as the excess of the virtual over its actualizations" (55). While it is Žižek's and Badiou's great insight to locate an excess in Deleuze's formulation of univocity, such that what appears to be one thing (i.e., becoming or the One itself) is actually secretly doubled, I would call this more specifically a question of the difference between the one and the two. To be sure, the two for Deleuze marks a kind of blasphemous excess of the One, but this is not the excess of the multiple, of the outside, of the transgressive à la Bataille. If it is to be called an excess, it is rather an internal excess, an excess of structure that is nearly invisible. It is not simply more than one, as excess would imply, but precisely the upsurge of the two where one thinks there is only one. This is the recurrent theme of Lacan's underrated seminar 6 on desire, though Žižek would align Deleuze with the Lacan of seminar 7 and onward, Lacan of the drive as opposed to desire.⁸

Another term that Žižek, following Manuel DeLanda, uses repeatedly to characterize the Sense-Event over the lesser model of productive becoming is "sterile." Insofar as it describes a realm of incorporeal effects

and not the body itself, this term makes some sense. However, following from Deleuze's outline of the incorporeal in *The Logic of Sense* and Émile Bréhier's *La Théorie des incorporels dans l'ancien stoïcisme*, which Deleuze is so indebted to, this realm might be more aptly described as impassive yet limitless.⁹ Sterility does not fully capture what Deleuze refers to as "incorporeal splendor,"¹⁰ nor does it convey the alternate temporality of this realm of incorporeal effects, what I have discussed predominantly under the banner of the "unlimited Aion, the becoming which divides itself infinitely in past and future and always eludes the present."¹¹ While this might seem a minor quibble, the reiteration of sterility (with its various derogatory resonances) seems to work at cross-purposes with what is otherwise a stunning and much-needed recuperation of Deleuze's hidden materialism in what might appear to be one of his most idealistic concepts.

As we have seen, Deleuze repeatedly asserts, in particular in *Difference and Repetition* and in *Bergsonism*, the significance of differences in kind as opposed to differences of degree. If the difference of degree represents an inclusive ecumenical standpoint, then the difference in kind signals the exclusiveness of the cut. This radical separation is something that Žižek does not hesitate to evoke in his examples. He opens *On Belief* with the wonderful example of a *Larry King Live* debate among a priest, a rabbi, and a Southern Baptist minister. Whereas the first two have accepting attitudes toward the belief systems of the others, the minister does not hesitate to assert that the other two are damned. As Žižek glosses it in pointed fashion, "The basic premise of this book is that, cruel as this position may sound, if one is to break the liberal-democratic hegemony and resuscitate an authentic radical position, one has to endorse its materialist version [that of the Southern Baptist]."¹² In *Bodies without Organs*, he is sharply critical of the notion held by many Western academics that political or humanitarian activism can be redemptively integrated with their academic pursuits, for he insists that this is a false mixing of categories that are different in kind, that largesse in one realm cannot be used to justify complicity in another (178–79). (It is interesting to note that Walter Benn Michaels makes much the same point in *The Shape of the Signifier*.)¹³

Badiou's book on Deleuze articulates this strong form of distinction almost to a fault, whereas Žižek's otherwise provocative book might draw out this art of separation, one for which Žižek has an extraordinary gift, even further. Žižek certainly broaches a strong theory of difference when

he separates the Deleuze of *The Logic of Sense* from that of *Anti-Oedipus* and when he brings out Deleuze's unacknowledged Hegelianism and Lacanianism. Yet at other points Žižek slips into the other form of difference, the difference of degree and not kind, when he evokes scenarios, especially in the latter part of the book, that are really his own examples and not Deleuze's. Why is this still Deleuze rather than not-Deleuze? Why are these ending meditations not also staged in the form of a betrayal, with the verve of the Protestant minister? There are times that Žižek might betray Deleuze more thoroughly, and in this fashion be even truer, and might employ even more of the disjunctive synthesis, which is after all also outlined by Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus*.

As discussed in the introduction with respect to Hallward's *Out of This World*, these two rather heterodox readings of Deleuze also in their fashion come closest to the argument of this book. They point to a dialectical dimension of Deleuze's thought and above all focus on Deleuze's early work and its relation to structure. Though the precise nature of the structure varies—from perversion and betrayal to series and mediation—of import at this juncture is the interest in the structure itself.