

## Slavoj Žižek and the *Return to Hegel*: Return, Repeat, and Overcome

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**Abstract:** Slavoj Žižek claims that when a true historical break occurs, there is an impossibility of return. What I hope to do in this paper is to provide an explication of Žižek’s idea of a *Return to Hegel*. In the general sense, a return may only be possible when there is a successful act of departure. However, this act of departure may simply be an illusion—as in the case of Hegel, whose contemporaries (and rivals) Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and Marx have proclaimed their post-Hegelian anti-philosophical break. When there is a false break, then the possibility of return is once again opened. I shall try to elucidate the idea in the following steps: 1) to give a generally accepted account of Hegel today; 2) to introduce Slavoj Žižek; 3) to dwell on the topic of return; and 4) to answer the question, “Is it still possible to be a Hegelian today?” I claim that Žižek’s version of a *Return to Hegel* is manifested in three steps: return, repeat, and overcome. The act of return leads us back to examine closely the historical transition wherein we may find the theoretical fault somewhere along the line (leading us to dismiss Hegel as the “absolute idealist” who claimed to have possessed “absolute knowledge”). The act of repeating gives us a fresh take on the text of Hegel. Hence, Žižek’s unorthodox reading of Hegel. The act of overcoming, as Žižek fondly describes, is “to become more Hegelian than the master himself.” This means that there is a need to read Hegel through contemporary lenses and context for him to fit in the contemporary era.

**Keywords:** Hegel, Re-evaluation, Return and Žižek

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### Introduction: A basic conception of the generally accepted account of Hegel today

“I don’t much like hearing that we have *gone beyond* Hegel, the way one hears we have *gone beyond* Descartes. We go beyond everything and always end up in the same place.”<sup>1</sup>

Suppose that we metaphorically describe the historical epoch of modern philosophy, as if it were a mountain of some sort. We find four significant parts: the

base, the upward slope, the apex, and the downward slope. Following this line of thought, we can plot three of the most important figures of modernity (including Enlightenment) to represent the aforementioned parts or the features of the mountain. We have René Descartes, Immanuel Kant, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Firstly, we can consider Descartes as the foot of the mountain—the base—the foundation and the seemingly unquestioned presupposition (as Gadamer and

MacIntyre criticizes<sup>2</sup>) that the Enlightenment rested upon. Following Descartes, the next significant figure is Kant, whom we can consider as the upward slope of the mountain, given the Kantian Revolution and his immense contribution to the history of thought. The last of our personages, and surely not the least, deserves (and you may disagree), two spots in the hypothetical ‘mountain of modernity.’ Indeed, at one point, Hegel was considered the apex—the peak of modernity. But it was also in him that modernity declined. The period of modernity reached its highest point and sooner, its downfall, with the philosophy of Hegel.

After the decline, what follows is an era entirely dedicated as a movement against Hegel (to put it quite ironically, a negation of a thesis). Michel Foucault was correct in saying that the age following the decline of modernity is an age wherein “whether through logic or epistemology, whether through Marx or through Nietzsche, has attempted to flee Hegel.”<sup>3</sup> The only haunting thing, however, is that we are not entirely sure if Hegel’s contemporaries were indeed able to develop a philosophy of their own, outside of Hegel’s shadow. When we think of it, it is common in philosophy and the history of thought that a contemporary thinker reacts upon his predecessor. This reaction may be for or against him. However, what is most intriguing in the phenomenon is the reason why Hegel’s contemporaries exerted much effort just to distance themselves away from him. Although, of course, there are those who claim and profess their indebtedness to Hegel, a rather large number of the thinkers of the postmodern era did try to renounce him, as if Hegel’s period was likened to the *dark ages* of the medieval era.

Now, let us not be mistaken. Postmodernity is largely a reaction against Hegel, and although a

large part of the critique is directed towards Hegel, postmodernists claim that they are offering a critique against Enlightenment in general. The condition of postmodernism, according to Jean-François Lyotard, as written in *La condition postmoderne* (1979) is characterized by “incredulity towards metanarratives.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, it gives us an idea that the era is against grand narratives, totalization, or the abstract universalism that was offered to us by the Enlightenment rationalism. This is very characteristic of Hegel’s philosophy. It is a grand philosophic system that was construed by someone who seemed to have claimed, by the very existence of the system, that he understood everything. Hence, it gives us an idea (an idiotic one, as Žižek often remarked in his lectures) of Hegel as that “German bureaucrat who thought he knew everything.” Two general characteristics of Hegel’s philosophy thus emerge from these critiques: the first is that Hegel’s philosophy is obscure *par excellence* and the second is that his project of a grand system was ambitious, more so (or if not), a misplaced arrogance.

The first of the two aforementioned characteristics were very general in secondary literatures concerning Hegel. It was always at the introduction of every, if not, most secondary books aiming to provide a user-friendly companion reader or guide to Hegel’s philosophy. The second characteristic may be rooted back to his early rivals, one notable of which, is Arthur Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer provided the most invective and vehement of all the criticisms ever thrown against Hegel. For some time in the past, esteemed historians of philosophy would customarily give to the immediate contemporaries of Kant (such as Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel), as “much honor and space” as to all of Kant’s predecessors from the pioneers of Continental Rationalism,

Empiricism, and Romanticism.<sup>5</sup> It is quite different with the case of Schopenhauer, who did not just disagree with Hegel, but with whom he also shared a self-induced professional and academic rivalry. For Schopenhauer, it is important to take note that any philosopher worth his salt must place emphasis on good and clear style of writing. For him, obscurantism immediately destroys the integrity of any philosopher. Schopenhauer criticized Kant for this, but nevertheless, he says that “the public was compelled to see that what is obscure is not always without significance.”<sup>6</sup> However, such reassuring tone changed as soon as he talked about Hegel. In the continuation of the quote, it says: “. . . consequently, what was without significance took refuge behind obscure language.”<sup>7</sup> Schopenhauer dedicates the latter quote to Fichte and Schelling, but with great effort, as he spoke of Hegel, he continues:

But the height of audacity in serving up pure nonsense, in stringing together senseless and extravagant mazes of words, such as had previously only been heard in madhouses, was finally reached in Hegel, and became the instrument of the most barefaced general mystification that has ever taken place, with a result which will appear fabulous to posterity and remain henceforth as a monument to German stupidity.<sup>8</sup>

Schopenhauer hated Hegel beyond his criticism.<sup>9</sup> Through such comments of Schopenhauer, perhaps, in one way or another, it had helped in the formulation of the idea of how we regard Hegel today, especially for those uninitiated readers of Hegel. Although presumably, that in part, Schopenhauer’s magnum opus serves as a precursor to Nietzsche and other contemporaries, a large part of that work still remains to display a huge hate and displeasure directed towards Hegel. If one continues to browse more through the pages of Schopenhauer’s other works, we may

find various descriptions directed to Hegel such as: “[A] commonplace, inane, loathsome, repulsive and ignorant charlatan, who with unparalleled effrontery compiled a system of crazy nonsense that was trumpeted abroad as immortal wisdom by his mercenary followers. . .”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, he regards Hegel as “[T]hat clumsy and nauseating charlatan, that pernicious person, who completely disorganized and ruined the minds of a whole generation. . .”<sup>11</sup>

While we may find more hate than criticism of content, in actuality and truth be told, there is indeed an undeniable level of obscurity in Hegel’s works, something that not even Heidegger (even if he tried to) could match. Thus the point is to dig deeper, and laboriously engage with the text. This is not to say that those who read Hegel in the past did not try to unearth meanings from the “constant mazes of words.” But perhaps, Schopenhauer’s words played a large part in the reader’s appetite, so to speak, in reading Hegel. Of course, beyond all these, we have to draw the line between profoundness and charlatanism. In other words, we have to determine to which extent may we categorize Hegel’s philosophic system as either *grand*, or simply, *grandiose*.

Howard Kainz, a Hegelian scholar and a founding member of the Hegel Society of America, tells us that to choose whether Hegel’s system is grand or merely grandiose is not an easy task. Further, he writes:

Hegel offers so much that is valuable and immensely insightful that even his enemies and critics—Kierkegaard, Marx, Sartre, and others—have ended up borrowing from him. But anyone who studies Hegel also comes across hairsplitting sophistries, non sequiturs, bad science, chauvinism, and prejudices.<sup>12</sup>

Kainz tells us that to choose on the grandness or grandiosity based from these factors alone

would be making a poor decision. He argues that for us to find out whether it is grand or grandiose, a thorough examination of Hegel's system is necessary. For Kainz, he presumes that the result would lead us to an idea of "something like a middle ground between 'grand' and 'grandiose.'"<sup>13</sup>

This is perhaps the reason why contemporary philosophers are urging for a project which was generally known to them as *The Return to Hegel*. From a lecture given by Slavoj Žižek to the now defunct Philosophy Department of Middlesex University in London (as a part of Saving the Middlesex Philosophy Department program), which was prior to the publication of his magnum opus (as he claims the work to be) in 2012, *Less than Nothing*, Žižek says that we have to read, or reread, in this case, Hegel in detail. He warns that you do not take one quote that you think isolates the basic structures and principle of an idea. You do not proceed then to take one passage from, say, negativity, substance, subject, and then with ultra-deep reading of those passages you claim to have understood Hegel. Žižek strongly tells us that in reading Hegel, we have to go step by step—engaging ourselves through all argumentations.<sup>14</sup> This provides a justification for the calling of a project of return. Maybe we have not really understood Hegel, or maybe our understanding of Hegel is greatly distorted by prejudices against him. However, whether it is to establish him as the precursor for postmodernity, or to re-enthroned him as a towering figure of modernity and enlightenment, or even to give justice to his works, there are surely more reasons than one when it comes to the project of a *Return to Hegel*. In the succeeding sections of this paper, let us now try to explore the idea behind this project, and what Žižek precisely means when he calls for a *return*.

### To the point of ~~no~~-return: Going back (?) to Hegel

To say that we are returning implies a successful action of leaving. In placing the idea within the context of the topic, we now ought to ask: *if we are returning to Hegel, does this mean that we have successfully left him, in the first place?* Well, if to say that there is a 'successful departure from Hegel' means that his contemporaries have successfully moved out of his shadow, then this paper begs to differ. If this project of return proves to be successful, to which we shall "proudly" rejoice, "Hegel is back!" we can only do so—to proclaim that Hegel is indeed back, but only because he never truly left. When we try to examine the works of Hegel's contemporaries, the general theme of their project was to distance themselves away from Hegel. This may also be recognized as the project of western philosophy for the past two centuries. However, they could never deny the imprint of the work of their philosophical forebear on their respective works. Stephen Houlgate, a celebrated Hegelian scholar tells us that:

[Hegel's] thought has left its mark on the existentialism of Kierkegaard and the historical materialism of Marx and Engels, as well as on British Idealism, American pragmatism, Frankfurt School social philosophy, Heidegger's 'history of Being,' Gadamerian Hermeneutics and Derridean deconstruction. . . . Even such notorious critics of Hegel as Nietzsche and Bertrand Russell acknowledge a debt to their German Idealist forebear—Nietzsche praising 'the astonishing stroke of *Hegel*, who . . . dared to teach that species concepts develop *out of each other*,' and Russell declaring his own early *Essay on the Foundations of Geometry* to be the work of a 'full-fledged Hegelian.'<sup>15</sup>

Now, with all these project of moving away and distancing ourselves from Hegel, it seems that Foucault's rather ominous warning creeps up our shoulders. He says:

[Truly] to escape Hegel involves an exact appreciation of the price we have to pay to detach ourselves from him. It assumes that we are aware of the extent to which Hegel, insidiously perhaps, is close to us; it implies a knowledge, in that which permits us to think against Hegel, of that which remains Hegelian. We have to determine the extent to which our anti-Hegelianism is possibly one of his tricks directed against us, at the end of which he stands, motionless, waiting for us.<sup>16</sup>

If such is the case, then our point of return is actually towards a *point of no return*.<sup>17</sup> It seems at this point that Hegel already anticipated that his system will be criticized, and albeit facing the toughness of each criticism, his contemporaries nevertheless flatter him by borrowing and using ideas that we consider *Hegelian*. We are now haunted by another question: *what if this very escape is a necessity for the fulfillment of Hegelian Philosophy? That in doing so, the dialectic moves on.* This phenomena reminds us of certain Hegelian principles. If we consider Hegel as the *thesis*, would it not then be, that the postmodern age is the *antithesis*?<sup>18</sup> More so, in terms of this move against Hegel, do they really negate Hegel? If we examine the occurrence more closely, we find that Hegel is not necessarily negated or cancelled, but rather *sublated*. Hegel uses the term *Aufhebung* to denote an act of sublation or subsumption. Sublation generally means to *deny* or *negate*, however, in the Hegelian sense of the term, it also means *preservation*. If we look at the phenomena as a dialectical process, Hegel as the thesis is sublated—he was overcome, but what is in his philosophy was not lost, but preserved into a higher level. This concept of *aufhebung* may very well justify why Hegel's contemporaries, despite their negative attitude towards him, still owe a great debt to him.

Nevertheless, let us try to follow Žižek in his journey towards the *Return to Hegel*. If we are to go back and try to study Hegel without the bias

of his contemporaries, this entails a new reading of Hegel—a new and unfamiliar reading that Slavoj Žižek offers.

### Slavoj Žižek: The Academic Rockstar

At the onset of this section, it is important to take note that the project of *Return to Hegel* was not a new or exclusive project of Žižek. In fact, a very similar project has been done by the first generation of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. The Frankfurt School, or more formally, the Institute for Social Research (*Institut für Sozialforschung*), was primarily preoccupied with returning to Kant's critical philosophy and its contemporary, Hegel's philosophy. Max Horkheimer led the other theorists at that time when he was the Director in the 1930s. Other notable thinkers are Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, to mention some. Setting this aside, we shall now bring into focus, a contemporary philosopher and social theorist, Slavoj Žižek.

Firstly, Žižek has been mentioned for a number of times in the earlier parts of the paper. There is already perhaps, a question situated in the reader's mind: Who is Slavoj Žižek?

Slavoj Žižek is not a name unheard of in the philosophical arena today. Perhaps it is safe to say that he is past the point wherein people consider him a "rising star" in the field and discipline of philosophy. He is already an established figure and one of the most notable and respected minds of today. He is a leading figure in contemporary thought, with over fifty books (as he writes at a rate of one book per year according to some of his commentators) and more than a hundred lectures in Asia, Europe, and the United States. Despite such fame, it is still necessary to map out a brief biographical content for the purposes of thoroughly introducing him. We shall find later

on that much of Žižek's life and experience has a great amount of impact in the formulation of his philosophic theories.

A good primer, perhaps, may be read in *Introducing Slavoj Žižek: A Graphic Guide* (2011). The book offers a biographical note on Žižek, intertwined with the development of his philosophical ideas. As in the case of some philosophers, Žižek's life experiences have much to do with the development of his thought. Žižek was born in Ljubljana, Slovenia in the year 1949.<sup>19</sup> During that time, the town was still part of the Communist Yugoslavia, until its disintegration in the 1980s. Žižek's engagement with French philosophy and psychoanalysis is brought about by his reaction against the ideals of communist orthodoxy. As an undergraduate in the University of Ljubljana, he studied Lacan, Derrida, and other French philosophers whose writings did not seem to favor communist and socialist ideals. In a way, Žižek was a rebel of some sort. He was supposed to have a teaching spot at the same university, after obtaining his Master's degree, but he was set aside when the administration considered a candidate whose ideals are closer to that of the party.

In the 1970s, Žižek became a part of what was soon to be a gradually rising group, The *Society for Theoretical Psychoanalysis* in Ljubljana. As Žižek pointed out, there was a certain popularity and acceptance for Psychoanalysis in Slovenia simply because "there was no established psychoanalytic community to hamper or mitigate their interest in the usually controversial subject."<sup>20</sup> By 1980s, the start of Yugoslavia's gradual disintegration, Žižek became active in politics. He ran during the first "free" elections of the Republic of Slovenia as President. Two years after the publication of Žižek's first major work in English, *The Sublime*

*Object of Ideology* (1989), Slovenia became independent from Yugoslavia. It was in the year 1989 that marked the start of Žižek's international fame and academic success.<sup>21</sup> He currently holds academic posts in Europe and in the United States. He also travels across the world as a visiting professor, and to deliver lectures, which will in turn receive thousands of hits in the popular video sharing website, *Youtube*.

An important note may be taken from Kul-Want's account. With regard to the general characteristic of Žižek's writings, he writes:

Žižek's writings are primarily concerned with politics, but he often explores this issue through a wide range of topical subjects and interests. Just a few of Žižek's many interests about which he has written are: Hollywood films . . . Popular fiction . . . "High" literature . . . "18th- and 19th-century opera . . . [and] Biogenetics, neuroscience, and quantum physics.

Žižek writes on a plethora of ideas. Imagine that from the aforementioned, Žižek incorporates Hegelian, Lacanian, and Marxist theories. This is one of the main reasons why he has already established himself as a well-respected philosopher, psychoanalyst, and cultural critic, with more or less 50 titles at hand, and a lot more still to come. Producing fifty books in a couple of decades was not really the factor that made Žižek popular to the people. His ideas, how radical they may seem, are only a part of how the people come to know him. He has this characteristic that is uncommon in philosophers, to say the least. Indeed, for the past several years, he has been called "the Borat of Philosophy," "the Marx Brother," and "the Elvis of Cultural Theory." At some point, when one gets the chance to view his lectures, one gets a grasp of his constant insertion of jokes (a huge number of which are obscene). It may be disagreeable, but often, jokes in philosophy are

very hard to come about, more so, they are quite hard to formulate. There is a risk that people may not take you so seriously,<sup>22</sup> but Žižek has bravely faced that risk perhaps because there is more to his jokes than the desire to make his audience laugh. Humor is a very delicate ingredient in philosophy. It is either make or break, wherein a small mistake in a context of a joke could lead everything to be wrong. This is one trait that makes Žižek very notable among his colleagues. He has the ability to make people laugh, while he also makes them think very deeply and critically. Indeed, as Wittgenstein once said, “A serious and good philosophical work could be written consisting entirely of jokes.”

Seriously speaking (no pun intended), it is important to take note that Žižek’s philosophy is basically drawn from French psychoanalysis and German philosophy. Specifically, from Jacques Lacan (psychoanalysis), G.W.F. Hegel and Karl Marx (German philosophy). This mixture, so to speak, gives us an interesting and fresh take on the theory of ideology and subjectivity, courtesy of Žižek.<sup>23</sup> This fresh interpretation or rather, formulation, of theories coincides with the condition of contemporary capitalism and the postmodern age. However, at this point let us be warned: although Žižek offers a close reading of French psychoanalysis and German philosophy, we may soon find that his Lacan is not *our* Lacan, and so is his Hegel and Marx. This led Parker to remark that while Žižek uses ideas from Marx, he is not a *Marxist*<sup>24</sup> (or at least, not the traditional one).

Parker tells us that Žižek, as it would seem, is a “Slovenian Lacanian Hegelian.” Parker suggests that on “how one shuffles those three descriptive terms, and how one places the final one as the theoretical anchor or final destination, is not so easy to determine though. .

.” As the issue of those three descriptions is still debatable today, let us primarily assume first, not a spatiotemporal nor a logical succession, but an interrelation among the three.

Many of Žižek’s writings and lectures calls about for a “*Return to Hegel*.” The phrase is not as easily understood as it may sound. A number of Žižek’s works significantly draws from Hegelian theories and terminology, and he sometimes correlates and applies this with theories and terminologies from Lacanian psychoanalysis to analyze certain phenomena. Nevertheless, it is the aim of this paper to be able to explicate such project of a “*Return to Hegel*.” *What does it mean? And why is there a need to?* Moreover, as an age old Žižek question goes, “is it still possible to be a Hegelian today?” We shall, try, from hereon, to explore on the subject-matter.

### **The dialectic continues (?): Slavoj Žižek’s idea of a *Return to Hegel***

Alfred North Whitehead once wrote that: “The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.”<sup>25</sup> Perhaps, with a little bias (and again, of course, it may be disagreeable), in today’s times, we could say that the general characterization of contemporary philosophy is a tradition that consists largely (not necessarily totally) of a series of footnotes to Hegel. Be it words for or against him, Hegel has undoubtedly influenced his critics and contemporaries more than they will ever admit. Nevertheless, for the past two centuries, the philosophical tradition in the west tried to grow out of Hegel’s wing. This is why they would like to distance themselves from Hegel. Yet despite all that, they seem to have never been able to get out of it. Žižek’s project of the *Return to Hegel* may be influenced by Foucault’s ominous warning, however, they seem to see this

“Hegelian remainder” in different ways. For Žižek, this inescapable remainder of Hegel does not try to haunt us back in the sense that it was always with us in the first place. For Žižek, Hegel and Hegelian philosophy is something that we cannot easily eliminate despite efforts, claims, and pretensions to the contrary.<sup>26</sup> Thus, in an article written by Žižek, he warns us to beware of all too easy attempts at overcoming metaphysics. He writes:

There are three (and only three) key philosophers in the history of (Western) metaphysics: Plato, Descartes, [and] Hegel. The proof of their privileged status is their extraordinary position in the series of philosophers: each of the three not only designates a clear break with the past, but also casts his long shadow on the thinkers who follow him - they can all be conceived as a series of negations/oppositions of/to his position.<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore,

It was already Foucault who noted that the entire history of Western philosophy can be defined as the history of rejections of Platonism: in a homologous way, the entire modern philosophy can be conceived as the history of rejections of Cartesianism, from subtle corrections (Malebranche, [and] Spinoza) to outright dismissals. With Hegel, things are, if anything, even more obvious: what united all that comes after Hegel is the opposition to the specter of Hegel's "panlogicism."<sup>28</sup>

Hegel's *panlogicism* made him the *bête noire* in philosophy for the past two centuries. Nevertheless, to claim to have gone beyond him and overcome him is not so much as an easy task as one could think of. Cliché as it may sound, but it is easier said than done. One does not overcome Hegel by denouncing him, yet flattering him by using his ideas. They may have, by word, renounce Hegel, but a part of them remained largely Hegelian (they think against Hegel, of which, according to Foucault,

remains Hegelian)—and in so, they have never escaped out of the specter of Hegel.

Although it was remarked that many of Žižek's writings and lecture indeed speak of a *Return to Hegel*, the idea was actually consummated in what he calls his magnum opus, a one thousand-page thick book, entitled, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (2012). Žižek calls this his “masterwork on Hegelian legacy.” When one comes to think of it, it is quite ironic to call a thousand-page book “less than nothing.” Anyhow, returning to the point, Žižek's close reading on Hegel composes about a third of the book. In the fourth chapter of the book, it explicitly asks, *is it still possible to be a Hegelian today?* At the onset of the section, Žižek writes:

The main feature of historical thought proper is not "mobilism" (the motif of the fluidification or historical relativization of all forms of life), but the full endorsement of a certain impossibility: after a true historical break, one simply cannot return to the past, or go on as if nothing happened—even if one does the same practice will have acquired a radically changed meaning.<sup>29</sup>

Žižek agreed with Adorno who provided an example of a clear historical break. After Schoenberg's atonal revolution took place, it was and still is, of course, possible to go on composing in the traditional tonal way, but the new tonal music has lost its innocence, since it is already 'mediated' by the atonal break and thus functions as its negation.<sup>30</sup> In other words, while it is possible to continue something after a clear historical break, there would be an element of fakeness into it, once we decided to do so.

Going back, it has been remarked that there can only be a possibility of return, when there is a successful act of leaving or departure. However, given the case, the return is no more than an

unreal experience if what was present was a true and clear historical break (remember Adorno's example). Moreover, Žižek tells us that if however, there is a false break, then the idea of a return is once again possible. Žižek implies that there may be a possibility of return, since his stand is that the "official" post-Hegelian anti-philosophical break of Schopenhauer-Kierkegaard-Marx, is no more than a false break.<sup>31</sup> Žižek further writes:

Although it presents itself as a break with idealism as embodied in its Hegelian climax, it ignores a crucial dimension of Hegel's thought; that is, it ultimately amounts to a desperate attempt to *go on thinking as if Hegel had not happened*. The hole left by this absence of Hegel is then, of course, filled with the ridiculous caricature of Hegel the "absolute idealist" who "possessed Absolute Knowledge." The re-assertion of Hegel's speculative thought is thus not what it may appear to be—a denial of the post-Hegelian break—but rather a bringing-forth of that very dimension whose denial sustains the post-Hegelian break itself.<sup>32</sup>

Žižek in a way, tells us that trying to escape from the shadow of Hegel—and when one claims that he has successfully done so—cannot be equated to overcoming Hegel. There is a need for return because something was missed. In other words, something went wrong in this historical transition from traditional metaphysics to post-metaphysical nineteenth and twentieth century anti-philosophy. This gives us a preliminary idea that Žižek's call for a *Return to Hegel* is not simply a dramatic call to revisit and study him again. In *Less than Nothing*, Žižek tries to map out the historical transition and strive to find the theoretical fault somewhere along the line.

Žižek explains that there is a clear historical break before and after Hegel. This places him in a unique position in the history of philosophy. As Žižek tells us:

The ultimate anti-Hegelian argument invokes the very fact of the post-Hegelian break: what even the most fanatical partisan of Hegel cannot deny is that something changed after Hegel, that a new era of thought began which can no longer be accounted for in Hegelian terms of absolute conceptual mediation; this rupture occurs in different guises. . . . Something happened here, for there is a clear break between the before and after, and while one can argue that Hegel already announces this break, that he is the last idealist metaphysician and the first post-metaphysical historicist, one cannot really be a Hegelian after this break, for Hegelianism has lost its innocence forever.<sup>33</sup>

Nevertheless, one can argue that we could, at least, in the empirical sense, return. One could pick up *Phenomenology* or *Logic*<sup>34</sup>, and engage with the text, (pretend to understand), and then proclaim oneself to be a Hegelian. However, Žižek says such act is similar to writing tonal music after Schoenberg: it is there, but there is an element of fakeness in it. In other words, today, we can play as Hegelians all we want, but it will always be fake. So, the question now is, *how will we be more Hegelian than Hegel himself, if we could not even be Hegelians today in the first place?* Žižek says that while it is true that there are Hegelian imprints on contemporary philosophy, particularly Hegel's contemporaries, the historical break nevertheless occurred in different guises. Of this, Žižek writes, we find Schelling's abyss of the *pre-logical Will* (which was later vulgarized by Schopenhauer according to Žižek); Kierkegaard's insistence on the uniqueness of *faith* and *subjectivity*; Marx's assertion of the socioeconomic life process; autonomization of mathematized natural sciences, and Freud's motif of the "death drive."<sup>35</sup>

The post-Hegelian break may thus be categorized into two: of the first, it appears that what we need is a return to some "pre-logical positivity of being, as true productive force."

This is exhibited in Schelling's Will, Marx's actual life process, and Kierkegaard's belief. But then, we also discover another aspect of the break, which turns out as the second category—the full autonomization of the mathematized natural sciences, up to Freud's motive of death drive, as “a repetition which insists beyond all dialectical mediation.”<sup>36</sup> On the one hand, we have the positivity of being, and on the other hand, we have this formalist repetition (pure repetition) as exhibited by Kierkegaard and Freud.

Let us review the historical passage. Prior to Hegel, we have something called traditional metaphysics. After Hegel, the post-Hegelian break, we have the nineteenth and twentieth century anti-philosophy in addition to the post-Hegelian take on the positivity of being. Hegel is situated in between the two—he is between the “before” and the “after.” No longer the before, but not yet the after. Now, granting that Hegel's period was considered by his contemporaries as the dark ages of modernity, something very traumatic, according to Žižek, happens to Hegel. To cover up this in-between, a ridiculous image of Hegel was propagated. In psychoanalysis, Žižek recalls that, Freud calls this *Screen-Memory (Deck-Erinnerung)*. It is a “fantasy formation destined to cover up a traumatic truth.”<sup>37</sup> Hence, the scarecrow image of Hegel. Here, we have an idea of Hegel as that “crazy guy” who thought his *interinarium mentis in deum* (not to invoke Bonaventure) was successful, and thus he thought he knew everything, etc. This take has something to do with the moments of historical passage. A dialectician, according to Žižek, basically knows that in the moment of passage, one sees something that in the moment of the old, previous order, they were not able to see. However, what was seen becomes invisible, the moment the new order settles in.

Žižek teaches that there are vaguely two schools of Hegel: 1) the conservative Hegelians; and 2) the radical Hegelians. However, a contemporary wave of Hegelian scholars—the Pittsburgh Hegelians—claimed that their greatest revolution was to subject Hegel to the ambit of liberalism (something that Hegel was known to be against). Žižek's problem is that this Pittsburgh Hegelians “concede to the critics of Hegel too much.” As a result, perhaps in an effort to brush off that scarecrow image of Hegel, they offer a “deflated” image of Hegel. This deflated image now provides as a Hegel “freed of ontological-metaphysical commitments, reduced to a general theory of discourse, of possibilities of argumentation.” Here now comes Žižek's thesis:

Such a “deflated” image of Hegel is not enough; the post-Hegelian break must be approached in more direct terms. True, there is a break, but in it Hegel is the “vanishing mediator” between its “before” and its “after,” between traditional metaphysics and post-metaphysical nineteenth- and twentieth-century thought. That is to say, something happens in Hegel, a breakthrough into a unique dimension of thought, which is obliterated, rendered invisible in its true dimension, by post-metaphysical thought.<sup>38</sup>

There is a need to repeat Hegel, because for Žižek, we are at the same situation today, as Hegel was in, before. Hegel saw something that was not visible to either the order of the before and the after. Moreover, we have to *Return to Hegel* because something was obliterated in his philosophy—something that was later on replaced by a ridiculous, idiotic caricature of Hegel as an idealist megalomaniac.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, Žižek writes that it is crucial to *Return to Hegel* to dispense all the classic anti-Hegelian topics, notably that of Hegel's narcissism, of the idea of Hegel's totality, etc.<sup>40</sup> We have to remember that beyond Žižek's education and grounding in German

philosophy, he was also an expert in French psychoanalysis. Thus, we have to situate this idea of a *Return to Hegel*, as something patterned after Jaques Lacan's return to Freud. The goal, nevertheless is quite similar: it is to save the philosopher from his contemporaries. This means that Žižek recognizes a need to save Hegel from the thinkers of the post-Hegelian break, and to re-actualize Hegel's speculative thought which could not be simply covered up by post-Hegelian break "Hegelians."

Žižek explains that the contemporary (mis)interpretation of Hegel played a large role in keeping the scarecrow image alive. There are about, as he lists, more or less ten prejudices about Hegel<sup>41</sup>, and due to the limitations of this piece, let us, for the moment, be acquainted with three of them, which Žižek highlights in the same lecture at Middlesex University. *First: Hegel as he who patches the loopholes in the world.* Žižek recalls that in rejecting philosophy, Freud once quoted Heinrich Heine who tried to describe the Hegelian philosopher. As the quotation goes: "With his nightcap and his night-shirt tatters, he botches up the loopholes in the structure of the world." Visualizing the description, one could readily see that this is an allusion to that famous portrait of Hegel. Žižek then raises his critique and inquiry: "But is philosophy at its most fundamental really reducible to a desperate attempt to fill in the gaps and inconsistencies in our notion of reality and thus to provide a harmonious *Weltanschauung*?"<sup>42</sup> Hegel says that as philosophers, we have to defend our discipline from this misinterpretation. Philosophy is not simply patching up things to the diverse *Weltanschauung*. Beginning from Kantian philosophy, Kant already opens up radical inconsistencies. Žižek tells us that Hegel, does not only patch things up, but he radicalizes it even more! One of Hegel's criticism of Kant

was that he was all too gentle: Kant sees an antinomy, and Kant epistemologizes it, hence the antinomies of reason. For Kant, antinomies means that it cannot really affect our reality. From the standpoint of Kant, the whole purpose, according to Žižek was to open up inconsistencies much more radical than what we our already face with: our everyday pluralist and diverse common sense. Philosophy does not patch up things, but rather, it radicalizes it, exposing it. Kant started this opening up of inconsistencies, and Hegel radicalized it even more. While it is true that one finds in Hegel, a "systematic drive to locate every phenomenon within a harmonious global edifice,"<sup>43</sup> Hegel's aim was to present how everything fails in some way.

*Second: Hegel as the totalizer.* Now, we all know the prejudice regarding Hegel's concept of totality. *Das Wahre ist das Ganze* and so on. The problem here is the critique of his contemporaries who seems to ask, *isn't there something in every totality—some indivisible remainder—something that resists to be totalized* (as Žižek quotes Schelling)? Žižek urges us that there is a need to rehabilitate Hegel's idea of totality. Hegel, insofar as totality is concerned, does not mean an ideal movement or structure that tends to sublimate (*Aufhebung*) everything including all inconsistent elements of reality. Žižek argues that on the contrary, to observe an element or structure in its totality, means that you have to account for all its inconsistencies as part of the original whole. Thus, the consistency must be broken: we have to account for everything, including all diversity, inconsistencies, etc. This appears contingent in Hegel's totality.

*Third: Hegel and the List der Vernunft (Cunning of Reason).* As a general account, we would take it naturally for Hegel to have some sort of idea of a secret, transcendent force (or reason) which

somehow guarantees that beyond all this conflict, confusion, struggle, etc., at the end, everything will turn out well. Žižek argues that a closer reading of Hegel would lead us to understand that *list der vernunft* is “effectively a name for its very opposite.” Žižek tells us that the meaning is practically the opposite of what we think of, for it means that whenever we desire to impose a project on reality, we have to have the assurance that something, at the very least, will indeed go wrong. Again, this is Hegel showing, rather than totalizing, the inconsistencies of reality. Žižek further claims that if there is such a thing as a Hegelian *a priori*, it is that things always go wrong (negativity) in some way or another, and it does so necessarily. At the end of it all, what you get is simply a theory of how things get to be wrong once in a while

If we are to go back to Hegel, we must follow a new reading of him. In order to coincide with the project, one must first be knowledgeable of the prejudices against Hegel, and from there work the way up to reading Hegel. This is why Žižek’s Hegel is not our Hegel. Truly, he offers a different reading of Hegel, in ways that we could never probably think of.

### **Synthesis: Three steps to return**

I claim at this point that Žižek’s *Return to Hegel* is composed of three, albeit unequal steps: 1) return; 2) repeat; and 3) overcome. To *Return to Hegel*, as lengthily discussed before, means to go back to that void in the historical passage. That is, to locate Hegel in between of the before (traditional metaphysics, and pre-modern philosophy) and the after (postmodern philosophy, nineteenth and twentieth century anti-philosophy). There is a need to *Return to Hegel*, because the very theoretical fault at the historical passage was the obliteration of his speculative thought. We could never deny that

there was a break, although we could argue for its inauthenticity. The return was made possible because there is a sense of falseness in the historical break as declared by the trio: Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and Marx. Following this step, Žižek ventures on to repeat Hegel. Basically, the steps of returning and repetition are similar in nature, although each possesses a distinguishing trait from one another. Žižek’s repetition of Hegel is his rereading of Hegel. This repetition is uniquely Žižekian because it draws largely from contemporary philosophy and Hegel’s contemporaries. Lacan and Marx are two of the most significant thinkers in Žižek’s reading of Hegel. Next, to overcome Hegel means to have restored what was obliterated. We cannot be Hegelians now, but from my understanding of Žižek, we cannot only be so because the spatiotemporal factor wherein Hegel was situated is no longer present with us. Moreover, we cannot be Hegelians because only Hegel can be Hegelian in the strictest sense. Hermeneutically speaking, this means that when we read Hegel, something of our own bias will be imprinted in our reading. And so therefore we find that there are Hegelians who are Marxists, existentialists, conservatives, liberals, radicals, etc. From what I understand when Žižek tells that at the post-Hegelian break, Hegelianism lost its innocence, Žižek tells us that we can simply be no longer Hegelian’s in the same sense that Hegel was a Hegelian given all the conditions present.. This does not mean that we can no longer use Hegel in the contemporary debates. In fact, the very reason for returning to Hegel is to reevaluate our understanding of him. For the past two centuries, although Hegelian philosophy remained to be a well-established academic study in philosophy, Žižek nonetheless dismisses it still as blinded by the scarecrow image of Hegel.<sup>44</sup> Žižek offered us a radical

interpretation of Hegel—a Hegel that can no longer fit in the before and after of Hegel’s time, but a Hegel that was constructed to understand the problems of today. Žižek tells us that “this obliteration [of the Hegelian dimension of thought] leaves an empty space which has to be filled in so that the continuity of the development of philosophy can be re-established.”<sup>45</sup> The very argument of post-Hegelianism may be generalized into an argument from incredulity. Since Hegel’s philosophy is too incredible (that a project of this large is either ambitiously arrogant or a work of a madman), then therefore, Hegelian philosophy is dismissed as such. Žižek’s point is that you can only try to ignore Hegel, after you have laboriously and wholeheartedly engaged with the text and studies. Considering Hegel’s place in the history of thought, one cannot afford to continue philosophy as if he did not exist. While there may be differences, it again reminds us of Foucault’s warning.

### Concluding Remarks

I hope that in the foregoing sections of this paper, I was able to bring about at the very least an introductory idea on Žižek’s project of the *Return to Hegel*. The limitations of this paper would not provide ample space for me to discuss Žižek’s unique Lacanian reading of Hegel, which, as he claimed that “the only way to save Hegel is through Lacan.”<sup>46</sup> In order for us to have a basic idea of the project of return, I have mapped out the paper into several sections. I have provided an account of how we generally conceive Hegel today, which is then followed by a preliminary analysis on the project of return. Afterwards, I have indicated an introductory note to Žižek, which, in a way, may help us to understand the project somehow better. Following this, I have given an explication on Žižek’s project of return drawn

largely from his book, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (2012). Although, as I have already mentioned, the idea of the project is scattered throughout what we can call Žižek’s philosophy, the grand narrative (ironically) of it is found in *Less than Nothing*. After the exposition on Žižek’s account, I bring about my claim which is that the process of returning is a project composing of three steps, namely: return, repeat, and overcome.

True enough, many would still not favor Žižek’s unorthodox reading of Hegel. Of course, as a pioneering work (when we say pioneering work, we have to take into account the uniqueness of Žižek’s work as compared to other projects of *Return to Hegel*), it rightfully receives both praise and criticism. Nevertheless, I still ought to leave an open thought to the interested reader. Disregarding Žižek’s reading of Hegel, let us consider the following relation: thesis-antithesis-synthesis; and Hegel, post-Hegelianism, contemporary philosophy (Žižek). Do we see a similar pattern? Whether it “conforms” to the pattern, the matter will be solved in the long run. From my own standpoint, what I find significant is that interpretation never stops. As Gadamer teaches us, we have to continuously reinterpret tradition for it to be alive in the present. What one hopes is that the project of the *Return to Hegel* may soon dispel the scarecrow image that lurks in the background of Western philosophy for the past two hundred years. Beyond all this, the dialectic continues (and this is from an orthodox reading of Hegel): something affirmed will soon prove itself to be unsatisfactory, and thus will be denied. However, and more importantly, this negation will also embrace the same fate.

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*,

1954-1955 (*Le Séminaire #2*), trans. Sylvana Tomaselli, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), 71.

<sup>2</sup> According to Gadamer, while the Enlightenment's thought claimed that they are free of prejudices, judgments, and presuppositions, it forgot that such a claim has been their unquestioned presupposition. Thus, Gadamer contends that Enlightenment's thought is guilty of a 'prejudice against prejudice.' See: Allyn Fives, *Political Reason: Morality and the Public Sphere* (Harmondsworth, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 235.

<sup>4</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, Introduction to *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge (La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir)*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (United Kingdom: Manchester University Press, 1984), xxiv.

<sup>5</sup> Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy* (New York: Pocket Books, 2006), 379.

<sup>6</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea, Vol. II (Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung)*, trans. R.B Haldane and J. Kemp (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), 22.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Walter Kaufmann tells us that Schopenhauer's later thunderous verbal attacks on Hegel might as well be considered "sour grapes." He says, "Schopenhauer attempted to teach at the University of Berlin, Hegel's stronghold, and that he was a failure—largely because he deliberately chose to deliver his lectures at times when he knew that Hegel would be lecturing, too. In this self-chosen contest he lost out; and his later diatribe *Über die Universitätphilosophie* (in *Parerga und Paralipomena*) might be considered 'sour grapes.'" See: Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Princeton, New Jersey: New Jersey University Press, 1974), 105.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena: Short Philosophical Essays*, Volume I, trans. E.F.J. Payne (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 96.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 168.

<sup>12</sup> Howard P. Kainz, Preface to *G.W.F. Hegel: The Philosophical System* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1998), ix.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* x.

<sup>14</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "Is it Still Possible to be a Hegelian Today?" In *Hegel Now?* (Lecture and workshop, Middlesex University, North London, England, 05 May 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Hegel Reader*, ed. Stephen Houlgate (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 1998), 1.

<sup>16</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language*, 235.

<sup>17</sup> A *point of no return* is generally defined as a point wherein the action is necessarily irreversible. But given this case, the project of return becomes a point of no return because the action of going back to Hegel seems irreversible—whether we proceed forward as Deleuze would have wanted, or we go back to Hegel himself, the result still is thus *back to Hegel*. The point may be quite vague as of this state, however, what is being argued here is that we are led back to Hegel no matter how we try to escape from him (which is quite similar with Foucault's view regarding the matter).

<sup>18</sup> Of course, it must be noted here that Hegel actually only used the terms thesis, antithesis, synthesis, once, and that is when he ascribed it to Kant. In various translations, one cannot really locate Hegel's usage of the three terms, however, most scholars would argue that it does not mean that the triadic formula is not used.

<sup>19</sup> Christopher Kul-Want (Author) and Piero (Illustrator), *Introducing Slavoj Žižek: A Graphical Guide*, ed. Duncan Heath (London: Icon Books, Ltd., 2011), 5. The brief biographical note that follows is taken from Christopher Kul-Want's account, unless cited otherwise, and with some additional notations from the author's insights.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 10.

<sup>21</sup> In a documentary, Žižek once told that while his peers and colleagues opted for French or German for the second language, Žižek opted for English. This is perhaps for the reason that he wanted to make his works and lectures more accessible to the rather large part of the population.

<sup>22</sup> This became a dilemma in Žižek's writing career, when his publishers, *Verso*, started to doubt the success of his books because it was always filled with jokes. However, as soon as Žižek wrote a book without one, the publisher worried, saying, *who would by that book if it contains no jokes?*

<sup>23</sup> Ian Parker, Introduction to *Slavoj Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (Virginia, USA: Pluto Press, 2004), 2.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1979), 39.

<sup>26</sup> David J. Gunkel, "Žižek and the Real Hegel," in *International Journal of Žižek Studies (IJZS)* 2, no. 2 (2008): 1-2.

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<sup>27</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “The Three Events of Philosophy,” in *International Journal of Žižek Studies (IJZS)*, Vol. 7 No. 1 (2013): 1.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), 193.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 194.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 236-237.

<sup>34</sup> The aforementioned two terms are the two widely-accepted shortened titles of Hegel’s most famous works, *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Science of Logic*, respectively.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* 237.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* 239.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Gabriel Tupinambá and Yuan Yao, *Hegel, Lacan, Žižek* (New York: Atropos Press, 2013), 153.

<sup>40</sup> Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, 258.

<sup>41</sup> This is explicitly discussed in the section entitled, “The Limits of Hegel,” found in *Less than Nothing*.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* 8.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Domenico Losurdo, *Hegel and the Freedom of Moderns (Post-Contemporary Interventions)* (Durnham, North Carolina: Duke University Press Books, 2004), 26.

<sup>45</sup> Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, 239.

<sup>46</sup> Slavoj Žižek, Introduction to *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 2009), xxxi.

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