

INTRODUCTION

DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM AT THE GATES

Two remarkable stories were reported in the media in 2003.

A Spanish art historian uncovered the first use of modern art as a deliberate form of torture: Kandinsky and Klee, as well Buñuel and Dalí, were the inspiration behind a series of secret cells and torture centers built in Barcelona in 1938, the work of a French anarchist, Alphonse Laurenčič (a Slovene family name!), who invented a form of “psychotechnic” torture: he created his so-called “colored cells” as a contribution to the fight against Franco’s forces.¹ The cells were as inspired by ideas of geometric abstraction and surrealism as they were by avant-garde art theories on the psychological properties of colors. Beds were placed at a 20-degree angle, making them near-impossible to sleep on, and the floors of the 6-foot-by-3-foot cells were strewn with bricks and other geometric blocks to prevent the prisoners from walking backward and forward. The only option left to them was staring at the walls, which were curved and covered with mind-altering patterns of cubes, squares, straight lines, and spirals which utilized tricks of color, perspective, and scale to cause mental confusion and distress. Lighting effects gave the impression that the dizzying patterns on the wall were moving. Laurenčič preferred to use the color green because, according to his theory of the psychological effects of various colors, it produced melancholy and sadness.

The second story: Walter Benjamin did not kill himself in a Spanish border village in 1940 out of fear that he would be returned to France, and thus to Nazi agents—he was killed there by Stalin’s agents.² A few months before he died, Benjamin wrote “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” his short but devastating analysis of the failure of Marxism; he died at a time when many former Soviet loyalists were becoming disillusioned with Moscow because of the Hitler-Stalin pact. In response, one of the “killerati” (Stalinist agents recruited from socialist intellectuals who were carrying out assassinations) killed him. The ultimate cause of his murder was that, as Benjamin fled through the mountains from France toward Spain, he was hugging a manuscript—the masterwork on which he had been working in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, the elaboration of the “Theses.” The briefcase containing this manuscript was entrusted to a fellow refugee who conveniently lost it on a train from Barcelona to Madrid. In short, Stalin read Benjamin’s “Theses,” he knew about the new book project based on the “Theses,” and he wanted to prevent its publication at any cost. . . .

What these two stories share is not just the surprising link between high culture (fine art and theory) and base brutal politics (murder, torture). At this level, the link is not even as unexpected as it may appear: is it not one of the most vulgar common-sense opinions that viewing abstract art (like listening to atonal music) is torture (along the same lines, we can easily envisage a prison in which the detainees are exposed constantly to atonal music)? On the other hand, the “deeper” common sense is that Schoenberg, in his music, expressed the horrors of holocaust and mass bombings before they actually occurred. More radically, what the two stories share is that the link they establish is an impossible short circuit of levels which, for structural reasons, can never meet: it is simply not possible, say, for what “Stalin” stands for to move at the same level as “Benjamin,” that is, to grasp the true dimensions of Benjamin’s “Theses”

from a Stalinist perspective. The illusion on which these two stories rely, that of putting two incompatible phenomena on the same level, is strictly analogous to what Kant called “transcendental illusion,” the illusion of being able to use the same language for phenomena which are mutually untranslatable and can be grasped only in a kind of parallax view, constantly shifting perspective between two points between which no synthesis or mediation is possible. Thus there is no rapport between the two levels, no shared space—although they are closely connected, even identical in a way, they are, as it were, on the opposed sides of a Moebius strip. The encounter between Leninist politics and modernist art (exemplified in the fantasy of Lenin meeting Dadaists in the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich) cannot structurally take place; more radically, revolutionary politics and revolutionary art move in different temporalities—although they are linked, they are two sides of the same phenomenon which, precisely as two sides, can never meet.³ There is more than a historical accident in the fact that, in matters of culture, Leninists admired great classic art, while many modernists were political conservatives, proto-Fascists even. Is this not already the lesson of the link between the French Revolution and German Idealism? Although they are two sides of the same historical moment, they could not directly meet—that is to say, German Idealism could emerge only in the “backward” conditions of a Germany where no political revolution occurred.

In short, what both these anecdotes share is the occurrence of an insurmountable *parallax gap*, the confrontation of two closely linked perspectives between which no neutral common ground is possible.⁴ In a first approach, such a notion of parallax gap cannot but appear as a kind of Kantian revenge over Hegel: is not “parallax” yet another name for a fundamental *antinomy* which can never be dialectically “mediated/sublated” into a higher synthesis, since there is no common language, no shared ground, between the two levels? It is the wager of this book that, far from posing an irreducible obstacle to dialectics, the notion of the parallax gap provides the key which enables us to discern its subversive core. To theorize this parallax gap properly is the necessary first step in the rehabilitation of the philosophy of *dialectical materialism*.⁵ Here we encounter a basic paradox: while many of today’s sciences spontaneously practice *materialist dialectic*, philosophically they oscillate between mechanical materialism and idealist obscurantism. There is no space for compromise here, no “dialogue,” no search for allies in difficult times—today, in an epoch of the temporary retreat of dialectical materialism, Lenin’s strategic insight is crucial: “When an army is in retreat, a hundred times more discipline is required than when the army is advancing. . . . When a Menshevik says, ‘You are now retreating; I have been advocating retreat all the time; I agree with you, I am your man, let us retreat together,’ we say in reply, ‘For public manifestation of Menshevism our revolutionary courts must pass the death sentence, otherwise they are not our courts, but God knows what.’”⁶

Today’s crisis of Marxism is not due only to the sociopolitical defeats of Marxist movements; at an inherent theoretical level, the crisis can (and should) also be indexed through the decline (virtual disappearance, even) of dialectical materialism as the philosophical underpinning of Marxism—dialectical materialism, not the much more

acceptable, and much less embarrassing, “materialist dialectic”: the shift from determinate reflection to reflective determination is crucial here—this is another case where a word or the position of words decides everything.⁷ The shift we are dealing with here is the key dialectical shift—the one which is most difficult to grasp for a “negative dialectics” in love with explosions of negativity, with all imaginable forms of “resistance” and “subversion,” but unable to overcome its own parasitizing on the preceding positive order—from the wild dance of the liberation from the (oppressive) System to (what German Idealists called) the System of Liberty. Two examples from revolutionary politics should suffice here: it is easy to fall in love with the multitude of freethinkers who blossomed in the prerevolutionary France of the late eighteenth century, from libertarians debating in the salons, enjoying the paradoxes of their own inconsistencies, to pathetic artists amusing those in power with their own protests against power; it is much more difficult fully to endorse the reversal of this unrest into the harsh new Order of the revolutionary Terror. Similarly, it is easy to fall in love with the crazy creative unrest of the first years after the October Revolution, with suprematists, futurists, constructivists, and so on, competing for primacy in revolutionary fervor; it is much more difficult to recognize in the horrors of the forced collectivization of the late 1920s the attempt to translate this revolutionary fervor into a new positive social order. There is nothing ethically more disgusting than revolutionary Beautiful Souls who refuse to recognize, in the Cross of the postrevolutionary present, the truth of their own flowering dreams about freedom.

That, philosophically speaking, Stalinist “dialectical materialism” is imbecility incarnate, is not so much beyond the point as, rather, *the point itself*, since my point is precisely to conceive the identity of my Hegelian-Lacanian position and the philosophy of dialectical materialism as a Hegelian infinite judgment, that is, as the speculative identity of the highest and the lowest, like the formula of phrenology “the Spirit is a bone.” In what, then, does the difference between the “highest” and the “lowest” reading of dialectical materialism consist? The steely Fourth Teacher⁸ committed a serious philosophical error when he ontologized the difference between dialectical and historical materialism, conceiving it as the difference between *metaphysica universalis* and *metaphysica specialis*, universal ontology and its application to the special domain of society. All we have to do here in order to pass from the “lowest” to the “highest” is to *displace this difference between the universal and the particular into the particular itself*: “dialectical materialism” provides another view on humanity itself, different from historical materialism . . . yes, once again, the relationship between historical and dialectical materialism is that of parallax; they are substantially the same, the shift from the one to the other is purely a shift of perspective. It introduces topics like the death drive, the “inhuman” core of the human, which reach over the horizon of the collective *praxis* of humanity; the gap is thus asserted as inherent to humanity itself, as the gap between humanity and its own inhuman excess.

There is a structural analogy between this relationship between historical and dialectical materialism and the properly psychoanalytic reply to the boring standard criticism of the application of psychoanalysis to social-ideological processes: is it

“legitimate” to expand the use of notions which were originally deployed for the treatment of individuals to collective entities, and to talk about religion, for example, as a “collective compulsive neurosis”? The focus of psychoanalysis resides elsewhere: the Social, the field of social practices and socially held beliefs, is not simply on a different level from individual experience, but something to which the individual himself has to relate, which the individual himself has to experience as an order which is minimally “reified,” externalized. The problem, therefore, is not “how to jump from the individual to the social level”; the problem is: *how should the external-impersonal socio-symbolic order of institutionalized practices and beliefs be structured, if the subject is to retain his “sanity,” his “normal” functioning?* (Take the proverbial egotist, cynically dismissing the public system of moral norms: as a rule, such a subject can function only if this system is “out there,” publicly recognized—that is to say, in order to be a private cynic, he has to presuppose the existence of naive other(s) who “really believe.”) In other words, the gap between the individual and the “impersonal” social dimension is to be inscribed back within the individual himself: *this “objective” order of the social Substance exists only insofar as individuals treat it as such, relate to it as such.* And is the supreme example here not (again) that of Christ himself: in him, the difference between God and man is transposed into man himself?

With regard to the relationship between thought and being, both historical and dialectical materialism, of course, leave behind the prephilosophically naive “dialectical materialist” notion of thought as a reflection/mirroring of being (of “independent, objectively existing, reality”); however, they do so in different ways. Historical materialism overcomes this external parallelism of thought and being, of thought as a passive mirroring of “objective reality,” through the notion of thought (“consciousness”) as an inherent moment of the very process of (social) being, of collective praxis, as a process embedded in social reality (although today, after the invasion of Iraq, one is somehow ashamed to use this verb), as its active moment. Georg Lukács’s discussion of this overcoming in *History and Class Consciousness* cannot be bettered: “consciousness” (becoming-conscious of one’s concrete social position and its revolutionary potential) changes being itself—that is to say, it transforms the passive “working class,” a stratum in the social edifice, into the “proletariat” as a revolutionary subject. Dialectical materialism, as it were, approaches the same knot from the opposite side: its problem is not how to overcome the external opposition of thought and being by deploying their practico-dialectical mediation, but *how, from within the flat order of positive being, the very gap between thought and being, the negativity of thought, emerges.* In other words, while Lukács et al. endeavor to demonstrate how thought is an active-constitutive moment of social being, the fundamental categories of dialectical materialism (like the negativity of the “death drive”) aim at the “practical” aspect of the very passivity of thought: *how is it possible, for a living being, to break/suspend the cycle of the reproduction of life, to install a non-act, a withdrawal into reflexive distance from being, as the most radical intervention?* To put it in Kierkegaard’s terms: the point is not to overcome the gap that separates thought from being, but to conceive it in its “becoming.” Of course, the Lukácsian philosophy of praxis contains its own account of how the gap between thought and being

emerges: the figure of the observing subject, exempt from the objective processes and intervening in them as an external manipulator, is itself *an effect of social alienation/reification*; however, this account—which moves within the field of social *praxis* as the insurmountable horizon—leaves out of consideration the very emergence of *praxis*, its repressed “transcendental genesis.” This supplement to historical materialism is crucial: without it, we either elevate society into a pseudo-Hegelian absolute Subject, or we have to leave open the space for some more encompassing general ontology.

The key problem here is that the basic “law” of dialectical materialism, the struggle of opposites, was colonized/obfuscated by the New Age notion of the polarity of opposites (*yin-yang*, and so on). The first critical move is to replace this topic of the polarity of opposites with the concept of the inherent “tension,” gap, noncoincidence, of the One itself. This book is based on a strategic politico-philosophical decision to designate this gap which separates the One from itself with the term *parallax*.⁹ There is an entire series of the modes of parallax in different domains of modern theory: quantum physics (the wave-particle duality); the parallax of *neurobiology* (the realization that, when we look behind the face into the skull, we find nothing; “there’s no one at home” there, just piles of gray matter—it is difficult to tarry with this gap between meaning and the pure Real); the parallax of *ontological difference*, of the discord between the ontic and the transcendental-ontological (we cannot reduce the ontological horizon to its ontic “roots,” but neither can we deduce the ontic domain from the ontological horizon; that is to say, transcendental constitution is not creation); the parallax of the Real (the Lacanian Real has no positive-substantial consistency, it is just the gap between the multitude of perspectives on it); the parallax nature of the gap between desire and drive (let us imagine an individual trying to perform some simple manual task—say, grab an object which repeatedly eludes him: the moment he changes his attitude, starting to find pleasure in just repeating the failed task, squeezing the object which, again and again, eludes him, he shifts from desire to drive);¹⁰ the parallax of the unconscious (the lack of a common measure between the two aspects of Freud’s theoretical edifice, interpretations of the formations of the unconscious [*The Interpretation of Dreams, The Psychopathology of Everyday Life, Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*] and theories of drives [*Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, and so on]); up to—last and least—the parallax of the *vagina* (the shift from the ultimate object of sexual penetration, the embodiment of the mystery of sexuality, to the very organ of maternity [birth]).

And, last but not least, we should assert the parallax status of philosophy as such. At its very inception (the Ionian pre-Socratics), philosophy emerged in the interstices of substantial social communities, as the thought of those who were caught in a “parallax” position, unable fully to identify with any of the positive social identities. In *On Tyranny*, Leo Strauss answered the question “In what does philosophic politics consist?” with: “In satisfying the city that the philosophers are not atheists, that they do not desecrate everything sacred to the city, that they reverence what the city reverences, that they are not subversives, in short that they are not irresponsible adventurers, but the best citizens.”¹¹ This, of course, is a defensive survival strategy to cover up the actual

subversive nature of philosophy. This crucial dimension is missing in Heidegger's account: how, from his beloved pre-Socratics onward, philosophizing involved an "impossible" position displaced with regard to any communal identity, be it "economy" (*oikos*, the household organization) or *polis* (the city-state). Like exchange according to Marx, philosophy emerges in the interstices *between* different communities, in the fragile space of exchange and circulation between them, a space which lacks any positive identity. Is this not especially clear in the case of Descartes? The grounding experience of his position of universal doubt is precisely a "multicultural" experience of how our own tradition is no better than what looks to us like the "eccentric" traditions of others:

I had been taught, even in my College days, that there is nothing imaginable so strange or so little credible that it has not been maintained by one philosopher or other, and I further recognized in the course of my travels that all those whose sentiments are very contrary to ours are yet not necessarily barbarians or savages, but may be possessed of reason in as great or even a greater degree than ourselves. I also considered how very different the self-same man, identical in mind and spirit, may become, according as he is brought up from childhood amongst the French or Germans, or has passed his whole life amongst Chinese or cannibals. I likewise noticed how even in the fashions of one's clothing the same thing that pleased us ten years ago, and which will perhaps please us once again before ten years are passed, seems at the present time extravagant and ridiculous. I thus concluded that it is much more custom and example that persuade us than any certain knowledge, and yet in spite of this the voice of the majority does not afford a proof of any value in truths a little difficult to discover, because such truths are much more likely to have been discovered by one man than by a nation. I could not, however, put my finger on a single person whose opinions seemed preferable to those of others, and I found that I was, so to speak, constrained myself to undertake the direction of my procedure.¹²

Thus Karatani is justified in emphasizing the insubstantial character of the *cogito*: "It cannot be spoken of positively; no sooner than it is, its function is lost."¹³ The *cogito* is not a substantial entity but a pure structural function, an empty place (Lacan's $\$$)—as such, it can emerge only in the interstices of substantial communal systems. The link between the emergence of the *cogito* and the disintegration and loss of substantial communal identities is therefore inherent, and this holds even more for Spinoza than for Descartes: although Spinoza criticized the Cartesian *cogito*, he criticized it as a positive ontological entity—but he implicitly fully endorsed it as the "position of the enunciated," the one which speaks from radical self-doubting, since, even more than Descartes, Spinoza spoke from the interstices of the social space(s), neither a Jew nor a Christian.

Spinoza is, in effect, the "philosopher as such," with his subjective stance of double outcast (excommunicated even from the community of the outcasts of Western civilization); this is why we should use him as a paradigm that enables us to discover the traces of a similar displacement, a communal "out-of-joint," with regard to all other great philosophers, up to Nietzsche, who was ashamed of the Germans and proudly emphasized his alleged Polish roots. For a philosopher, ethnic roots, national identity,

and so on, are simply *not a category of truth*—or, to put it in precise Kantian terms, when we reflect upon our ethnic roots, we engage in a *private use of reason*, constrained by contingent dogmatic presuppositions; that is to say, we act as “immature” individuals, not as free human beings who dwell in the dimension of the universality of reason. This, of course, does not in any way entail that we should be ashamed of our ethnic roots; we can love them, be proud of them; returning home may warm our hearts—but the fact remains that all this is ultimately irrelevant. We should act like Saint Paul who, while he was proud of his particular identity (a Jew and a Roman citizen), was nonetheless aware that, in the proper space of the Christian absolute Truth, “there is neither Jew nor Greek.” . . . The struggle which truly engages him is not simply “more universal” than that of one ethnic group against another; it is a struggle which obeys an entirely different logic: no longer the logic of one self-identical substantial group fighting another group, but of an antagonism that cuts diagonally across all particular groups.

It would be easy to counterargue here that this Cartesian multiculturalist opening and relativizing of one’s own position is just a first step, the abandoning of inherited opinions, which should allow us to acquire the absolutely certain philosophical knowledge—the abandoning of the false, unstable home in order to reach our true home. Did not Hegel himself compare Descartes’s discovery of the *cogito* to a sailor who, after drifting around in the sea for a long time, finally catches sight of firm ground? Is this Cartesian homelessness not just a deceitful strategic move? Are we not dealing here with a Hegelian “negation of negation,” the *Aufhebung* of the false traditional home in the finally discovered conceptual true home? In this sense, was Heidegger not justified in approvingly quoting Novalis’s determination of philosophy as longing for the true lost home? Two things should be added here. First, Kant himself is in fact unique with regard to this topic: in his transcendental philosophy, homelessness remains irreducible; we remain forever split, condemned to a fragile position between the two dimensions, and to a “leap of faith” without any guarantee. Secondly, is the Hegelian situation really so clear? Is it not that, for Hegel, this new “home” is in a way *homelessness* itself, the very open movement of negativity?

Along these lines of the constitutive “homelessness” of philosophy, Karatani asserts—against Hegel—Kant’s idea of the cosmopolitan “world-civil-society/*Weltbürgergesellschaft*,” which is not simply an expansion of the citizenship of a nation-state to the citizenship of a global transnational State; it involves a shift from the principle of identification with one’s “organic” ethnic substance actualized in particular tradition, to a radically different principle of identification—Karatani refers here to Deleuze’s notion of universal singularity as opposed to the triad individuality-particularity-generality; this opposition is the opposition between Kant and Hegel. For Hegel, “world-civil-society” is an abstract notion without substantial content, lacking the mediation of the particular, and thus the force of full actuality—that is to say, it involves an abstract identification which does not seize the subject substantially; the only way for an individual to participate effectively in universal humanity is therefore via full identification with a particular nation-state: I am “human” only as a German, an Englishman. . . .¹⁴ For Kant, on the contrary, “world-civil-society” designates the

paradox of the universal singularity, of a singular subject who, in a kind of short circuit, bypassing the mediation of the particular, directly participates in the Universal. This identification with the Universal is not the identification with an all-encompassing global Substance (“humanity”), but the identification with a universal ethico-political principle—a universal religious collective, a scientific collective, a global revolutionary organization, all of which are in principle accessible to everyone. This is what Kant, in the famous passage of “What Is Enlightenment?”, means by “public” as opposed to “private”: “private” is not individual as opposed to communal ties, but the very communal-institutional order of one’s particular identification; while “public” is the transnational universality of the exercise of one’s Reason. The paradox is thus that one participates in the universal dimension of the “public” sphere precisely as a singular individual extracted from or even opposed to one’s substantial communal identification—one is truly universal only as radically singular, in the interstices of communal identities.¹⁵

It would be easy to get lost in a nonsystematic deployment of the multitude of parallax gaps; my aim here is to introduce a minimum of conceptual order into this multitude by focusing on its three main modes: philosophical, scientific, and political. First, there is the *ontological difference* itself as the ultimate parallax which conditions our very access to reality; then there is the *scientific parallax*, the irreducible gap between the phenomenal experience of reality and its scientific account/explanation, which reaches its apogee in cognitivism, with its endeavor to provide a “third-person” neurobiological account of our “first-person” experience; last, but not least, there is the *political parallax*, the social antagonism which allows for no common ground between the conflicting agents (once upon a time, it was called “class struggle”), with its two main modes of existence on which the last two chapters of this book focus (the parallax gap between the public Law and its superego obscene supplement; the parallax gap between the “Bartleby” attitude of withdrawal from social engagement and collective social action). These three modes account for the tripartite structure of the book; between each part an interlude is added which applies the conceptual network to a more specific domain (Henry James’s novels; the link between capitalism and anti-Semitism).

In each of the three parts, the same formal operation is discerned and deployed, each time at a different level: a gap is asserted as irreducible and insurmountable, a gap which posits a limit to the field of reality. Philosophy revolves around ontological difference, the gap between ontological horizon and “objective” ontic reality; the cognitivist brain sciences revolve around the gap between the subject’s phenomenal self-relating and the biophysical reality of the brain; political struggle revolves around the gap between antagonisms proper and socioeconomic reality. This triad, of course, is that of the Universal-Particular-Singular: *universal* philosophy, *particular* science, the *singularity* of the political.¹⁶ In all three cases, the problem is how to think this gap in a *materialist* way, which means: it is not enough merely to insist on the fact that the ontological horizon cannot be reduced to an effect of ontic occurrences; that phenomenal self-awareness

cannot be reduced to an epiphenomenon of “objective” brain processes; that social antagonism (“class struggle”) cannot be reduced to an effect of objective socioeconomic forces. We should take a step further and reach beneath this dualism itself, into a “minimal difference” (the noncoincidence of the One with itself) that generates it. Since I have written many pages in which I struggle with the work of Jacques Derrida, now—when the Derridean fashion is fading away—is perhaps the moment to honor his memory by pointing out the proximity of this “minimal difference” to what he called *différance*, this neologism whose very notoriety obfuscates its unprecedented materialist potential.

If anything, however, this reappraisal is intended to draw an even stronger line of demarcation from the usual gang of democracy-to-come-deconstructionist-postsecular-Levinasian-respect-for-Otherness suspects. So—to paraphrase Vladimir Nabokov’s famous barbed anti-Freudian warning from his Foreword to the English translation of *King, Queen, Knave*—as usual, I would like to point out that, as usual (and, as usual, several sensitive people I like will look huffy), the democracy-to-come delegation has not been invited. If, however, a resolute democrat-to-come manages to slip in, he or she should be warned that a number of cruel traps have been set here and there throughout the book.

Our everyday academic experience provides a nice example of the Lacanian difference between the subject of the enunciated and the subject of the enunciation. When, at a conference, a speaker asks me: “Did you like my talk?”, how do I politely imply that it was boring and stupid? By saying: “It was interesting. . . .” The paradox is that, if I say this directly, I say more: my message will be perceived as a personal attack on the very heart of the speaker’s being, as an act of hatred toward him, not simply as a dismissal of his talk—in this case, the speaker will have the right to protest: “If you really just wanted to say that my talk was boring and stupid, why didn’t you simply say that it was interesting?” . . . If, however, I sincerely hope that readers will find the present book interesting, then I am nonetheless using this word in a more precise, properly dialectical, sense: the explanation of a universal concept becomes “interesting” when the particular cases evoked to exemplify it are in tension with their own universality—how?

In any large American bookstore, it is possible to purchase volumes of *Shakespeare Made Easy*, a unique series edited by John Durband and published by Barron’s: a “bilingual” edition of Shakespeare’s plays, with the original archaic English on the left-hand page and the translation into common contemporary English on the right-hand page. The obscene satisfaction provided by reading these volumes derives from the fact that what purports to be a mere translation into contemporary English turns out to be much more: as a rule, Durband tries to formulate directly, in everyday locution, (what he considers to be) the thought expressed in Shakespeare’s metaphoric idiom—“To be or not to be, that is the question” becomes something like: “What’s bothering me now is: Shall I kill myself or not?” Maybe the only way to de-jargonize a literary classic is to accept this crazy wager of “retranslating” its text into everyday colloquial speech.

One can imagine the translation of the most sublime of Hölderlin's verses into everyday German: "Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst das Rettende auch"—"When you're in deep trouble, don't despair too quickly, look around carefully, the solution may be just around the corner." Or, in a similar procedure, one can well imagine supplementing the Heideggerian commentary on some pre-Socratic line with an obscene twist. When, in *Holzwege*, apropos of Anaximander, Heidegger deploys all the dimensions of the word *Fug*, *fügen*, of the tension between *Fug* and *Unfug*, ontological accord and discord, what about indulging in speculation about how the *f . . .* word itself is rooted in this cosmic *Fug*, along the lines of the pagan notion of the universe as resulting from the primordial copulation of the masculine and feminine cosmic principles (*yin* and *yang*, and so on)—so, to put it in Heideggerian terms, the essence of fucking has nothing to do with the ontic act of fuck itself; rather it, concerns the harmonious-struggling *Fucking* which provides the very composition of the universe.

In the documentary *Derrida*, in answer to the question of what he would ask some great classic philosopher if he were to meet him, Derrida immediately snaps back: "About his sex life." Here, perhaps, we should supplement Derrida: if we asked this question directly, we would probably get a common answer; the thing to look for, rather, would be the *theory* about sexuality at the level of each's respective philosophy. Perhaps the ultimate philosophical fantasy here would be the discovery of a manuscript in which Hegel, the systematician *par excellence*, develops a system of sexuality, of sexual practices contradicting, inverting, sublating each other, deducing all (straight and "perverse") forms from its basic deadlock.¹⁷ As in Hegel's *Encyclopaedia*, we would first get the deduction of the main "subjective attitudes toward sex" (animal coupling, pure excessive lust, expression of human love, metaphysical passion), followed by the proper "system of sexuality," organized, as one would expect from Hegel, into a sequence of triads. The starting point here is copulation *a tergo*, the sexual act in its animal, presubjective immediacy; we then go on to its immediate (abstract) negation: masturbation, in which solo self-excitation is supplemented by fantasizing (Jean Laplanche argued that masturbation-with-fantasy is the elementary, zero-level, form of the properly human drive as opposed to the animal instinct.) What follows is the synthesis of the two: the sexual act proper in a missionary position, in which face-to-face contact guarantees that full bodily contact (penetration) remains supplemented by fantasizing. This means that the "normal" human sexual act has the structure of double masturbation: each participant is masturbating with a real partner. However, the gap between the raw reality of copulation and its fantasmatic supplement can no longer be closed; all variations and displacements of sexual practices that follow are so many desperate attempts to restore the balance of the two.

The dialectical "progress" thus first goes through a series of variations with regard to the relationship between face, sexual organs, and other bodily parts, and the modes of their respective uses: the organ remains the phallus, but the opening to be penetrated changes (anus, mouth). Then, in a kind of "negation of negation," not only does the object to be penetrated change, but the totality of the person who is the partner

passes into its opposite (homosexuality). In a further development, the goal itself is no longer orgasm (fetishism). Fist-fucking introduces into this series an impossible synthesis of hand (the organ of instrumental activity, of hard work) and vagina (the organ of “spontaneous” passive generation). The fist (focus of purposeful work, the hand as the most tightly controlled and trained part of our body) replaces the phallus (the organ out of our conscious control *par excellence*, since its erection comes and goes independently of our will), in a kind of correlate to somebody who approaches a state that should emerge “spontaneously” in a well-planned instrumental way (a poet who constructs his poems in a “rational” way, for instance, is a poetic fist-fucker). There are, of course, further variations here which call for their speculative deduction: in masculine masturbation, the vagina, the ultimate passive organ, is substituted by the hand, the ultimate active organ which passivizes the phallus itself. Furthermore, when the phallus penetrates the anus, we obtain the correct insight into the speculative identity of excrementation and insemination, the highest and the lowest. There is no room here to explore further variations to be deduced: doing it with an animal, with a machine-doll; doing it with many partners, sadism and masochism. . . . The main point is that the very “progress” from one form to another is motivated by the structural imbalance of the sexual relationship (Lacan’s *il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel*), which condemns any sexual practice to eternal oscillation between the “spontaneous” pathos of self-obliteration and the logic of external ritual (following the rules). Thus the final outcome is that sexuality is the domain of “spurious infinity” whose logic, brought to an extreme, cannot but engender tasteless excesses like those of “spermathon” contests—how many men can a woman bring to orgasm in an hour, and so on . . . for a true philosopher, there are more interesting things in the world than sex.

What accounts for the weird (if not—for some, at least—tasteless) character of this exercise is not the reference to sexual practices as such, but the short circuit between two spheres which are usually perceived as incompatible, as moving at ontologically different levels: that of sublime philosophical speculation and that of the details of sexual practices. Even if there is nothing which, *a priori*, prohibits the application of the Hegelian conceptual machinery to sexual practices, it nonetheless appears that the entire exercise is somehow meaningless, a (rather bad) joke. The unpleasant, weird effect of such short circuits shows that they play a symptomatic role in our symbolic universes: they bring home the implicit, tacit prohibitions on which these universes rely. One practices concrete universality by confronting a universality with its “unbearable” example. Of course, Hegelian dialectics can be used to analyze anything—nonetheless, one is tacitly summoned not to apply it to sexuality, as if this move would make the very notion of dialectical analysis ridiculous; of course, all people are equal—nonetheless, one is tacitly summoned to treat some of them as “less equal,” as if asserting their full equality would undermine the very notion of equality.

This, then, is the nontrivial sense in which I hope readers will find the present book interesting: insofar as I succeed in my effort to *practice* concrete universality—to engage in what Deleuze, that great anti-Hegelian, called “expanding the concepts.”