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## *Introduction: Thinking, Writing and Reading about the Real*

Slavoj Žižek is the most vital interdisciplinary thinker to emerge in recent years. He has become so influential across the whole range of the humanities and social sciences that his importance can be compared with that of Foucault in the 1970s and 1980s; but he is much more fun to read. His publishers like to include in the blurb on the back of his books the claim that he 'provides the best intellectual high since *Anti-Oedipus*'; but he is a lot more entertaining than Deleuze and Guattari too. Reading Žižek is like taking an exhilarating ride on a roller-coaster through anecdote, Kant, popular film, science, religion, Marx, opera, smut, current affairs, modern art, Derrida, political correctness, canonical literature, cyberspace, etc. etc., being constantly buffeted as you do so in the twists and turns of Hegelian dialectic and Lacanian theory. A riveting speaker, Žižek is also his own best publicist, and even if, when you hear him, you may have the feeling that you've heard it before, the experience is still irresistibly energizing.

At the core of Žižek's work is a vigorous reactivation of Lacanian psychoanalysis in the service of a project at once political and philosophical. His main philosophical contention is that Lacan's thought is heir to the Enlightenment, but represents a seismic shift forwards. For Žižek, Lacan both continues and radicalizes the trajectory of European transcendental metaphysics: that is, of the quest to achieve true understanding of the nature of being that starts with Plato and is then decisively reoriented by Kant and Hegel. Žižek contrasts Lacan with the deviations from this tradition represented

by Heidegger and post-structuralism (initially Žižek identifies Lacan as 'postmodern', but not for long).

Žižek is a leading thinker, but he does not work in isolation.<sup>1</sup> Born in 1949 in what was then Yugoslavia and is now Slovenia, he is one of a group of Slovenian Lacanians based at the Institute of Philosophy in Ljubljana, Slovenia. The characteristics of this group are their shared background in Continental philosophy (Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Marx), their fascination with Lacanian psychoanalysis, and a relentless urge to explain each in the terms of the other. A true pedagogic passion drives their writings. They are also united by their interest in ideology and popular culture. Several of the volumes edited by Žižek contain examples of work by his fellow Slovenians. They are formidable linguists, who, like Žižek himself, seem at home in several European vernaculars, capable of reading Hegel and Lacan in the original German or French; their culture is cosmopolitan, and much of their work, like Žižek's own, is available in a range of languages. Like him, they originally published in Slovenian, principally in the journal *Problemi* and the book series *Analecta* which they had founded.

With a doctorate in philosophy from Ljubljana, and a first book on Heidegger, Žižek studied for a second doctorate in Paris with Lacan's son-in-law and principal disciple, Jacques-Alain Miller. His thesis with Miller, on Hegel and Lacan, provided much of the substance for his first two books in English, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989) and *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (1990); the latter was published in French in the same year. Another early book, a collection of essays produced in collaboration with several other Slovenian Lacanians and entertainingly entitled *Everything You Wanted to Know about Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)* (1992), first appeared in French, and *Enjoy Your Symptom!* (likewise 1992) also gave rise to a French version. The French psychoanalytical film theorist Michel Chion is a significant collaborator and reference point at this time. Another theorist who was interested in Žižek and the other Slovenian Lacanians at this early date was the influential American Marxist critic Fredric Jameson. Ernesto Laclau, a political theorist working in the UK, also recognized Žižek's work and contributed a supportive explanatory preface to *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. His greater exposure than the other Slovenian Lacanians on the international lecture circuit, particularly in the USA, where he has held a succession of visiting professorships, has led Žižek to pull away from them somewhat. For a period he maintained a vigorous debate with

the American philosopher and theorist of gender Judith Butler. Among his major interlocutors now is the French philosopher Alain Badiou, a student of the French Marxist Althusser and a vehement anti-capitalist.

Since the early 1990s Žižek has published at a hectic pace, with an increasing number of titles coming out each year. Faced with this abundance, where should one start? Among his most accessible books are the ones on popular culture, especially *Looking Awry* (1991); more specialized, but also pretty readable, is his recent study of the film director Kiesłowski, *The Frigate of Real Tears* (2001). Another good starting point is the comic self-interview in which he obligingly asks himself to outline his views to himself (published in *The Metastases of Enjoyment* of 1994). Probably his best books are *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), *Tarrying with the Negative* (1993) and *The Ticklish Subject* (1999), but many of the ideas developed in these works are also contained in a more accessible form in *Enjoy Your Symptom!*. That this last may, in some sense, be the key Žižekian text is suggested by the fact that he has published it twice, in 1992 and again in expanded form in 2001.

Like other intellectual superstars, Žižek is at risk of writing faster than he can read, and at times faster even than he can think. A certain dilution, repetitiveness<sup>2</sup> and inattention to detail<sup>3</sup> are the price of success. But his energy seems unabated as he continues to find new areas of debate and new partners *in* debate. Indeed, since this book was drafted, a further book has appeared, co-written with Mladen Dolar, called *Opera's Second Death*; a collection of Lenin's writings flanked by an Introduction and Afterword, *Revolution at the Gates*, appeared as it went to press; a revised edition, with a new Introduction, of *For They Know Not What They Do* has been announced; and a further book on cognitive psychology, Christianity and other matters is in hand.

## Thinking about the Real

What holds these various philosophical, political and cultural strands together in Žižek's writing is his sustained interrogation of what Lacan calls the 'real'. Since this difficult concept is, in a sense, what all of his books revolve around (and indeed, most of the later writings of Lacan too), it is not possible to provide a snappy definition of what it means, but I shall start by offering a few pointers. (See also the entry REAL in the Glossary.)

The real must not for a moment be confused with what, through discourse, we represent to ourselves as 'reality'; it is, by definition, that which discourse cannot include. Whereas Foucault's *oeuvre* turns around the problem of discourse and how we are positioned in and by it, Žižek's concern is thus with the exact obverse. The real is more akin to the mad machines and terrifying inertia evoked in the opening pages of the *Anti-Oedipus*, but instead of constituting – as these do for Deleuze and Guattari – a material reality analogous to the various historical modes of production, the real for Žižek is far more elusive and far less amenable to description. This does not mean, however, that it is not all around us. On the contrary, it dogs our every step – as though stuck to the sole of our shoe, as Lacan humorously put it.<sup>4</sup> Lacan's remark brings to mind the joke told about Sir Thomas Beecham, who when asked if he had ever conducted music by Stockhausen replied, 'No, but I trod in some once.' The real is the disgusting, hidden underside of reality which we cannot fail but step on, however much we imagine that our minds are set on higher things. Indeed, the more we keep our heads in the air, the more it clings to our feet. And just as we can't keep ourselves from sniffing at it – whether with titillation or revulsion – so it fills us with *jouissance*, or enjoyment: the thrill of the real. This enjoyment can never be directly experienced or acknowledged, but it colours our responses in the guise of an obscene smear, an opaque, contaminating stain. Or, to take a rather different and less unsavoury tack, the real can be thought of as the limit of language, and thus as everything we lose by becoming speaking beings. This limitation is just that: a cut-off point so absolute as to be invisible to us as language-users. If we attempt to trace it, it wraps back into the heart of language, just as the hole in the middle of a doughnut is a continuation of the space that surrounds it. Thanks to the hole, the doughnut is a doughnut, even though, in a sense, the hole is precisely what is not in it; analogously, the real is what shapes our sense of reality, even though it is excluded from it. Conversely, the real may be represented as something unremittingly resistant, a 'hard kernel' that our thoughts keep glancing off and that no mental light can illumine. The words most commonly used by Žižek to gesture towards the real include 'antagonism', 'traumatic', 'impossible', 'kernel' and 'deadlock'; others that belong (some of them surprisingly) in this field are 'act', 'death', 'drive', 'ethical', 'freedom', 'forced choice' and 'love' (see the Glossary for an elaboration of some of these terms).

Žižek's concept of the real will be explored from many angles in this book. The panoramic range of topics he discusses, from smutty anecdotes to religious faith and from science fiction movies to quantum physics, all interest him because of the way they simultaneously exclude and engage it. For now, in this summary of the main lines of Žižek's thought, it is enough to say that Žižek places Lacan in the tradition of post-Enlightenment metaphysics because he sees Lacan as a philosopher of the real. However elusive the real may be, it insinuates its effects upon us; however negative, it remains a point of anchorage to which we are bound by enjoyment. Post-structuralism, then, is criticized for distancing itself from metaphysics and casting itself adrift from the real. Likewise, the real lies at the heart of Žižek's political project because, for him, ideology relies upon the social organization of enjoyment, and it is through enjoyment that political compliance is secured. By means of what he calls 'the act', however, we erupt into non-compliance, disturb ideology, and loosen its hold on us. In Žižek's terms, we accomplish the political equivalent of 'traversing the fantasy' – a phrase referring to the outcome of Lacanian therapy, in which we glimpse that what we had taken for reality was all along an illusion masking the space of the real, and so have an opportunity to build 'reality' afresh. The philosophical and political dimensions of his project are thus inseparable, even if what connects them (the real) is precisely that which, in a sense, is not there. Their conjunction is brought out most clearly in his most ambitious book to date, *The Ticklish Subject*, whose subtitle declares it as addressing 'the absent centre of political ontology'.

This 'absent centre' takes on different coloration in different phases of Žižek's philosophy. Most pervasive (and from a Lacanian standpoint most orthodox) is the identification of the real with sexual difference. The real is also explored in terms of the negative in Hegel's dialectic. From *The Indivisible Remainder* (1996) onwards, the negativity of the real is discovered in the resistance offered to thought by material reality. This 'materialist' account leads Žižek (in *The Ticklish Subject* of 1999 and subsequent writings) to identify the unshakeable monolith of capital as a manifestation of the real. His recent writings on Christianity also lead to a new and original purchase on the real as the domain of grace, by contrast with that of law.

Where political thought is concerned, there are likewise major changes between the earlier and later Žižek. In works prior to *The*

*Indivisible Remainder*, his principal stance is anti-totalitarian, and his main subject matter is the critique of ideology, especially nationalist and racist ideology. His next books (most notably *The Ticklish Subject*) mount an impassioned attack on capitalism, and plead for a return to universality as the only means of opposing capitalist globalization. Most recently, the wheel seems almost to have come full circle as Žižek critiques liberalism and queries the very category of 'totalitarianism'. A constant of Žižek's political writing throughout, however, has been his opposition to cynicism and his promotion of what he calls 'the act', a violent disruption of the *status quo* that might make it possible to puncture the prevailing ideology and effect political change.

### Writing about the Real

Žižek's writing can be quite hard going. In part this is because philosophical thought is inevitably demanding, especially when, like Žižek's, it is conceived in response to thinkers who are themselves notoriously difficult. Even when he is in pedagogic vein, his determination to illumine a difficulty in one writer (typically Hegel) in the light of a difficulty in another (typically Lacan) can prove as much intimidating as enlightening. In part, too, it is because the boundary between exposition and critique is blurred in his writing, as it is in much recent theory and philosophy. Žižek tends to explicate the thought of any writer with whom he disagrees in terms that anticipate the intended corrective; his exposition 'always already' contains the germs of the ensuing critique, and thus tends to be couched in his prevailing (Hegelianized) Lacanese. The aim of this book is to facilitate access to Žižek's thought, and I start in chapter 2 with the fundamental Lacan–Hegel exchange.

There is, however, another reason why Žižek's writing can be baffling, which I shall address in this Introduction. At the local level, his writing is enormous fun. His materials are so lively and varied, and his raconteur's art so seductive, that the ideas seem to come to life. One has the sense of being presented with a succession of nuggets which are individually fascinating and which, squirrelled away, would make a veritable storehouse of insights into Lacanian and philosophical apothegms ('the Other does not exist', 'there is no sexual relation', 'the Spirit is a bone', etc.). But at the level of the chapter, and still more of the book, his writing can seem utterly chaotic. The principal moves of his argument are often hard to make

out, and its overall thrust can be unclear. This is the more disconcerting since a good deal of care has evidently gone into the construction of the books themselves. They exhibit, for instance, a marked concern for balance and symmetry; they often follow an elegant tripartite plan, and the individual chapters of any given work are remarkably similar in length. So why does what appears, from one point of view, to be so carefully orchestrated seem, from another, to be so utterly shapeless?

The answer I propose is that Žižek's challenge to his readers to find coherence in his writing is the way he personally has evolved of writing around the real. Žižek teases at the limits of our understanding at the level of the chapter or the book in a way practised by Lacan from the level of the sentence upwards. Syntactically tortuous and laden with puns, circumlocutions, obscure allusions and foreign terms, Lacan's prose is a tireless (if fatiguing) testimony to the gaps that haunt our speech.<sup>5</sup> As Žižek puts it, 'the only way to comprehend Lacan is to approach his work . . . as a succession of attempts to seize the same persistent traumatic kernel' (*Metastases*, 173). Although Žižek's style seems, by contrast with Lacan's, to be a model of clarity, the construction of his writing overall is illumined by this comment. Such coherence as can be ascribed to it will come from the reader's own willingness to 'seize the . . . traumatic kernel' that emerges as a counter-effect of the text's loose-knit and disorienting structure. Žižek's manner of composition, that is, provokes the reader to acknowledge the real *as* an effect of writing and *in* its effect *on* writing. The next section traces a reader's experience of reading about the real and offers some strategies for coping with Žižek's texts.

## Reading about the Real

In this necessarily selective account, I shall look at three features of Žižek's writing which disconcert the reader initially: his oblique approach to a topic, his sometimes surprising use of exemplification, and his inconsistent persona and personal style.<sup>6</sup>

### *The oblique approach*

The way Žižek broaches an argument often appears to bear a scant relationship to what then appears to be its main content. The first chapter of *Tarrying with the Negative* is a challenging review of the

conception of the subject from Descartes to Lacan ('subject' being used here in the philosophical sense to refer to the nature of the agency that says 'I'). But it opens with Žižek lofting in sideways an apparently innocuous inquiry into the relation between *noir* and *neo-noir* films. It is only once this inquiry has focused on the similarities between two *neo-noir* films, *Angel Heart* and *Blade Runner*, that the point emerges, as if by chance, that both films present a 'radical undermining of self-identity' (*Tarrying*, 10). The paradox of *Blade Runner* is that memory, usually the prop and guarantee of identity, is precisely what makes the identity of the hero (Harrison Ford) forfeit. Because what seem like 'his' memories have in all likelihood been fabricated (he is probably not a human being but a 'replicant'), the 'I' he thinks he is cannot avoid the suspicion that he is not that 'I' after all. It is only in retrospect, when we have read a good deal more of the chapter, that we see, as it were, the point of this point. *Blade Runner* illustrates in the register of popular culture the traumatic split between the subject available to consciousness, a prey to the fictions of the symbolic order, and the transcendental or unconscious subject, a split which (Žižek contends) runs through post-Cartesian philosophy, and is the manifestation in it of the real. The relation of *noir* to *neo-noir* films was the feint or detour by which the real of this split was approached. The obliqueness of Žižek's approach enables the reader to see that the real cannot be approached directly, but is always stumbled upon in a way that is at once contingent and unavoidable.

Because the real is experienced as much as absence as troubling excess, form rather than content may provide a means of approaching it. Content may mesmerize and mislead, but if we can look at things in such a way as to make the content recede from view and instead bring the formal parallels into focus, then the gaps that emerge *between* them may prove a source of insight. An instance of an argument that is introduced obliquely through form rather than content is the opening chapter of *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, in which we are invited to understand how Marx's concept of commodity fetishism has the same formal properties as Freud's theory of dreams.<sup>7</sup> For Marx, the commodity is an entity that effaces its own origins. The human effort of manufacturing it is what determines its value as an object of exchange; yet it presents itself to the consumer not as a product of labour but as an object that is valuable in so far as it can be made use of. The commodity, as a result, possesses a pseudo-magical value that derives from the way in which it conceals from those who use it the actual economic rela-



tions that produced it. Likewise, what Freud calls the 'dreamwork' is the operation whereby the desire which gave rise to the dream is repressed and displaced on to its form. The point of comparison between the dream and the commodity, then, is not some tangible content, but something which is lost in our conscious perception of both. This formal analogy between the two opens up, in the rest of the chapter, a brilliant revision of Marx's notion of ideology in which the unconscious plays a central role.

Žižek's interest in form is focused not just on the gap that holds open a particular structure, but on the way it is also deposited as a presence on the manifest content, inflecting or 'staining' it. In *The Sublime Object* this inflection is especially far reaching. The initial comparison between society's symptoms (the commodity) and those of the clinic (the patient reporting his dreams to the analyst) has its own repressed content, which then adheres to the form of the whole book. This content, which is never made explicit, is that the capitalist world is pathological; and the form taken by the book is that of a psychoanalytic therapy. Part I is about the symptom, Part II is very largely about the fantasy, and Part III is about our subjection to the real. This progression parallels that of the clinic, from the patient's initial complaints about his symptoms, to the way he privately represents his condition to himself, through to his disturbing and 'traversing' this fantasy in order to expose its contingent and fabricated nature. Thus, although Freud's account of the dreamwork is innocently introduced as a merely fleeting comparison, its evocation of the clinical encounter is also deposited on the book as a whole.<sup>8</sup> In negotiating the indirection of a book such as this, Žižek's readers may well feel baffled and frustrated, but these very feelings may help to draw them into the analytical process and provoke acknowledgement of the real.

### *The excess in the example*

Žižek's examples do not just replicate the theoretical point which they are introduced to exemplify. Just as his entry into an argument can be confusingly oblique, likewise what was seemingly a mere illustration can lead to unexpected departures.

The instance that I will discuss here comes from chapter 2 of *Tarrying with the Negative*, where Žižek draws out the implications of Lacan's responses to Descartes's famous *cogito*, 'I think, therefore I am'. Because Lacan believes that there is an irresolvable split between the conscious and the unconscious, he experiments with

various ways of recasting Descartes's formula in order to mark how, for psychoanalysis, its two halves must necessarily be sundered: we cannot consciously command both thinking and being. Žižek takes Lacan's speculations further, distinguishing between a 'masculine' and a 'feminine' variant of the formula. (The reasons for this, too complex to go into here, are examined below, pp. 87–90). I will concentrate on the feminine variant, 'I think, therefore it is',<sup>9</sup> which results from breaking apart Descartes's formula in such a way that *cogito* ('I think') stays in the conscious mind, but *ergo sum* ('therefore I am') is relegated to the unconscious. *Ergo sum* must now be recast as 'therefore it is', 'it' being equivalent to Freud's *id* or Lacan's *ça*, terms used to refer to the dimension of the real in the unconscious.<sup>10</sup> The subject is rent, its 'being' confined to the real, and its capacity for 'thinking' defined by its severance from being. Žižek expounds all this, and then proceeds to illustrate it using examples from popular culture. Disconcertingly, however, this so-called feminine subjectivity turns out to be exemplified by one female and two male characters: Sigourney Weaver in *Alien*, Mr Valdemar in Poe's story of the same name, and James Stewart in *It's a Wonderful Life* (*Tarrying*, 62–4). Why?

The point of the examples, it seems to me, is twofold: to bring out the horrific nature of the 'it' in all cases, and to underline how gender is separate from sex. Either way, the excess which flows out from the examples relates to the problem of the real.

The revision of Descartes's formula to 'I think, therefore it is' underlines the extent to which we are mutilated and off balance as a result of our 'I' being severed from the real of our being. The formula runs the risk, however, of being purely cerebral. It risks, that is, performing what it says: recoiling from the real it has expelled, much as, when Sigourney Weaver recoils from the monstrous figure of the alien, 'the subject constitutes itself by rejecting the slimy substance of *jouissance*' (*Tarrying*, 62). Žižek uses this phrase again in citing 'The Facts in the Case of Mr Valdemar'. Poe's tale recounts how the protagonist, who had lain for a long time in suspended animation, woke up and said 'I am dead', whereupon his body instantly liquefied 'into a pure, formless, slimy substance of *jouissance*' (*ibid.*). The final example, *It's a Wonderful Life*, is the most telling of the three. Its ostensible point is to show how the 'I' of George Bailey (James Stewart) is likewise sundered from its being in the real. Žižek's interest thus centres on the scene in which George is about to commit suicide and his guardian angel conducts him back over his life 'reduced to a nonexistent gaze, i.e. . . . para-

doxically entitled to observe the world in which [he does] not exist' (*Tarrying*, 64). However, this point is reached only after Žižek has lingered over the substance of what the angel shows to George. If George hadn't existed, the consequences would have been nightmarish for his family and community. Here the true point of comparison with the other examples emerges: 'We see him encounter the real in the filmic dream, and it is precisely in order to escape this traumatic real that the hero takes refuge within the (diegetic) "reality", i.e. the ideological fantasy of an idyllic town community' (*Tarrying*, 63). The common ground between all three examples, then, is that they emphasize the traumatic (slimy, nightmarish) quality of the real 'it' from which the 'I think' of each character recoils.

Secondly, the examples suggest that 'masculine' and 'feminine' are not inherent gender identities, but incompatible positions linked only by their different ways of fielding (or failing to field) this traumatic *it*. Gender difference relies not on physical or social differentiation, but on differing subject positions in relation to this real. Thus it is not the anatomical body but the position of the psyche that is gendered for psychoanalysis. To serve mixed-sex examples in illustration of 'femininity' helps insinuate this point (which I develop in chapter 4).

The apparent misfit between the theoretical context and the illustrative instance provokes Žižek's readers to work out the reason for it. In the passage just discussed, this working out leads us to the problematic at the core of his writing: that of our relation to the real. By the same token, for the reader, a relation to the real, both as something lost to conscious thought and as a fearsome threat, is conjured in the very effort of trying to understand his text.

### *Žižek's personal style*

Uncertainty as to how to read Žižek's persona introduces the position(s) from which this relation to the real might be broached. The personal style of his writing may enthuse or irritate readers, but it is unlikely to leave them cold.<sup>11</sup> Emphatic and flamboyant, it is peppered with instances of 'of course', 'ultimately' and 'crucially', and long stretches in italics. The progress of interpretation is a theatrical performance in which he will proffer an opinion tolerantly proffered as banal ('one usually thinks'), before brandishing a much cleverer one ('what this leaves out of account, of course'), only to proceed with a flourish to its dramatic reversal ('but ultimately, of

course').<sup>12</sup> Connections between ideas are gestured at with a lordly tone ('suffice it to recall in this context'; 'it is against this background that one has to conceive'; 'the temptation to be avoided here').

Readers may find all this annoying. I think, nevertheless, that there is as much self-conscious bravado and self-mockery in these procedures as self-conceit. Caught in the glare of self-awareness, flamboyance and impudence can quickly transform into self-parody, and Žižek abounds in self-puncturing moments that cut the ground from under his grandiloquence. In *Tarrying with the Negative* he characterizes himself as an obsessional neurotic who can avoid feeling guilty about watching so many idiotic films only by subsequently sacrificing himself on the altar of theory and writing mind-bendingly complex commentaries on them (*Tarrying*, 73). Another *piquant* instance of self-parody comes at the start of *Everything You Wanted to Know*, where he imagines a postmodern theorist (himself) in dialogue with a lower mortal: 'You think what you see is a simple melodrama even your senile granny would have no difficulty in following? Yet without taking into account . . ./the difference between symptom and *sinthom* [*sic*]; the structure of the Borromean knot; the fact that Woman is one of the Names-of-the-Father; etc., etc./ you've totally missed the point!' (*Everything*, 2). The self-mockery of these moments is confirmed by the more openly self-deprecating humour of Žižek's personal reminiscences in his writings – his experiences of military service, the disapproval he encounters from his relatives, the minefield of negotiation with one's in-laws.<sup>13</sup> The result is that, in Žižek's writing, what we think of as 'serious' thought constantly threatens to dissolve into derision, a threat which it is difficult for the reader to locate, and consequently impossible to parry. If Žižek, not I, were writing this section, he might choose as his title, 'Theorist or Impostor? Yes, Please! What is the reader to make of all this?'

I am going to focus my discussion on an anecdote which Robert Boynton (in 'Enjoy Your Žižek!') records Žižek as telling about his analysis by Jacques-Alain Miller. Like Lacan, Miller uses the technique of the variable session with his patients in place of the traditional '50-minute hour':

'It was my strict rule, my sole ethical principle, to lie consistently: to invent all symptoms, fabricate all dreams,' [Žižek] reports of his treatment. 'It was obsessional neurosis in its absolute purest form. Because you never knew how long it would last, I was always prepared for at least two sessions. I have this incredible fear of what I

might discover if I really went into analysis. What if I lost my frenetic theoretical desire? What if I turned into a common person? Eventually, Žižek claims, he had Miller completely taken in by his charade: 'Once I knew what aroused his interest, I invented even more complicated scenarios and dreams. One involved the Bette Davis movie *All About Eve*. Miller's daughter is named Eve, so I told him that I had dreamed about going to a movie with Bette Davis in it. I planned every detail so that when I finished he announced grandly, "This was your revenge against me!"'

The ostensible butt of this anecdote is Miller. But once someone admits to being a prankster, then he could be pulling your leg at any time – and Žižek loves this kind of intellectual practical joke.<sup>14</sup> If we take his stories at face value, we risk becoming the butt of the hoax ourselves. Whatever the truth of this anecdote, however, it is revealing that Žižek should cast himself in the role of trickster on the analytical couch and thus associate psychoanalysis, theory and theatrical pretence.

Lacan's account, in his *Seminar XVII*, of four interlocking discourses – those of the master, the university, the analyst and the patient – enables us to take this discussion further, and to see that Žižek's tale deliberately confuses the reader as to which discourse(s) he aspires to.<sup>15</sup> Like Lacan, he actively distances him from the first two. The discourse of the master lays claim to uncontested authority (but betrays inner anxiety at its own deficiency); it addresses itself to control over knowledge, but the real eludes it. The discourse of the university affirms control over knowledge (but rests on an ultimately arbitrary authority); it wants to address itself to the real, but produces anxious, deficient subjects. What remain, then, are the discourses of the analysand (or patient) and the analyst. The analysand presents as a hysterical subject, preoccupied by her<sup>16</sup> lack of some inner substance, and thus condemned to theatricality. She addresses herself to the analyst, whom she invests with magisterial authority, hoping to gain from him knowledge of what this mysterious treasure is. The way the analyst responds is by himself posing as this object, and revealing it to her in all its vacuity. The analyst's task, then, is to be abject and unlovely in order that the patient should realize that the authority she is looking for in him does not exist, and that it is the nature of the subject to be an empty performance, lacking a central core. In this way, the analyst produces knowledge of a different order from that of any of the other discourses: the knowledge that there is no such thing as one's inner treasure, except as the object of one's desire. Eventu-

ally the analysand is drawn, through glimpsing this worthlessness, to renounce belief in mastery and see it as imposture; in this way, the analyst becomes a waste product of the analytical scene.<sup>17</sup> By thus 'traversing the fantasy' the subject accepts the vacuity of subjectivity, the fact that, in its lack, it is subject to the real.

With this in mind, we can go back to Žižek's anecdote about his analysis with Miller. Clearly, one thing he is doing is staging a bravura performance of 'the discourse of the hysteric'. He couples a frenzied desire for knowledge ('What if I lost my frenetic theoretical desire?') with the conviction that he is the repository of some secret treasure ('What if I turned into a common person?'). But he has also appropriated the role of the analyst. Not only does he pre-empt the analyst's terms of art ('invent all symptoms, fabricate all dreams') and anticipate his diagnosis ('obsessional neurosis in its absolute purest form'), he also effects Miller's elimination from the scene, wickedly branding him as having erroneously assumed the position of the master ('he announced grandly, "This was your revenge against me!"') and assuming his position himself. In this way, Žižek monopolizes both halves of the analytical script, combining in his own person the theatricality and restless search for knowledge of the neurotic and the deflating derision of the analyst.

This anecdote suggests that a way of accounting for Žižek's often disconcerting writing style is that it conflates two interlocking positions. As analysand-theorist, he enthuses over his theoretical treasure with a histrionic glee that tips into self-parody, his performance being further undermined by the laconic derision he displays as analyst. This combination is well illustrated by *Enjoy Your Symptom!*. Ostensibly, it proceeds in the discourse of the patient; each of its chapters frames a question that insists on a troublesome Lacanian term: 'Why Does a *Letter* Always Arrive at Its Destination?', 'Why Is *Woman* a Symptom of Man?', and so on. However, the injunction which provides the book's title can be spoken only from the perspective of the analyst, who, recognizing that the patient is wedded to his symptom, encourages him to embrace it as his identity. What the patient took to be 'the worst', the hindrance to his being, is actually 'the best', the form of his subjection to the real.

More generally, I suggest that this anecdote about Miller and himself serves as a figure of the way Žižek's readers are precipitated into the thick of the analytical scene with all its tensions, passions and potential for exposure to the real. This is confirmed by

my earlier remarks about *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, which, as I said, has the form of a therapy. A clinical outline is also discernible in chapter 4 of *Looking Awry* and in *The Abyss of Freedom*. The Introduction to *For They Know Not What They Do*, a book which began life as a series of lectures delivered in Slovenia in 1989 in the run-up to the country's first democratic elections, also presents the book as a psychoanalysis, though in this case Žižek confines himself to the role of analyst and identifies the public – ourselves – as the analyst (*For They Know Not*, 3).

One of the commonplaces about the Slovenian Lacanians is that they do not practise psychoanalysis in the clinic.<sup>18</sup> However, Žižek treats the world as a textual clinic in which the writer's task is to speak for and to social pathology.<sup>19</sup> As his readers, *we* are that world, and in requiring us to make sense of his writings for ourselves, Žižek enjoins on us the difficulty of 'traversing the fantasy' and recognizing our subjection to the real. In this way, his writings perform the intellectual equivalent of his concept of 'the act', provoking us as reader-agents to rid ourselves of complacency towards the symbolic order, a provocation which is bound to be as uncomfortable as it is challenging.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion and the Way Ahead

Often Žižek's observations about other writers can just as illuminatingly be applied to himself, and the following comments on Derrida suggest that it is precisely the capacity for disconcerting elusiveness which confers unity on his own texts:

The kernel of unreadability that resists and belies every interpretative appropriation – that is, the very feature which makes a text forever 'non-identical to itself', the unappropriable foreign ingredient-body on account of which a text always eludes and defers its being comprehended – is the ultimate guarantee of its identity; without this unassimilable kernel, the text would lack any proper consistency, it would be a transparent medium, a mere appearance of *another* essential identity. (*Indivisible Remainder*, 26, emphasis original)

Žižek's own 'kernel of unreadability', I have argued, reflects the 'unassimilable kernel' in his writing which in turn points to how, for him, thought is also hollowed out by the 'unassimilable kernel' of the real.

Obviously, then, the reading I have offered is my own way of making sense of what, I am also claiming, eludes sense. Each reader must find his or her own way of grappling with the gaps, and will never come up with the same account twice. As with Lacan, every reading of a Žižek text is only a possible trajectory – which is not to say that it is not true. In the one offered here, I have placed a lot of weight on the experience of difficulty, irritation, frustration and so forth, as provoking us to engage with the ‘kernel of unreadability’ in his writings. But it is equally the case that, in his unstinting efforts to address this ‘unassimilable kernel’, Žižek’s harnessing of popular culture, jokes, cyberpunk, etc. generates a constant stream of enjoyment. Although Žižek never disguises the sombre side of *jouissance*, the effervescent excitement with which it bursts out from his reflections is also a perpetual source of joking and amusement. Another, but just as valid, introduction to his thought could be written through the optic of the insubstantiality of humour and its converse, the real of laughter.

In the chapters that follow I shall do Žižek a disservice in taking to pieces what he has so exuberantly hurtled together. Each pursues a Žižekian theme – not in isolation, since that would be impossible, but nevertheless in an attempt to focus on one issue at a time. Chapter 2 is about Žižek’s controversial conjuncture of Lacan and Hegel, which provides the framework for all his other work. Chapter 3 focuses on culture and the way in which works of art articulate a sense of ‘reality’. Chapter 4 addresses the problematic of gender and sexual difference, and Žižek’s interaction with Judith Butler. Chapter 5 looks selectively at the vast range of philosophical reference in Žižek, concentrating on his view of human nature as filtered through theology and psychoanalysis. The final chapter is about what I take to be his central preoccupation – politics – a domain so all embracing that something of the richness and variety of Žižek’s thinking is, I hope, represented in it.